

# Re-conceptualizing Student-Teacher Dynamics in the 21st Century Classroom: A Case for Autonomy and Empowerment

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## ABSTRACT

The educational landscape in the 21st century has undergone substantial transformation, distinct from any previous epochs. Characterized by a fusion of physical and virtual dimensions, these learning environments are geared towards addressing real-world issues, all while situated amidst unprecedented challenges and possibilities. In such a context, a pressing necessity arises: the fundamental reimagining of the dynamic between educators and learners, with an emphasis on facilitating student autonomy and empowerment. This stands in contrast to the conventional mode that tends to cultivate passive receptivity, devoid of any meaningful engagement with the learners. It is within this paradigm shift of Student-Teacher interactions that the potential for profound impact resides. This shift holds the promise of nurturing a global populace adept not only at advocating for socio-political and environmental justice but also at possessing the cognitive acuity necessary for assuming the roles of thought leaders and adept problem-solvers. In essence, the recalibration of Student-Teacher dynamics emerges as an imperative lever for nurturing a citizenry capable of championing global equity, while concurrently cultivating the critical awareness requisite for addressing intricate challenges.

**Keywords:** *Critical Pedagogy, Student Autonomy, Empowerment, Socio-political justice.*

## 1. Introduction

Amid the intricate array of challenges presented by pandemics, ecological crisis, the proliferation of misinformation, and the corrosive propagation of hatred in the 21st century, it is important to rethink the role and impact of a teacher not just in the classroom, but in society, the nation and the world at large. Should the teacher be the conveyor of information or an agent of transformation in the classroom?

Should the teacher encourage the class to think and critique the power structures in society and accordingly contribute to instilling critical thinking skills in students or should they turn them into passive recipients of the information who show high dependency on an external authority with no recognition of their individual talent?

Teaching, therefore, becomes a political act, as a teacher makes a conscious choice in shaping the attitude, aptitude and interest of the students. A teacher exercises considerable influence in the classroom, which is capable of producing a powerful impact on society. Yet, there is a misconception that teaching is a neutral activity. Had that been the case, the greatest political thinkers would not have termed education as a tool for transformative change.

Teachers must realize their power and potential and politicize teaching as a powerful activity. This should be supplemented with reimagining the role of a teacher and student in the classroom.

Freedom has been a cherished ideal, the pursuit of which has inspired wars, battles and rebellions. Yet, the notion of freedom has been somewhat restricted and twisted for children. They have been reduced to a *Tabula Rasa* who are in need of constant vigilance. At a time, when children are starting businesses and the government is rolling out schemes such as the Entrepreneurship Mindset Curriculum, it is plainly obvious by the logic of such initiatives that children are not lacking in intelligence or ethical consciousness or are incapable actors. Thus, their personhood, agency and autonomy need to be acknowledged and respected in classroom spaces. This is possible only when the existing education system changes its perception of the child and recognizes them as full person that has their own life journeys and learning that can enrich the classroom environment. Such a humanizing outlook towards the role of a student and teacher is made possible with the contribution of the Critical Pedagogy educational philosophy that challenges

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Received: 20 April, 2023

Available online: 20 September, 2023

the in-built hierarchy between the teacher and the student in the current schooling system.

## 2. On Child Autonomy

It is strange and counterproductive that the schooling system deprives the autonomy and agency of the child and then expects them to grow up into independent, rational beings that provide out-of-the-box solutions for the challenges of environmental pollution, ethnocentrism, gender inequality et al.

Ashis Nandy in his work *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias* explains that childhood is a cultural concept and it played an important role in perpetuating the colonial ideology. In the modern world, the concept of adulthood is associated with productivity, work, money, power and domination and all these were important factors not just perpetuating colonialism but sustaining modern-day capitalism too. In present-day society, adulthood signifies completeness and the end product of development while childhood signifies a transitional stage towards adulthood and normality. The concept of childhood was used to justify colonialism. Britain was seen as the adult, mature society which was guiding the primitive, childish Indian society. Nandy discusses that while children have suffered exploitation and oppression throughout history in the form of castration, circumcision, sodomy, sexual exploitation etc, the modern world unleashes its own oppression on children through the use of “impersonal, centralizing and uniformizing forces unleashed by modern state system and technology”. (Nandy, 1987, pp 60) Such a worldview projects the child as a weak, inferior but usable version of the fully mature adult. In the growing instrumental view of interpersonal relationships, the modern worldview stresses using the child as a projective device where the child reflects the inner needs and ambitions of the parents. Further, childhood is regarded as a dystopia of the modern world where childhood has become a euphemism for immaturity, abnormality, and underdevelopment. Here the concept of a good child actually results from the demands of adults whether it is emotional, economic, personal or even political.

Teachers in the classroom must consciously realize that childhood and adulthood form a continuum, and they are synchronically present in the personality of both the child and the adult.

According to Nandy, the dismissal of childhood is the dismissal of culture and an alternative vision of a good society. If the schooling system continues to view children as inferior beings, then the generation is doomed because on one hand, we are fast promoting ideas of an entrepreneurial mindset and responsible youth and on the other hand, we continue to infantilize them and refuse to acknowledge their individuality and creativity in their crucial years of growth and development.

## 3. Classroom Teaching Reimagined

Critical thinking skills, research aptitude and a spirit of inquiry are some of the key values that today's education system claims to achieve. Yet, this is not possible unless a teacher consciously uses their influence in inculcating these qualities in the students. Hence, teaching is not a neutral exercise, it is a political act that not just familiarizes the students with ideas and concepts, but also provides them with a social critique for improvement in the system. Re-politicizing teaching essentially involves mindfully using teaching as a tool for change. It involves using Critical Pedagogy with the goal to develop, according to Paulo Freire, *conscientização*, or critical consciousness in students. Teachers are not information providers; they are transformative intellectuals who directly impact the future of the civilization.

Popular books on Teacher Education define teaching as a *modification of behaviour*. In this definition itself, there is an implicit meaning that something wrong or undesirable exists in children which requires rectification. The term is dehumanizing in so many respects as if the child lacks consciousness or a sense of right and wrong. Rather than, modifying the child's behaviour efforts focus should be on value addition. However, value addition can be done only once the child's attitude, aptitude and interest are discovered.

The problem with the existing schooling system in India is that since the beginning, children are made to enter classrooms and sit from morning till afternoon operating along the standardized curriculum and mechanically disciplined school environment. Standardization leaves no room for individual creative expression and poses a major limitation on one's thinking. Keeping this in mind, the curriculum and the evaluation should be made flexible and student-centred and it must encourage social critique and political action. This is possible only if the teacher exercises considerable autonomy in the classroom such as in brainstorming the assignment and deciding the parameters for assessment. Critical pedagogy views education as a liberatory practice, in which the end goal of education is the liberation and humanization of students from the chains of ignorance.

Educational institutions with a strict disciplinary environment, where the teaching-learning process is confined to the classroom, and student activities within the school building are not considered part of the learning experience, tend to produce individuals who may excel in rote. The teaching pedagogy is determined by the school structure and also the campus culture. The degree of freedom of interaction between the students and teachers is an important indicator of the success of critical pedagogy. Having informal spaces such as a playground, and a common sitting area apart from the classroom

setting, therefore, becomes important for the children to engage in discussions about factors that directly impact them and their surroundings..

Critical pedagogues are well-informed citizens who engage in power analysis in order to question structural societal inequities. Thus they challenge the hierarchy that is created between the student and teacher. The dynamics of the relationship between educators and students are crucial, as the two of them in tandem are responsible for the co-creation of knowledge. Freire described the traditional teaching method as “the banking method” because it involves teachers depositing information into students like empty vessels. Such a system of education is deemed oppressive as children lose out on their precious human years in memorizing and regurgitating the facts deposited in them by their teachers. This traditional model according to Freire creates a kind of ignorance where students are unable to critique knowledge and power and are in fact dependent on their immediate teachers. Such a mentality makes students submissive and makes them habituated to oppression in other domains of their lives later on. Hence, the power dynamics between a teacher and student need to be re-conceptualized.

The engaged pedagogy concept that Bell Hooks introduced emphasizes care and healing within the learning process, and goes beyond Freire’s primary focus on the mind. (May-Varas, n.d.) This wholeness includes mind, body and spirit and prioritizes well-being, a concept best seen in the Indian philosophy that emphasizes the role of the mind, body and spirit in the pursuit of knowledge. A. Nagraj's philosophy that underpins the Happiness Curriculum running in the schools of Delhi Government also gives importance to mindfulness in thought, speech and action to achieve sustainable happiness.

#### **4. Way Forward**

Critical pedagogy can be helpful in re-conceptualizing Teacher-Student dynamics and providing opportunities for autonomy, empowerment and liberation of students. The following are some areas in which we should reconsider our approach within our current education system.

##### ***Rethinking the time-table***

The timetable can be made flexible for students by giving 10 minutes break every period. Finland for instance gave a 15 minutes breakout after a 45-minute lecture since 1960s. It helps students to focus better, finish incomplete tasks, promote their physical health and make them more interested in studies. An American teacher who started teaching in Helsinki writes that by incorporating these short breaks in his classes, he never saw “feet-dragging, zombie-like kids in my classroom”. (Walker, 2018) It kept the students fresh throughout the year. Children decide how to utilize the break. It is a free play not teacher directed.

##### ***Professional Ethics for Teachers***

The teacher must unlearn the hierarchy that is created between them and the students. They should not treat the students as clean slates. They must respect and acknowledge the presence of every student in the class. They must realize the influence they wield in the classroom.

##### ***Student-centred pedagogy***

The classroom needs to be decentered. The teacher must try to adopt student-centred pedagogy that encourages them to think and reflect. Quoting real-life examples and encouraging the students to do the same can help break the monotony of the textbook. Group discussions and brainstorming can be important methods to instill skills of team work, cooperation and leadership.

##### ***Evaluation Techniques suited to child's attitude, aptitude and interest***

Teacher autonomy is essential and a prerequisite for student autonomy and empowerment. Rather than going for standardized tests, teachers should have the autonomy in class to evaluate the students based on their aptitude, attitude and interests. Students should be free to express their learning through any form- a term paper, presentation, a one-act play et al.

##### ***Informal Learning Spaces***

Learning is a lifelong activity precisely because the human mind does not stop absorbing and reflecting, either consciously or subconsciously. The presence of Informal Learning Spaces is considered necessary to aid the teaching-learning process. Thus, the existence of a playground is necessary for children, which not just promotes their physical health through sports but also promotes inter-personal relationships. The presence of a cafeteria for the students can also be an important place for discussing issues and distressing.

##### ***Environmental ethics***

Given how the air quality of Delhi is hazardous, it is essential to incorporate environmental consciousness among students from a young age. Planting saplings, ensuring cleanliness in the classroom, school compounds and outside school, and spreading awareness in crowded places can be particularly helpful.

Further, social science teachers may encourage students to write letters and petitions to politicians and government about the issue. Such experiences will enable the students to realize the power of their voice and collective action. Allowing students to spend time in nature during the 15 minutes break between classes will also instill in them a feeling of gratitude and responsibility towards the environment.

### 5. Conclusion

The present times calls for a complete shift in thinking about the role of a teacher and student in the classroom. The former needs to realize their influence and power in the classroom. The latter need to be seen as human beings with dignity, and their experience and previous knowledge must be acknowledged and respected by all participants in the classroom. Efforts must be made to strive for teacher-student autonomy and empowerment where the latter is given more avenues for self-exploration and creative expression. Critical Pedagogy may be useful in transforming the Student-Teacher dynamics such that students develop their critical consciousness and a sense of ownership towards the society and the environment.

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