



Original Article

Critical Pedagogy: A Critical Look of NEP 2020 and NCF 2023

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Abstract

*The statement emphasizes the urgency of enhancing children's pedagogical subject knowledge and nurturing their ability to critically engage with their social environments. By doing so, they can evolve into law-abiding and socially responsible individuals, better equipped to navigate and shape their future. To achieve this, the current educational framework must innovate, moving away from conventional models. A teacher implementing a curriculum based on **critical pedagogy** becomes pivotal in transforming an unhappy society into a progressive one. Critical pedagogy emphasizes critical thinking, reflection, and questioning societal norms, enabling students to understand and address social injustices.*

*In this context, policy documents like the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** and the **National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023** take center stage. Both stress the importance of creating a curriculum that aligns with critical pedagogy principles, fostering analytical thinking and problem-solving skills. These policies advocate for empowering students with the ability to tackle complex life challenges and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Thus, educators play a vital role in guiding students to develop these essential skills, helping them prepare for dynamic, real-world scenarios and encouraging them to become proactive, thoughtful participants in society.*

Keywords: School children, creativity, critical pedagogy, constructivist learning, experiential learning, inclusive education, teacher empowerment, social justice in education.

Introduction

One of the most dependable indicators of a nation's progress is its literacy rate. Despite discussions on the various definitions and dimensions of literacy, the focus on improving effective instruction—both internally within educational institutions and externally in community outreach—has not received adequate attention in the ongoing debates about education in India. A key factor often overlooked is that a significant proportion of parents in India remain uneducated, which affects the country's overall literacy rate. Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated a strong positive correlation between the literacy rate and primary education. This raises an essential question: how can we expect a high literacy rate if children lack access to foundational skills during their formative years? Alarming, approximately 50% of students fail to acquire basic literacy skills by the time they complete primary education. This underscores the urgent need for reforms in the education system, focusing on early interventions, teacher training, and community involvement. Without addressing these fundamental issues, achieving a substantial increase in literacy levels remains a distant goal.

Methodology: The study used a descriptive survey method.

Critical Pedagogy: A Theoretical Perspective

It is widely accepted that education has the power to transform a child's life in every way. Rooted in the Indian philosophical idea of "*Sa Vidya ya Vimuktaye*"—which means "knowledge leads from darkness to light"—education is seen as a guiding force. However, there's still an ongoing debate about whether effective education can truly thrive in isolation. The main aim of both social and philosophical approaches to education is to help children understand life more deeply and grow in their skills through meaningful teaching methods. In essence, pedagogy is both the art and science of teaching. It shapes the way a teacher thinks

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and acts within a classroom, influencing the life paths and opportunities available to students. But pedagogy goes beyond classroom routines—it is deeply complex and interconnected with larger societal and cultural forces.

Henry Giroux (1997) emphasizes that pedagogy isn't limited to what happens inside schools. Instead, it involves how people learn, how knowledge is created, and how identities are formed. He argues that teaching is always connected to broader political and cultural contexts. In the Indian context, thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Yashpal, and Krishna Kumar have all offered meaningful insights into education. Critical pedagogy, in particular, focuses on helping students become aware of and question social inequalities and harmful educational practices. It provides a learning space where students can develop the ability to critically examine dominant ideas and societal norms. Teachers, in this approach, are encouraged to understand their students' real-life situations and challenge oppressive beliefs or behaviors. The teacher becomes more of a facilitator—guiding learners to respond to the world both individually and as a group (Babu, 2007).

The foundation of critical pedagogy comes from critical theory, especially the ideas of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian philosopher and educational reformer. Freire strongly opposed traditional, passive modes of education and instead supported teaching practices that empower students to reflect critically on their surroundings. His concept of "dialogue" between teachers and students is central—encouraging students to think, question, and relate learning to their own lives. Key ideas in Freire's philosophy include empowerment, awareness, dialogue, and active engagement, all part of his "pedagogy of the oppressed." Freire believed that classrooms should go beyond rote memorization. Instead, they should be dynamic spaces that nurture critical thinking and social responsibility. He envisioned education as a joint effort between teacher and student, where both work together to explore real-world issues and search for solutions. Freire's approach aligns closely with Lev Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism. Vygotsky highlighted the importance of social and cultural context in learning and argued that critical thinking develops best through meaningful dialogue and collaboration. He believed that students don't just absorb knowledge—they construct it through interaction with others and their environment.

Together, Freire and Vygotsky offer a powerful vision for education: one where learning is active, reflective, and rooted in the lived realities of students. This theoretical foundation underpins the values and practices of critical pedagogy today.

The Role of Gandhian Nai Talim in Critical Education

Gandhi's **Nai Talim** offers another profound critique of traditional educational systems. It aims to oppose the social hegemony embedded in these systems and advocates for integrating education with productive activity. This approach fosters the harmonious development of the *mind, heart, and hands*, ensuring a balance between intellectual, emotional, and practical skills. Nai Talim focuses on social freedom and the moral grounding of education, providing a robust framework for critical pedagogy.

Decades later, Gandhi's ideas continue to inspire educators worldwide, offering a scientific and practical foundation for teaching. By combining theoretical learning with hands-on experiences, Nai Talim aligns with progressive educational goals and promotes critical engagement with social realities.

Tagore's Emancipatory Vision of Education

Rabindranath Tagore's educational philosophy complements Gandhi's Nai Talim by advocating for joy, creativity, and real-world engagement in the teaching and learning process. Tagore emphasized the importance of an **emancipatory curriculum**, one that rejects rigid and prescriptive structures in favor of fostering creativity and originality. His humanistic philosophy calls for connecting education with nature and the workplace, ensuring that learning is both meaningful and relevant.

The Burden of Curriculum and Critical Pedagogy

The issue of an overburdened curriculum was critically addressed in the 1993 "*Learning without Burden*" report by Yashpal. The report highlighted the physical and mental toll of overloaded curricula on students, particularly in the lower grades. It advocated for reducing the curriculum load and integrating strategies that focus on active and critical learning. These recommendations align with the principles of critical pedagogy, emphasizing that education should not just be about imparting knowledge but enabling students to think critically and meaningfully.

Krishna Kumar's Perspective on Knowledge

Krishna Kumar (1992) delves into the social construction of knowledge, posing fundamental questions about the nature and value of what is taught in schools. He argues that knowledge is reconstructed through social choices made in specific contexts. The curriculum, Kumar contends, is a product of elite decision-making, designed for societal benefit but often disconnected from the lived realities of students. This perspective calls for educators to embrace critical pedagogy and address biased practices, enabling students to question, analyze, and transform their understanding of the world.

Implications for Educators

The works of Freire, Vygotsky, Gandhi, Tagore, and others underline the necessity of embedding critical pedagogy into the educational framework. Educators must cultivate an environment where students can question societal norms, analyze knowledge critically, and develop solutions for real-world problems. This requires:

- **Dialogue and Collaboration:** Encouraging open discussions that allow students to voice their perspectives and learn collectively.
 - **Contextual Learning:** Linking education with students' social and cultural environments to make learning more relevant.
 - **Empowerment:** Guiding students toward autonomous critical thinking and active participation in social transformation.
 - **Curriculum Reform:** Reducing learning burdens and focusing on meaningful, interactive, and creative educational strategies.
- By adopting these approaches, educators can fulfill their role as agents of social change, empowering students to shape a more equitable and enlightened society.

Critical Pedagogy and National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** represents a transformative approach to education in India, aiming to foster critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills among learners. The policy underscores the importance of reducing rote memorization in favor of interactive, engaging, and analytical learning approaches.

Key Aspects of NEP 2020:

1. **Critical Thinking and Flexible Curriculum**

NEP 2020 emphasizes critical thinking as the bedrock of meaningful learning. According to subheading 4.4 (page 18) of the policy document, the content across topics has been streamlined to focus on core concepts, problem-solving, and application. This restructuring encourages discovery-based, discussion-based, and analysis-based learning, providing students with opportunities for in-depth engagement and interactive classroom experiences.

2. **Building a New Generation of Learners**

The policy envisions equipping students with the skills necessary to tackle real-world challenges. By promoting critical thinking and creativity from the elementary level, NEP 2020 aims to produce a generation of innovative thinkers and socially responsible individuals prepared to face life's uncertainties.

3. **Teachers as change agents**

Teachers play a pivotal role in realizing NEP 2020's goals. The policy emphasizes a **two-stage pedagogical approach** for educators:

Multidisciplinary Teaching: Teachers are encouraged to employ interdisciplinary approaches, allowing students to view social issues through multiple lenses. This helps students develop integrated learning strategies and critical thinking abilities.

Lifelong Learning for Teachers: The policy highlights the need for continuous professional development for teachers. By embracing re-skilling and up-skilling opportunities, educators can stay updated with modern teaching methods and prepare students for dynamic future challenges.

Interactive Classrooms and Skill Development

To ensure immersive learning, NEP 2020 promotes the use of engaging teaching strategies such as debates, discussions, and collaborative projects. The focus is on nurturing critical thinkers who can actively participate in reshaping societal perspectives.

National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023: A Step Forward

The **National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023** aligns closely with NEP 2020's vision, aiming to create an inclusive, adaptive, and holistic educational environment. It seeks to address the diverse socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of Indian students while ensuring equitable access to quality education.

Goals of NCF 2023:

1. **Inclusive and Equitable Education**

The framework emphasizes removing barriers to learning and creating a supportive environment for students from varied backgrounds. It ensures that all children have access to high-quality education, regardless of their socio-economic status.

2. **Technology integration**

To enhance learning opportunities, NCF 2023 integrates technology into classrooms, enabling a more dynamic and interactive educational experience.

3. **Cultural and Environmental Relevance**

The curriculum encourages students to explore cultural and environmental contexts, promoting critical thinking and awareness of their surroundings.

4. **Comprehensive Learning**

By adopting a multidisciplinary approach, NCF 2023 ensures that students develop a broad understanding of various subjects, fostering creativity, social awareness, and critical literacy.

NCF Pedagogy: An Integrated Framework

The pedagogical principles outlined in NCF 2023 focus on creating student-centered learning environments that encourage collaboration, inclusivity, and experiential learning. Key components include:

1. **Constructivist Teaching**

Students are active participants in the learning process, constructing knowledge through hands-on activities, teamwork, and problem-solving tasks. Educators act as facilitators and mentors, guiding students in their journey.

2. **Experiential Learning**

Practical experiences such as projects, experiments, and fieldwork are prioritized to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application.

3. **Multidisciplinary Integration**

NCF 2023 promotes the integration of various subjects, highlighting the interconnectedness of knowledge domains. This approach broadens students' perspectives and fosters holistic understanding.

4. **Inclusive Education**

Addressing diverse learning needs, the framework encourages differentiated instruction tailored to individual learning styles. This ensures that all students, regardless of their abilities, can thrive in the classroom.

5. **Assessment and Feedback**

The framework advocates for customized and collaborative assessment methods that evaluate both academic and non-academic outcomes. This approach ensures a more comprehensive understanding of a student's growth.

Implications for Educators and Students

Both NEP 2020 and NCF 2023 recognize the critical role of educators in shaping the future of education in India. Teachers are tasked with not only delivering content but also inspiring students to think critically, engage actively, and approach problems creatively.

For Students:

- Develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Engage in collaborative and interactive learning.
- Explore cultural, social, and environmental contexts to become socially responsible citizens.

For Teachers:

- Embrace lifelong learning and continuous professional development.
- Implement multidisciplinary and experiential teaching methods.
- Foster an inclusive and supportive classroom environment.

Conclusion

More than four decades ago, Paulo Freire introduced the "banking concept" of education, critiquing the traditional approach where students passively receive knowledge from teachers. Despite extensive discussions on his ideas, the Indian educational system has struggled to implement the envisioned transformation. Without constructive and critical education, the desired social change remains elusive. To overcome inertia and thoughtlessness in the teaching-learning process, it is imperative to reform current pedagogical traditions. At the elementary level, education must preserve the richness of traditional knowledge while incorporating critical thinking to develop practical and analytical skills. Under the framework of **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** and **National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023**, education is shifting toward fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and a multidisciplinary approach. This shift emphasizes innovation, the integration of life skills, and the reorganization of learning methods to align with the dynamic needs of society. Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping the holistic development of students, including their intellectual, emotional, and social faculties. As facilitators of critical pedagogy, teachers are central to creating environments where students can cultivate original ideas and develop into empowered individuals.

To achieve this transformation, classrooms must evolve into democratic spaces where dialogue, exploration, and critical reflection are encouraged. Teachers must embrace critical pedagogy in its entirety, ensuring that their methods align with the principles of inclusivity, innovation, and student-centered learning. By doing so, students will not only develop the ability to analyse and critique social issues but also acquire the tools to resist oppression and foster equity. In summary, critical pedagogy, as envisioned in NEP 2020 and NCF 2023, is a pathway to building an education system that prepares students for real-world challenges. It equips learners with the capacity to think critically, engage actively, and contribute to a democratic society where every individual can thrive without fear of oppression. Through this approach, teachers can transform classrooms into hubs of meaningful learning, fostering not just academic excellence but also social consciousness and responsibility.

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Conflicts of interest

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