

## "Education As A Tool For Social Change: Examining The Role Of Critical Pedagogy In Addressing Inequality"

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to outline how critical pedagogy, relying on the principles of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire, can help existing educational paradigms overcome social inequalities. Critical pedagogy confronting hierarchical power relations and the goals of fostering students' critical awareness about oppression and justice. It does this through dialogic learning, problem-posing education, and conscientization. The paper evaluates the relationship of education with socio-economic status, race, gender, and disability either as a means for social mobility or additional enforcement of negative social status for disadvantaged students. Critical pedagogy provides an answer by integrating the concept of social justice into the curriculum, while at the same time, constructing cultural meaning. However, critical pedagogy in action has a set of practices that encounter institutional realities that demand strategies to address. In the end of the paper, the author emphasizes the need to support critical pedagogical practices in policy as well as training for future teachers. This enables students and instructors with the capabilities to tackle social injustice. It also examines how the critical theory of pedagogy grows in response to the current challenges introduced by the use of digital technology and the Sustainable Development Goals and how it remains relevant in driving fair societies.

**Keywords:** Critical theory, social justice, education change, power relations, Paulo Freire trick.

### INTRODUCTION

Education has been seen both locally and globally as a weapon of change and social status for quite some time now. Mandela conveyed that "Education is our most valuable tool as a humanoid race to affect our reality" (1). The critical pedagogy theory of education is a paradigm shift from traditional models of schooling so that students develop critical consciousness and be empowered to work collectively to effect change (2). To clarify the challenge of education and social inequality, including the role of critical pedagogy in confronting these problems, this essay will first introduce the basis of these two important themes. Tolerance, social mobility, discourse, economic return, health, and well-being. However, the quality and hence, access to education also fail to promote social equity in society. It noted that students from disadvantaged backgrounds perform poorly, drop out easily, and have low college entry and completion rates (3). These students attend schools located within low-income areas that are characterized by resource deprivations, concentration poverty effects, and inexperienced teachers. These inputs promote inequality in education outputs and life chances across indices such as achievement gaps, graduation rates, employment status, and incarceration rates (4). This cumulating inequality implies that any generation enjoys less social and economic change than previous generations did unless policies alter the problems – recent studies reveal that mobility in the United States has been declining.

Critical pedagogy refers to a teaching approach, which was for the first time documented by Paulo Freire in his work of 1968 titled; 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. Critical pedagogy expects traditional Education Models to perpetuate hegemonic beliefs and systems in society. Rather than students as the receivers of knowledge filtered and chosen by a teacher, students should be encouraged to engage in relational and critical analysis of the political and socioeconomic realities of educational systems and societies (5). In this way, through critical consciousness raising they can understand the fundamental causes of social issues and mobilize to fight against some aspects of realities dominating a society.

While traditional curriculum addresses mostly functional literacy and math allegedly necessary for the workforce, critical pedagogy prescribes a problem-posing approach that ties knowledge acquisition to the struggles of oppression (6). For example in Mathematics, lessons would involve discussing differential rates of homeownership by race as opposed to mathematical formulae. Instructional conversations in history would provide links to the incidents of today including police brutality protests, and vote suppression. Science classes would study power relations and possible interventions about the unequal distribution of environmental risks to people based on their race and class. In all the disciplines of critical education, analysis skills in assessing power relations, economic rationality, cultural domination, and social design faults aiding to persistent social issues are tried to be established (7).

Advocates speak of how critical pedagogy offers marginalized learners paranganglia in order to reflect on their oppression and planaria in order to view the sources as something that can be changed by collective action. It departs from the liberal

and empiricist view that education and learning are best represented as intelligence qua test scores towards cultivating emancipatory critical awareness and agency concerning injustice and oppression as a whole in society. Teachers are not so much transmitters of knowledge as they are guides of students' construction of knowledge predicated on studying the shortcomings of society (8). Where students are treated as subjects in the problem-posing dialogue aimed at creating the lifelong educational process, the powerlessness that many youths experience due to continuous cycles of poverty, violence, mass incarceration, sexualization, and slackening of civil liberties enforced by current social institutions might be replaced by a quest for actions to take (9).

Some positive effects of critical pedagogy programs are well illustrated through different research carried out on empowering marginalized students. Another work reveals that an ethnically-focused critical pedagogy of Service learning increased Latino students' voting rate six years after the school's graduation (10). A study on the National Paideia Center another critical pedagogy school identified concluded that low-income learner in these Paideia school were twice as likely to complete high school and further their post-secondary education than those in traditional schools (11). Future qualitative research must investigate causal mechanisms and generalizations since most effective programs are small-scale and implemented beyond the public school system. Whether or not questions connecting critical pedagogy to teacher training and curricula as possibilities to contribute to closing noted achievement gaps tied to SES and race should remain priority research and policy questions for educators.

### THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical pedagogy is a teaching paradigm and organization of the education process with the objective of critical awareness of society and people's capacity for change of oppressive circumstances. The founder of critical theory in education is Paulo Freire who wrote the book; *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970 (12).

Freire despised the content Receptionist model of education in which the teacher transfers knowledge to the learners who only receive it. He stated that the only kind of learning that was possible was the dialogic wherein both the teacher and the student are active Ferraris, 2008:106 negotiators of knowledge from one another (13). It also allows the student's voice and nurtures analytic frameworks for challenging normalized narratives.

#### Core concepts of critical pedagogy include:

**Dialogic Learning:** Knowledge is created in cooperation between teachers and students, using questioning aimed at open concepts and the horizontal communication model. As with each other, it educates both parties and erases the mentality of the top-down approach speaking only when it believes it has the answers (14).



**Fig 1: A Collaborative Exchange Between Teachers and Students**  
 (<https://www.learningvillage.net/article/dialogic-teaching>)

**Problem-Posing Education:** Teachers pose real social issues as palpable 'problems' into which the students enter with a view of finding solutions. They describe such motivation as having helped engagingly shape students and cultivate in them social consciousness.



Fig 2: **Problem-Posing Education:** Engaging Students in Real-World Solutions. (<https://unsplash.com/photos/man-and-woman-sitting-on-chairs-zFS06bnZJTW>)

**Conscientization:** Individuals gain sociopolitical consciousness of various social and political antinomies and struggles that underpin existence experiences. This makes it possible for a collective action for liberation to be achieved.

**Empowerment:** Oppressed categories 'gain' socio-political power to bring about social transformation and self-empowerment. Conscientization leading to empowerment is an important factor where education is intervention (15). When enacting these ideas, the intentions of critical pedagogy include the disruption of oppression's normalization which underpins race, gender, class, and other vectors. It shows how power, privilege, and oppression function in education and beyond (16). It empowers learners to address oppression that goes on within them and make changes.

Critical pedagogy as a social justice-oriented theory of education and change has impacted on teacher education programs worldwide, particularly multicultural and antiracism reform efforts. It offers philosophical justification and methods for education as a means for unmasking interlocking oppression and building a less oppressive world in the spirit of human rights.

Although its conceptual framework has been developed in Latin America by Freire, critical pedagogy is still developing as a result of new forms of oppression emerging in other parts of the world (17). It meant humanization and decolonization and calls for eco-ethical awareness applicable to geopolitics, race, gender, mass media, and climate crisis. Essentially, critical solidarity is optimally nurtured through education, especially in societies that are fractured.

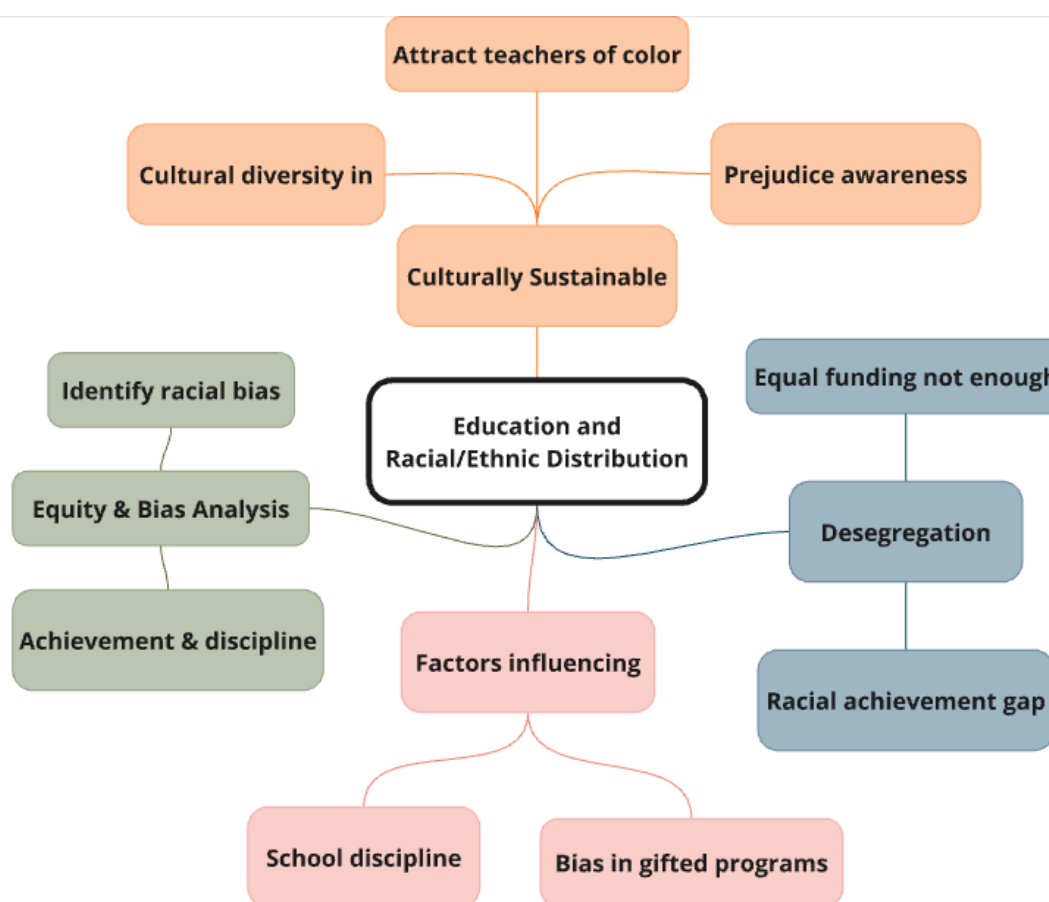
## THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN ADDRESSING SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

### *Education and Income Disparity*

Socioeconomic status is one of the most important factors that affect student achievement. They can quantify how low-income usage puts children in a poor starting position for school readiness, the poor richness of preschool learning experience, and the poor quality of school choices in the given neighborhood (18). This K-12 economic achievement gap remains and has consequences for college enrollment and attainment. To mitigate it, Maryland can fully and fairly fund schools in districts, provide need-based scholarship aid to attend postsecondary institutions, establish community schools that can address students' comprehensive needs, and increase the availability of high-quality early learning at an affordable price.

### *Education and Racial/Ethnic Distribution*

Desegregation and Integration of schools have tried to address the issue of equal funding for all schools without achieving quality of addressing the issue of the racial achievement gap. Factors that have consequences on race and participation of students in gifted programs are also leading to school discipline disparities arising from bias (19). For better equity, schools should analyze whether achievement is biased in terms of race and discipline practices and then introduce culturally sustainable teaching practices that incorporate cultural differences and diversity, attract and retain teachers of color, and train teachers and administrators about prejudice and culturally comprehensive pedagogy (20).



**Figure:**

### ***Gender and Education: Bridging the Gap***

More so, the primary and secondary education enrollment between girls and boys has been equal in developed countries, but gender inequality still prevails (21). Adolescent girls have lower self-estimate skills in mathematics and science than boys. Gender-biased perceptions as to the place of male and female students in society and their potential incline academic preferences and occupations (22). To reduce gender bias in schools, schools should replace curriculum and achievements that portray gender bias, encourage and support girls to perform well in STEM courses, teach students about media messages that support stereotyping gender roles, and acquaint teachers, staff, and students with ways that provoked gender bias influences expectations for girls and boys.

### ***The Educational Challenges experienced by People of Color in Minority Settings***

Students with disabilities, students of color, immigrant and cultural minorities, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other students of other minority groups experience other forms of barriers. ESL, discrimination, no money, and no-self being depicted in curriculum and faculty all influence opportunity and achievement (23). As the quantity of teachers and managers from underrepresented backgrounds increases, coupled with greater training on social justice and diversity, strategies can now be created to tackle these injustices.

Levain education for social justice means knowing where prejudice is operating and putting in place policies, programs training, curricula, and pedagogy that will give value and opportunity, experience, and results to students who had hitherto been unfairly treated in schools due to their color, gender, disability, sexual orientation or nationality (24). Education can help interrupt social reproduction only if strenuous collective work is being done for this aim. Stating goals that are congruent with equality, social justice, and the ability to critically review data that shows disparities is the foundation. Such things as topics such as culturally responsive teaching carried in teacher preparation programs, and schools that work in collaboration with communities also advance this course. Boosting the awareness of the difficulties tied to reforming current systems can be achieved through education that covers a range of concerns regarding diversity, inclusion, and social justice (25).



## CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN PRACTICE

Critical pedagogy is an educational philosophy and a teaching paradigm that concerns the process of raising critical awareness of the injustices in society (26). Applying critical pedagogy in school requires educating teachers on how to look at critical pedagogy, involving the emancipation of oppressed students and switching conventional relations of power in the classroom (27).

Authentic application points out that educators are important in inducing social change through the application of critical pedagogy approaches. This entails the orientation of the students to critically analyze their social context, scrutinize causes of injustice, and transform the current societal structures (28). Educators choose subject matters that are culturally related, arrange effective and empowering lessons that empower students, and establish relevant forums for cultivating critical discussions and discussions. The outcome is to equip students with the ability to recognize social injustices in their society and know how to address them (29).

However, practices towards critical pedagogy encounter organizational rigor and didactic hurdles. In many ways, school administrations maintain prescribed curricula that reflect and perpetuate the status quo in the classroom. There are likely to be challenges of pushback in critical educators for promoting politically charged, contentious issues. The absence of training and difficult experiences among students are also considered barriers to change-oriented instruction (30).

To counteract these forms of institutionalization, critical educators need to be able to demonstrate to institutional managers the value of critical pedagogy and develop solidarity with others in their schools, universities, etc. This resource indicates that before one can succeed in maximum students in the classroom, it is prudent to demonstrate culturally sensitive pedagogy in the process of teaching (31). Of course, critical approaches prepare educators for tensions, but one should persist in sowing seeds of how to transform an unequal society. Even though the educational system presents limitations, critical pedagogy offers theoretical support and an exemplary model to teachers, on how to use the position of power to raise students to social consciousness and action.

## CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND POLICY REFORM

The argument about critical pedagogy advocates is that government educational policies and curriculum decisions are socially justifiable in schools (32). Critics on the other hand state that education equality should be the policymaker's strategy of choice to change power relations in learning institutions.

### *Government and Education Policy: Possibilities and Reality*

Critical theorists express the view that government decisions have a considerable influence on what is taught at schools and on which voices are heard (33). They argue that policies tend to construct the dominant discourses that are unproblematic about the existing social injustices. For example, state curriculum standards might tell histories from a European perspective or might cater to students from richer backgrounds emphasizing the preparation for the tests. Critique Pedagogy thinks that such measures continue to promote structural racism by silencing minorities (34). As proponents of equality in opportunity, advocates think that policymakers should require liberal, social justice approaches to teaching to democratize learning. They may include mandating that one must take ethnic studies, adopting nontraditional texts in English classes, or presenting contentious subjects in several ways (35). So, by using authority in standards and accountability, policymakers can achieve curricular justice.

### *Promoting equity-based changes in curriculum and instruction for students*

Advocates of critical pedagogy have always demanded change in curricula that perpetuate inequality. They seek resources that resolve cultural representations, relations of power, norms and problems of activism that empower students. Students, in a U.S. history curriculum that concentrates on equity, explore the impacts of slavery, judge past rebellions, and ponder resolutions for present discrimination (36). Some scholars think that such narratives should be imposed by policymakers in fields such as ethnic studies, literature, and social science where empathy is paramount. For these scholars, educative solutions to reaching the pedagogy of the oppressed include the transformation of the curriculum, teachers' professional discretion over what to teach, and diversified student-centered state syllabi.

It is proposed that critical pedagogy take on a significant part in the education of teachers, covering both primary training and ongoing professional development.

Fitialization of critical pedagogy principles is slowly informing several teacher credentialing programs (37). Through such concepts as deficit thinking, cultural-professional responsiveness, and anti-oppressive pedagogy, these programs support teachers and future teachers in critical self-reflection at the bias level as well as in the acquisition of culturally sustaining pedagogies. This makes the teachers more capable of developing the learner with a critical understanding of the curriculum and students from diverse backgrounds. Both approaches to critical pedagogy should be required of all students who wish to become educators – so that they take on a social justice perspective (38). They continue to argue that such training is beneficial for the transition from models that oppress domination and marginalization in schools. Increasing numbers of states are now putting social justice teaching standards into their licensure testing too. Critical pedagogy theory postulates that education governance and curriculum choices either reproduce education inequity or can be used for equity emancipation of struggling students (39). Policymakers are prodded into the latter by advocates

demanding things that shake up the norm – demanding equity for the powerless and making sure that teachers are prepared to teach in equity (40). These people consider systematic enhancements to be necessary for accessing the freedom potentials that education presents.

### THE FUTURE OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN PROMOTING SOCIAL CHANGE

The paper identifies how critical pedagogy has a purpose to serve in the facilitation of equal opportunities and social justice in the 21st century. While the liberating ideas must go on informing critical pedagogy in the discussion of technology in education and the changing structure of economies, a criticality has to emerge from the practical contexts (41).

Applying the tenets of criticality in the new media landscape empowers the use of new technologies to create dialogue, voice, connections, and engagement with people beyond the limits of classrooms across the world (42). But the same realms also offer an opportunity for new forms of exclusion. Teachers need to inform students about what exclusion and bias look like and where they occur, which is in algorithm systems, interface designs, and AI use as well as in technological products. Students within the course should be exposed to how the interests of the privileged groups determine technological advancement. Students can become involved in participatory design projects to craft digital solutions that are appropriate for people's needs in their communities (43).

We, therefore, argue that deepening community participation is necessary for realizing the emancipatory vision of Freire's critical pedagogy. Courses that involve service-learning and activities in participatory action research support students and faculty to work with organizations as partners rather than as topics of study. These initiatives determine the structural realities that communities can come up against, increase civic engagement, and build partnerships to address issues affecting communities such as poverty, poor housing, or environmental humanities. Students thus obtain critical awareness of multiple forms of oppression within the system, while community-centered learning processes defy power imbalance (44).

The Post-2015, 2030, and New Development Goals or the SDGs have re-emerging possibilities for the advancement of critical pedagogy in such areas as: } SDG should be endorsed by teachers as a useful method of illustrating links between poverty, climate change, conflict, and justice on a systemic level (45). Empowering the targeted student population with the ability to critically think about political and economic practices compared to ecological integrity and human rights renders critical pedagogy's goal of knowledge integration. When students interact with the SDGs implementing groups on campus it also energizes social actions (46). Such examples clearly show that critical pedagogy nurtures societies that are fair, strong in the face of adversity, and sustainable – the kind of societies we need on this planet.

When our ruling structures become more powerful and we experience growing social breakdowns, critical pedagogy is seen as a critical tool for empowering individuals and creating social change (47). The primary purpose of critical pedagogy is to endow those struggling against injustice with the skills needed to address the differing challenges set forth by a society that is evolving and unjust.

### CONCLUSION

Applying the tenets of criticality in the new media landscape empowers the use of new technologies to create dialogue, voice, connections, and engagement with people beyond the limits of classrooms across the world. But the same realms also offer an opportunity for new forms of exclusion. Teachers need to inform students about what exclusion and bias look like and where they occur, which is in algorithm systems, interface designs, and AI use as well as in technological products. Students within the course should be exposed to how the interests of the privileged groups determine technological advancement. Students can become involved in participatory design projects to craft digital solutions that are appropriate for people's needs in their communities. We therefore argue that deepening community participation is necessary for realising emancipatory vision of Freire's critical pedagogy. Courses that involve service-learning and activities in participatory action research support students and faculty to work with organizations as partners rather than as topics of study. These initiatives determine the structural realities that communities can come up against, increase civic engagement, and build partnerships to address issues affecting communities such as poverty, poor housing, or environmental humanities. Students thus obtain critical awareness of multiple forms of oppression within system, while community-centered learning processes defy power imbalance.

The Post-2015, 2030 and New Development Goals or SDGs have re-emerging possibilities for the advancement of critical pedagogy in such areas as SDG should be endorsed by teachers as a useful method of illustrating links between poverty, climate change, conflict, and justice on a systemic level. Empowering the targeted student population with the ability to critically think about political and economic practices comparative to ecological integrity and human rights renders critical pedagogy's goal of knowledge integration. When students are interacting with the SDGs implementing groups on campus it as well energizes social actions. Such examples clearly show that critical pedagogy nurtures societies that are fair, strong in the face of adversity and sustainable – the kind of societies we need on this planet. When our ruling structures become more powerful and we experience growing social breakdown, critical pedagogy is seen as a critical tool for empowering individuals and creating social change. The primary purpose of critical pedagogy is to endow those struggling against injustice with the skills needed to address the differing challenges set forth by a society that is evolving and unjust.

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