Exploration of Praxis through Personal and Professional Journey: Implications

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> Education, at its best, provides the symbolic and cultural capital that empowers people to survive and prosper in an increasingly complex and changing world, and the resources to produce a more cooperative, democratic, egalitarian and just society. (Kahn & Kellner 2007, p. 440)

Abstract

This paper explores the meaning of praxis through the personal and professional journey of the author, emphasizing the thoughts of major proponents of praxis and their contributions in the field. What emerges through this exploration is that praxis is not knowing but putting the knowing into action for the betterment of all humankind through practical judgment. This paper leads readers through the author's reflection on the diverse socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds that shape his praxis journey, and ends with implications in the field. In light of different interpretations of praxis, the author suggests embracing reflective practices and calls for paradigmatic shifts in existing educational practices for social justice and equity.

Introduction

There has been a long rugged debate in academia as to whether "teachers are born" or "teachers are made." There is no doubt about the fact that we had many examples of successful born teachers in history and in mythology (e.g., Guru Dronacharya, Chanakya (Kautilaya), Confucius, Guru Ravindranath Tagore, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Rousseau). However, the notion that teachers are made is highly contested in the field of teaching and education. Linda Darling-Hammond (2006) describes the belief that "good teachers are born and not made" as one of education's "most damaging myths," one that has gained the standing of a "superstition," with harmful consequences for teacher education and schooling (p. ix).

The notion of teacher as a change agent against social injustice and inequities emerged along with education and curricular reforms in the early 20th century in the US. By referring to the problems of public school teachers in regards to children of immigrants, Jane Addams wrote: "The ignorant teacher cuts students off because he himself cannot understand the situation, the cultivated teachers fastens them because his own mind is open to the charm and beauty of that old-country life" (cited in Flinders & Thornton, 2009, p. 43).

Within the past few decades, significant economic and political changes have occurred all across the globe. These changes appear to have seriously revamped educational policies, paradigms, and philosophies as a result of economic and social globalization. The emergence of globalization is making education researchers' task much more challenging than ever before, to explore innovative perspectives to educate humankind for future global citizenship. It is required for framing visionary agenda to cater quality education to all, without creating class and status based education system. In this regard, some time ago, Jonathan Kozol (2005) in his book "The Shame of the Nation," argues that American public education is depriving minority children from quality education. On the other hand, in his book, "The Abandoned Generation", Giroux (2003) writes:

> One of the most serious, yet unspoken and unrecognized, tragedies in the United States is the condition of its children. We live in a society in which too many young people are poor, lack decent housing and health care, attend decrepit schools filled with overworked and underpaid teachers, and who, by all standards, deserve more in a country that prides itself on its level of democracy, liberty, and alleged equality for all citizens. (p.9)

In light of the given evolving scenarios, I explore the meaning of praxis through my own the personal and professional journey, highlighting the thoughts of major proponents of praxis and their contributions in the field. Taking different interpretations of praxis into consideration along with my own personal and professional experiences, I suggest for embracing reflective practices by teachers and professionals for social justice and equity.

Praxis: Historical and Philosophical Perspectives

The concept of "Western Praxis" is first ascribed to Aristotle, which describes a continuous commitment to knowledge creation out of experience. For Aristotle, (cited

in Kemmis & Smith, 2008) praxis is one of the three basic activities of human beings: *theoria* (theory), *poiēsis* (skilfull manufacture), and *phronesis* (wisdom). This means that Aristotelian praxis includes voluntary and goal-directed action, although it sometimes includes the condition that the action is an action done for its own sake (Kemmis & Smith, 2008).

Contrary to Aristotle, Kant, 1771 (cited in Kemmis & Smith, 2008), viewed praxis as the application of a theory to cases encountered in experience, and developed through ethically significant thought or practical reason. According to Coulter and Weins (2002), the aim of praxis is to lead "a good and virtuous life via *phronesis*; determining a good and virtuous life however, is ultimately the result of contemplation or study and its particular form of wisdom via *sophia*; wisdom developed through inspiration" (p. 16). This implies that reasoning about what there should be as opposed to what there is (Coulter & Weins, 2002; Kemmis & Smith, 2008).

However, for Marx, 1939 (cited in Kemmis & Smith, 2008), praxis is the central theme to the new philosophical ideas of transforming the world through revolutionary activities. This means that the subordination of theory to practice is also connected with the inability of reasoning to solve contradictions and prejudices, which are instead removed by the dialectical progress of history. Thus, praxis is also connected with free, self-conscious, authentic activity as opposed to the alienated labor demanded under capitalism. According to Kemmis and Smith (2008) praxis might be regarded as a first approximation, as "action that is morally committed, and oriented and informed by traditions in a field, the term praxis is contested, within and across languages and intellectual traditions" (p. 4). This means that praxis comprises a cycle of action-reflection-action by which individuals create culture and society. It also enables individuals to reiterate the process of consciousness, practice, and reflective practice in their experience. In other words, praxis as action embodies certain qualities that include a commitment to human well-being and the search for truth and respect for self-reflexivity and others' perspectives.

On the other hand, Taylor (1993) argues that word and action, action and reflection, theory and practice are all facets of the same idea, what Freire has called "activism"

and Aristotle termed it "*poiēsis*." It implies that praxis is not merely the act of doing but is also about acting upon and doing to; it is about working with objects.

Praxis as Critical Pedagogy

While there are many interpretations of Praxis within academia, the development of an activist pedagogy and the genre of writing surrounding pedagogic activism reemerged from the work of Paulo Freire. Freire's (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* expresses a definition of what activist teachers do: "problem posing education" (p. 65). For Freire (1972), teachers need to teach competently so that their students can become "presences in the world." Teaching, then, is at least a preliminary form of activism and teachers are handed the responsibility for guiding the students' identities within an explicitly social context, and this responsibility consists of a process of discovery connected to the struggle against injustice. This is to be contrasted with "banking education," which teaches students to be passively observant of reality.

Freire (1972) challenged the separatist "banking model of education" in which literacy is taught as a set of cognitive skills or a decontextualized body of knowledge divorced from learners lives, with the consequence that learners cannot be reflective or bring their own experiences to the learning process. It inhibits creative power and submerges consciousness. Instead, a liberatory "problem-posing education" rejects the "banking model of education" as the process of transferring information, and embraces a view of education as consisting of acts of cognition that take place through dialogue. Later, emphasizing the need for knowledge to be evolved through praxis, Horton and Freire (1990) stated, "We as human beings have created knowledge … continue to create a new knowledge. …knowledge has historicity. That is, knowledge never is static, it's always in the process" (p.194). This means that educational practices and teachers' pedagogy should change as per the needs of society and so as to assist in catering the needs and expectations of all its stakeholders, students, parents, teachers, and community at large. This implies that pedagogy is not limited to the practices in schools, as individuals of all ages and cultural spheres need education.

In other words, critical pedagogy refers to how a teacher enables or constrains a particular view of knowledge and knowledge formation that either assists students to read the word and the world (that is, to learn dialogically and dialectically), or helps to

restrict access and understanding of the social world for students and their relationship to it (Apple, 1996; Freire, 1972, 1998; Giroux, 1997, 2003, 2006; Kincheloe, 1991; Peterson, 2003). Freire (1972) emphasizes the need for dialectical relationship between teachers and students, and for this, he advocates for mutual respect and dialogue between teachers and students, so that they become critical co-investigators for their learning and teaching.

Freire and Shor (1987) emphasize the importance of dialogue when they suggest that the "idea of talking a book and not just writing a book is valuable" (p. 2). They further suggest that dialogue can offer a rigorous approach to ideas, facts, and problems, but offers a style that is itself creative and re-creative, stating, "That is, in the last analysis you are re-creating yourself in dialogue" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 3). For Freire (1972), "social revolution is the result of praxis at the communal level in which dialogical method has enabled teachers to play the role of "participant managers" of the classroom conversation" (cited in Allen, 1993, p. 38). Furthermore, Burbules and Rice (1991) discuss about the significance of dialogue through two schools of Western thought called antidemocratic (Plato's, 427 B.C.) and democratic or critical (Freire's, 1972). In their own words, "in the Western tradition of educational thought, dialogue has served as a prescriptive ideal pointing to a particular type of communicative interaction thought to have special, even unique, educational potential" (p. 393). However, both schools of thought agree upon the importance of dialogical process and its emancipatory potential. According to Burbules and Rice (1991):

> There is something intrinsic to the dialogical process, the process of questioning, doubting, reexamining assumptions, clarifying meanings, and so forth that joins partners in a teaching learning relation in which, together, they can unlearn the falsehoods they might be burdened with and reconstruct a truer, fuller understanding of their worlds. (p. 393)

They further argue that in changing contexts, one form of dialogue cannot be acceptable for all communities, and especially for those who have been silenced by others. As they write, "when the ideal of dialogue assumes a singular homogeneous model of communication, it frequently can have a contradictory effect: constraining communicative possibilities rather than opening them up" (Burbules, & Rice, 1991, p. 395). However, they acknowledge limitations in terms of having any agreed upon format for a composite dialogue, which includes all existing diversities of societies.

They write, "A respect for diversity, a desire for inclusion within a democratic conversation, and an ideal built on a mutually respectful, reciprocal, open-ended form of pedagogical communication remain well beyond the attainments of modem society" (Burbules, & Rice, 1991, p. 396).

Therefore, Burbules and Rice (1991) express their concerns for the use of dialogues for pedagogical purposes by stating that they have two concerns about the role dialogue: "'proceduralism,' which elevates issues of pedagogy over an examination of the broader factors that do or do not make dialogue possible; 'prescriptivism,' which despite good intents at accommodating diversity, may be counterproductive in contexts of difference" (Burbules & Rice, 1991, p. 399). Teachers should bring variety into the classroom so that the diverse needs of learners can be met. The teachers should avoid imposing a single form of dialogue for all students since prescriptivism demoralizes the creativity of the learners and gives birth to resentments and aggression. Coulter and Wiens (2002) also argue that respecting diverse standpoints requires dialogue with other people, listening to their stories, and relating to their uniqueness without collapsing these divergent views into a generalized amalgam (p. 18). Similarly, Rogers and Babinski (1999) emphasize the need for collaboration between new and experienced teachers through composite dialogues and reflective practices, "The first year of teaching is trying, even traumatic, for many beginning teachers. Moving from teacher-in-training to teacher-in-charge represents so painful a period in the professional lives of new teachers that it has its own name: reality shock" (Rogers & Babinski, 1999, p.1). They further highlight the complexities that new teachers face when nobody is willing to listen to issues pertaining to teaching or classroom problems that they are grappling with. According to Lieberman and Miller, "The culture of teaching imposes unspoken rules; it is acceptable to talk about the weather, sports, and even sex or to complain in general about school and students, yet it is unacceptable for teachers to talk to each other about teaching and what goes on in classrooms" (cited in Rogers & Babinski, 1999, p.1).

Others maintain that hegemony asserts itself in schools through a hidden curriculum that comprises the unstated norms, values, and beliefs embedded in the underlying rules that structure the routines and social relationships in school and classroom life. That is why critical theorists underscore the need for teachers empowerment and transformation, and for this, they emphasize teachers self-reflection through praxis,

action research (Apple, 1996; Giroux, 2003, 2006, Kincheloe, 1991; Lather, 2008; Paul & Elder, 2008; Peterson, 2003).

Praxis as Action Research

Action research with a special emphasis on invigorating the senses of the people involved, promotes teachers' Praxis through reflection and self-reflection by doing cycles of action research in their classrooms. Advocates of praxis as action research hold that

> it shares its epistemological base with Marxian Humanism (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), Gandhian non-violent civil resistance, Gadamer's critical hermeneutics, Gramscian concept of political praxis and organic intellectualism, Thoreau's ethical economics, Feyerabend's resistance to the monopoly of 'scientific' methods (Feyraband, 1970), Kuhn's notion of paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962), Agnes Heller's systemic reciprocity (Heller, 1989), Paulo Frieire's dialogical conscientisation, Samir Amin's critique of imperialism, the argument of subaltern philosophy, feminism, pro-labor concerns, and so on (Borda, 2001, p. 27-36).

In other words, action research can be used as the process of "transpersonal empowerment", "cooperative inquiry" that helps people give birth to rich and subtle phenomenology, thus liberating themselves from the age-old authoritarianism of schools and institutions of spiritual, secular or academic kinds (Heron, 2001, p. 333). While for Reason and Bradbury (2001), the primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to the disadvantaged people in the everyday conduct of their lives:

> A wider purpose of action research is to contribute through this practical knowledge to the increased well being–economic, political, psychological, spiritual– of human persons and communities, and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 2)

Similarly, Horton and Freire (1990) have emphasized the need for putting knowledge into practice, as Horton states," my ideas have changed and are constantly changing and should change and that I'm proud of my inconsistencies as I am my consistencies" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 10). The further note, "One of the best ways for us to work as human beings is not only to know that we are uncompleted but to assume incompleteness…We have to become interested in a permanent process of searching"

(p. 11). It is important to consider that knowledge should be tested in practice. It means that what teachers know and do should be compatible with the level of the students. If the knowledge is not compatible with the learning of students, no sense can be made.

Thus, following the theory of Horton and Freire (1990), teachers must believe their students construct knowledge in the tasks in which they are (i.e. reading texts, writing notes, doing homework, etc.) engaged. Furthermore, they advise that the teacher's job is to give a reason for students to think and learn, and once the students realize the need for learning, they can initiate and take responsibility for their learning. Horton (1990) stated, "I know people can know because I know people can do things, and I know people can die for what they believe in. I know that once people get involved, they're willing to do anything they believe is right" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 177). In other words, the teaching should be meaningful and should be based on real life experiences and contexts of learners so that they can lead and take responsibility for their own learning.

My Praxis Journey

My understanding of praxis has evolved in very different social, political, and economic, and cultural contexts. Hence, I take readers through my personal and professional development journey, which support in understanding some of the common challenges that most teachers/professionals and researchers grapple with around the world, no matter what their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds are. One of the challenges that educational practitioners in diversified societies face, is the adoption of inclusive educational practices that are cognizant of the cultural, linguistic and differentiated learning styles of the various groups and ethnic communities that make up the today's student populations in schools across the globe. In the following sections, I describe my personal backgrounds, both within and outside of formal education environments and shed light on how these backgrounds give readers insights for their own praxis.

Before I discuss my professional journey and praxis, I would like to shed some light on social, cultural and linguistic contexts of Nepal, where I grew up and started my personal and professional journey. It is important to consider the diverse social and cultural contexts of Nepal where I grew up and started my professional journey.

Linguistic and Cultural Contexts of Nepal

Basically, Nepal is a small country, but it is very diverse in every respect as there are more than 30 different languages being spoken and so many communities live together in harmony and practice their own cultures and traditions. In other words, culturally, Nepal is a mosaic of many different cultures, languages and religions. The last 2001 Nepal census reported more than 101 ethnic groups are living in the country. Nonetheless, more than 90 percent of the population is Hindu (Singh, 2011).

Nepal is a small but multilingual nation. Despite its small size, it is linguistically diverse. Multilingualism has been the fabric of Nepalese societies for centuries and pluralism manifests in its linguistic diversity. In this respect, it is worthwhile to refer to Mark Turin (2007) who notes:

> In Nepal, linguistic and cultural identities are closely interwoven, and many of the country's indigenous peoples define themselves in large part according to the language they speak. Language is often used as a symbolic badge of membership in a particular community, and is a prominent emblem of pride in one's social or ethnic identity. (p. 27)

However, it is also important to note that a huge number of children dropout of school in Nepal due to various factors, one of them is the language of instruction, Nepali. Referring to the high dropout rates due to the gap between home languages of children and the language of instruction in Nepal, Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar (2010) contend that "it would therefore be appropriate to educate the children in their mother-tongue in order to make the break between home and school as small as possible" (p. 51).

Although the existence of multiple languages in Nepal has long been recognized, there have been many shifts of policy concerning their recognition and usage within the education system. For example, the first education plan (NNEPC, 1956) adopted a policy of language transfer, whereas the second education plan (ARNEC, 1962) proposed Nepali as the medium of instruction in public schools, as did subsequent education plans (NESP, 1971). It was only after the advent of democracy in 1990 that language issues in education came to the forefront. Consequently, the constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal (1990; article 3:18:2) and the subsequent education plans (NEC, 1992; HEC, 2000) advocated mother tongue education (CRED, 2005; NCED, 2008; Taylor, 2010; UNESCO, 2007).

Like several other countries struggling to eradicate poverty and promote development and progress, Nepal is also making its best efforts with the technical and financial assistance of different donor agencies. Having recognized that in the absence of abundant resources, human resource development is the only key to lift the country out of this poverty trap and abysmal conditions of underdevelopment, numerous efforts have been made in the past to address issues of educational development in the country.

Recently, with funding and technical assistance from various donor agencies such as Asian Development Bank, The World Bank, DANIDA UNICEF, UNESCO and several other, the Government of Nepal/Ministry of Education have started to focus on poverty alleviation through the provision of quality education. There is a dire need for an education system that could help students to make some sense of their lives and the world around them. The high percentage of dropouts, repeaters of classes and failures is contributing to inefficiency and placing tremendous strain on the already limited resources available to Nepal and its educational system. Owing to great dearth of educational professionals in Nepalese education system in general and at Ministry of Education and Sports in particular and due to lack of experts in policy formulation and curriculum designing, Nepal is still not capable of addressing the large number of failures at all levels of its Education system every year. There is a great dearth of professionals in Nepalese education system in general and at Ministry of Education and Sports in particular to cope with the new challenges of public education. Education at all levels has been substandard due to a number of factors such as lack of appropriate textbooks, qualified teachers, adequate supplementary materials and audio visual aids, physical facilities and suitable environment.

In spite of several efforts made by various agencies, ranging from curriculum designers to textbook writers, and teachers to examiners, the result has not been satisfactory to the expected mark. Educational management is highly blamed for it. The high percentage of dropouts and the repetition of classes and failures, placing great strain on the limited resources available, characterize the educational system of Nepal. The estimated number of students in secondary schools is1.6 million, but the total numbers of students who pass the SLC examination only averages about 49% (National Commission for Education 1998).

In Nepal, English was taught as a foreign language from 1854 when Durbar High School was established. However, it was not until the writing of the "Nepal National Education Plan 1971," that English was formally recognized as a foreign language along with some other languages, such as Chinese, French, Hindi, Japanese, Russian, and Tibetan. Since then, English had been taught from grade four to graduate level courses as a foreign language in Nepalese educational institutes and universities till 2004 (Giri, 2009, 2011; Singh, 2011).

After restoration of the multiparty system in 1990, the provision for teaching English language from the first grade in the place of the fourth grade has been made in 2004. Gradually, English would be used as a second language in the Nepalese education system. However, due to perceived inadequacies of the public education system to teach English as a foreign language in particular, parents have invested heavily in private tutoring or language institutes to provide English education to their children. According to the report of Nepal's National Commission for Education (1998), the estimated number of students in secondary schools is more than 1.6 million, but the total numbers of students who pass the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination averages only about 49 percent (NCF, 2007). In Nepal, ELT at all levels has been considered as having lower status due to a number of factors such as lack of appropriate textbooks, qualified teachers, adequate supplementary materials and audio visual aids, physical facilities and suitable environment (Giri, 2009, 2011; Singh, 2011; Taylor, 2010).

My Literacy Journey

I would like to acknowledge that there are many educational philosophers (Buddha, Chanakya, Swami Vivekananda, Guru Ravindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Socrates, Plato, J. J. Rousseau, Paulo Freire, Evan Illich, and Dewey), whose educational philosophies influence and inspire me in framing my praxis. However, it is the critical theorists and philosophers who I am very much inspired by, iwho frame the underpinning of my curricular understandings and beliefs. What I am today has come from my culture and from my family's values, religion, beliefs, and customs, and much more. From my childhood to now there have been many events that have influenced my teaching philosophy and shaped my cultural perspectives, which have large significance in my life. I have experienced all kinds of diversity in my personal

life and in my professional career, including teaching experiences for more than ten years at different levels, ranging from a home tutor in Nepal to university instructor in the US.

Given the multi-ethnic and linguistic contexts of Nepal, I have experienced many kinds of diversity in my personal life as well as in my professional career. I grew up in an extended family in which there was a dual leadership tradition; my grandpa was in charge of the outside affairs of the family, while my grandma was leader of the internal family affairs, which I called "domestic management." In terms of literacy, my family is a literate family; my father is a high school graduate; my mother completed her primary education; my grandfather completed middle school education; my grandmother is illiterate.

I was born and grew up in an extended family with my parents, uncles, aunties and my grandparents, and my great grandparents and I spent most of time in my village, where I acquired my first language, a dialect of Hindi , *Thethi/Dehati*. During the first six years of my language acquisition, I was mainly brought up as a monolingual child in my extended family. Meanwhile my periodic visits to my relatives and some of Indian cities gave me the chance to get involved in another language environment, where I learned some vocabulary of Bhojpuri and Maithili languages along with standard form of Hindi. So my parents spoke five languages fluently when I was born as they were fluent in Hindi, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Sanskrit languages. However, in case of dispute, which was very rare, the final verdict came from my great grandparents.

In terms of literacy, my family was just a literate family at that time. My father was a high school graduate but my mother was just completed her primary education; and my grandfather had up-to middle school education but my grandmother was just literate. I also have some faded memory that my mother tried to give me some extra coaching, however, she got a scolding from my grandmother by saying that my child's (*Laika*) neck would be twisted if he studied more. I spent most my childhood time with my grandparents rather than my parents. I learned some ancient Hindi and Sanskrit chants and poems from my great grandparents and grandparents. With *Thethi* as my first language, I always addressed my family members in it rather than the standard form of Hindi that I have acquired later.

I began my schooling at the age of six in my own village school, but I spent most my time at home and started my literacy journey under a tutor who came to teach my uncles and aunts at that time. I have some faded memory that my grandfather brought some slates (they were made up of graphite and in my childhood slate was almost compulsory for literacy of kids) and chuck-pencils along with a booklet, known as *Manoharpothi.* The booklet was in standard Hindi but pictorial (it was a common booklet for all family in my community and Hindi speaking community all over India and Nepal for literacy purposes). It also had English Alphabets in both forms (capital and small) and some day-to-day use vocabulary but mostly nouns and adjectives. This booklet is still very popular among parents for literacy of kids in Hindi speaking community. It was my grandfather, who asked my tutor to enroll me as a student in my village school. When I started to go to school at the age of seven, the medium of instruction was in local vernacular (*Thethi*) and sometimes it was in Hindi, however, the books were in Nepali language. In terms of similarities in vocabulary of both Hindi and Nepali languages, there was not much more problematic in learning Nepali language in my schooling education.

In my early childhood, I rarely mingled with other kids of my community. However, I learned something about other cultures through my home tutor, who was a Muslim. He was respected by my family and openly shared his religious and cultural practices with us. I was also privy to other members of society through those who were associated with my family as cook, maids, servants, wage laborers, and so on.

I come from a very small homogenous community; there is not much diversity in terms of religion, culture, social values and practices. In many smaller Nepalese communities, like the one I come from, most residents are from the same ethnic background and have a common occupation, agriculture. I learned, however, that even though we may have the same ethnicity and religion as others, we may have different beliefs and practices because of the cast-based society and prevalent social stratification system in Nepal. Later, I attended a high school that was eight miles away from my home. After high school I moved to towns and cosmopolitan cities to continue my further education.

My Teaching Philosophy

I graduated in English language and literature, and completed a one year diploma course in education. I completed my first Master's degree in education from Nepal. During my Master's degree, I established research on Listening Comprehension. The study was to determine listening texts (seen and unseen) comprehension by foreign language learners. The study involved 80 students, an equal number of boys and girls of Grade VIII, who were studying English as a foreign language. In that research, the girls showed better listening comprehension than the boys, not only in seen texts but also in unseen texts. That was the first specific study carried out on listening comprehension in Nepal.

In 2007, I came to the United States to pursue my second Master's degree in Teaching English as Second Language and completed that in 2008. I also have earned my doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction with focus in Applied Linguistics from a US university in 2012. Prior to that, I worked for Nepal's Ministry of Education for more than 10 years in different positions. As a part of my job, I engaged in such diversified roles as educational planner, curriculum designer, materials developer, teacher trainer, and administrator. I also worked with diverse people and organizations within every respect of their organizational culture, including work ethic, teamwork and so on. As a professional, I started my teaching career as a home literacy tutor of small children. I then taught English language to various grade ranges, including graduate level students. Now I am teaching both graduate and undergraduate courses at university in the US. I also have received professional trainings at home and abroad, including India (my second home), Thailand the United Kingdom and the US.

There were many times in my personal and professional life when the situations required resourcefulness and innovativeness to resolve my part. I believe in critical understanding as an innovative approach in education that can complement and affect it in many different ways. There are many educational philosophers (Buddha, Chanakya, Swami Vivekananda, Guru Ravindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Socrates, Plato, J. J. Rousseau, Paulo Freire, Evan Illich, and Dewey), whose educational philosophies influence and inspire me in framing my praxis. I think what I am today has come from my culture and from my family's values, religion, beliefs, and customs, and much more. From my childhood to now there have been many

events that have influenced my teaching philosophy and shaped my cultural perspectives, which have large significance in my life. One of the challenges that face educational practitioners in diversified societies is the adoption of inclusive educational practices that are cognizant of the cultural, linguistic and differentiated learning styles of the various groups that make up the student body. I have experienced all kinds of diversity in my personal life and in my professional career, including teaching experiences for more than ten years at different levels, ranging from a home tutor in Nepal to university instructor in the US.

I heed Giroux's (1997) advice that theory and practice be explored through the use of a language of possibility. I also think that a teacher's ultimate goal is to communicate new information and ideas to students, not just memorizing facts, but also to learn how to think. So, for me, critical thinking is "what we generate, we know." Therefore, to me, student engagement is paramount and getting students interested and excited about the courses is something that I always strive for. I try to integrate both lecturing and discussion components into a single lesson. I think a teacher must be able to recognize how students learn best at the group and individual level, and so as to mould his/her lesson plans and activities accordingly to cater the needs and demands of every single student in classroom. However, it is not an easy task for a teacher to follow an idealistic path, given the diverse student populations in most cases.

What I like best about teaching is that one compliment, breakthrough or positive experience really outweighs several negatives ones. A single positive comment or note from a student or parent really finds its way into my heart. When I receive praise about the class or an assignment, I cannot help but feel proud and happy that I am in a profession that allows me to experience this kind of appreciation, even if it is not consistent. I also find it rewarding when a student is really enjoying the class and making a lot of progress.

To me, student engagement is very important and getting students interested and excited about the courses is something that I always strive for. I think a teacher must be able to recognize how students learn best at the group and individual level, and to mould his/her lesson plans and activities accordingly to cater the needs and demands of every single student. I also think that a teacher's ultimate goal is to communicate new information and ideas to students, not just memorizing facts, but also to learn

how to think. I try to integrate both lecturing and discussion components into a single lesson in line with the notion of Freire (1972) "cultural circles."

The notion of cultural circles

Freire (1972) introduced the notion of culture circles in opposition to "the banking model of education." Learners engaging with praxis are well equipped to actively participate in collective actions especially in cultural circles. In cultural circles, students engage in describing their cultural backgrounds, customs, and role models and things through their own social and cultural lenses (Coombs & Sarason, 1998). In culture circles, participants would identify issues that impacted their daily lives, and through dialogue with the coordinator either they clarify situations or seek action arising from that clarification (cited in Williams, 2009). While Mariana Souto-Manning (2010) in her book, *Freire, Teaching, and Learning*: *Culture Circles Across Contexts* argues that culture circles are not a thing of the past but rather a powerful way to help learners of all ages and in all situations make sense of the world and, in the process, help change it. Thus, some characteristics of praxis include self-determination as opposed to coercion, independence as opposed to dependence, self-confidence as opposed to timidness, creativity as opposed to homogeneity, rationality as opposed to chance, and trusting others as opposed to suspecting (Boyce, 1996; Lather, 2008).

I believe in all kinds of diversity, personal, social, economic, and cultural. I think that all students have their potentiality, and all they need to have enabling environments to show them in actuality. I also believe that students come from different contexts and they have their own world, so one size fits all approach is not going to make justice to them. In other words, there needs to be variety in activities of a lesson or lecture that can cater individual needs and meet expectations of students in my class. Hence, I design my lesson and frame my lecture in a way that fosters students' participation and give them a sense of belongingness, which in turn encourage students to take ownership and responsibility for their own learning. I encourage my students to reflect through their own social and cultural lenses, whatever examples I use in my class. For example, many teachers taken for granted that all students celebrate their birthday in a Western style with candles and cakes. However, I believe that not all communities have the same Western style of birthday celebrations. There are many different ways

of celebration across cultures and communities. Surprisingly enough, some communities do not celebrate birthday at all.

I follow a dialogic model of teaching in which I usually ask my students about their expectations on the first day of my class or lecture. I believe in flexibility and I try to mould a course syllabus and make some changes, if deems necessary to meet my students' course expectations, but at the same time try to keep the rigor and quality of the course throughout a semester or year. I regularly use audio-visual equipment in class to show current television reports and advertisements as required, followed by discussions and sharing with a view to develop what Freire (1972) calls "critical consciousness" of students. For this, he emphasizes the development of critical consciousness through dialogic process between teachers and students to recognize connections between their individual problems, experiences, and the social contexts in which they are embedded. For developing critical consciousness, the first step of praxis, is an ongoing reflective approach to taking action, engaging in a cycle of theory, application, appraisal, and reflection (Freire, 1972).

My favorite success stories are the students who were totally apathetic at the beginning, but then really came around and performed much better towards the end. Similarly, I love when a student who has been labeled as an underachiever in other classes, takes an interest in mine and seeks out my help and really learns from me. Although I realize that some teachers take a "leave your baggage at the door" stance, I have found it rewarding to get to know my students and find out what is going on with them. I want to be someone they can talk to. I feel rewarded when they come to me with their concerns, and I can at least encourage them in some way. Hard to reach students can surprise me sometimes, and I am touched when I can make a connection with them. Even one nice or encouraging comment or one volunteered answer from the seemingly apathetic student will always make the day a success in my eyes. Having a student who initially resisted interactive learning take the time to share their discovery of how valuable the process is to developing a deeper level of learning is very gratifying. I find it rewarding to be a part of the personal and professional development of my students. My greatest rewards come as I see growth in students as they explore new concepts, ask questions and pursue answers, make connections between concepts and practices, get excited about what they are learning,

express confidence in their knowledge base for developing their own teaching practices, and find direction for their future.

Implications

In praxis, there can be no prior understanding of the right means by which one assumes the end in a particular situation. As we think about what is to be achieved, the course for achieving is altered. As we consider possibilities for accomplishing a task, the way in which it might be accomplished changes (Bernstein 1983). There is continual interplay between the ends and means in the same way there is continual interplay between thought and action. This process involves interpretation, understanding and application in one unified process (Gadamer 1979). It is something we engage in as humans and it is directed at other humans.

The importance of sharing knowledge is advocated by Horton and Freire (1990), who emphasize the need for reflective practices and sharing. They contend, "All knowledge should be in free-trade zone. Your knowledge, my knowledge, everybody's knowledge should be made use of" (p. 235). Where critical thinking in the classroom is concerned, three things must come into play: first, students must reason (a bridge from their present thinking to new thinking); second, students must reason about the content (the new way to think); and third, there must be a "hook" (recognition of students' present thinking) so that students will be willing to do the first two (Paul & Elder, 2008). In the words of Paul and Elder (2008):

> When your students are learning well, they are employing the logic of their own thinking as a tool in learning. They are reasoning their way into the logic of the content…you need to give them assignments and activities that help them to bridge between these two, their old thinking and the new. (p. 88).

This means that teachers should always be in the process of acquiring knowledge and, for this, reflective practices such as action research, peer supports and mentorship could be the best possible avenues for teacher transformation. Chubbuck (2010) argues that teachers need to apply both individual and structural orientation for their reflective process to ensure social justice and equities to get the deeper understanding of individual student needs and background.

The Role of Teachers

Using both an individual and a structural orientation in the reflection process, the teacher can see how the student's struggle to identify inequitable structures in society, frequently linked to race, class, and gender, such as differential access to employment, housing, transportation, and health care…affecting a child's learning experiences" (Chubbuck, 2010, pp. 202). She further contends that views outside of the learning environment can help educators to develop solutions to societal-level issues and challenge such injustices. This suggests that by applying broader perspectives, teachers can be proactive in promoting social justice instead of promoting the status quo. However, the increased demands placed on teachers by educational legislation in the name of standardization and accountability create additional pressures that make the promotion of social justice a herculean task for teachers. Agarwal, Epstein, Oppenheim, Oyler, & Sonu (2010) write:

> To teach for social justice requires one not only to manage the steep learning curve…but to be able to navigate through a school context laden with hindrances…pacing, test preparation, and mandated curriculum…against a social justice agenda. (p. 239)

Many educational researchers (e.g., Agarwal, Epstein, Oppenheim, Oyler, & Sonu, 2010; Brantlinger, 2004; Chubbuck, 2010; Lather, 2008; Popen, 2009) argue that social justice within the current classroom setting is an overwhelming task, only educators/teachers who engage in any kind of self-interrogation on a regular basis are likely to become critical teachers and promote critical thinking in their students. In addition to self-analysis, teachers can also simulate hypothetical situations that are likely to occur in their day-to-day interactions with students based on their personal and expert knowledge of their classrooms. For them, the purpose of hypothetical simulations and reflective teaching is to become proactive, an important component of praxis-oriented pedagogy (Agarwal, Epstein, Oppenheim, Oyler, & Sonu, 2010; Chubbuck, 2010).

Hence, those who advocate for the idea that teachers are artists who design and shape the students through their impositions rather than giving students any chance to relate and learn from themselves are killing the freedom of students (Freire & Horton, 1990). In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) maintains, "Critical thinkers who

want to change our teaching practices (must) talk to one another, collaborate in a discussion that crosses boundaries and create a space for intervention" (p. 129). A similar view is expressed by Hones (2002) who assumes that "dialogical process uses students' linguistic and cultural understanding as sources of knowledge and motivates social participation. As an integral part of critical pedagogy, dialogue can engage teacher and students in an interactive exchange about their lives, where social, economic, political and cultural issues are addressed critically and an opportunity to challenge the power relationships within the community is provided" (p.163). Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests that dialogic pedagogy helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity which challenges the status quo in society.

Horton and Freire (1990) contend that we should break the status quo and traditional model of teaching and to apply something new, "there is no creativity without rupture, without a break from the old, without conflict in which you have to make a decision. I would say there is no human existence without rupture" (p. 38). This means that teachers should give equal opportunities and respect to those who still feel isolated and oppressed by those who have power and who control the educational decisions without giving consideration to the feelings and emotions of the oppressed. In this context, we refer to the movie El Norte (1983) in which the characters reveal how they (working class people and minorities) are still being treated like tools of the rich:

> To the rich, the peasant is just a pair of strong arms. We can't go on this way anymore...I've worked in many places, and everywhere it's the same. For the rich, the peasant is just a pair of arms. That's all, we are just arms to do their work. (Arturo, El Norte, Nava, 1983)

However, it is no easy task for teachers to forge a path that leads to emancipation for those who have been oppressed for centuries and still feel neglected and isolated in society. As one of the characters in the film El Norte (1983) expresses "in our homeland there's no place for us, they want to kill us. In Mexico, there's only poverty. And in the north, we aren't accepted. When are we going to find a home, maybe only in death?" (Rosa, El Norte, Nava, 1983). This presents the realities of human civilization where the poor and destitute feel worthless and desire death. The question is, what can a teacher do for the poor and/or the oppressed? The answer is that

teachers, by empowering themselves, can be agents of change by giving voice to the oppressed.

While teachers may have limited opportunities to influence macro-level policies, they can create environments that foster positive educational outcomes for their students through critical pedagogy. As hooks (1994) reminds, "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility...I...call for renewal and rejuvenation in our teaching practices" (p.12). For this, Peterson (2003) underscores the need for empowerment of teachers for true emancipation of the oppressed. Empowerment does not mean "giving" someone their freedom. Nor does it mean creating a type of surface "empowerment" in which one gives the students the impression that they are "equal" to the teacher. "The challenge for the teacher who believes in student empowerment is to create an environment which is both stimulating and flexible in which students can exercise increasing levels of power reflecting upon and evaluating the new learner-teacher relationship" (Peterson, 2003, pp. 373-374).

The Role of Researchers

As I have stated earlier, Freire (1972) believes that existing educational and political systems must be changed to overcome oppressions and improve human conditions. For this, he argued that researchers should discover the interpretation of problems, in the linking of meaningful themes. For Kincheloe (1991), to be considered critical, research must meet five requirements: First, it must reject positivist notions of rationality, objectivity, and truth. It means that critical researchers reject the notion that educational issues are technical rather than political or ethical. Second, it must incorporate the perspectives of those involved in school practice in the researchers' interpretation of their educational practices. Third, it must attempt to distinguish between ideologically laden interpretations and those which transcend ideological disfiguration. Fourth, it must attempt to analyze "false consciousness," while indicating strategies for overcoming its effects. It means that research critically examines those aspects of the dominant social order, which block educators' efforts to pursue authentically educational goal. Finally, critical research always links theory and practice (p. x).

Conclusion

While paradigmatic shifts are clearly difficult to make, teachers who make the commitment to adopt critical pedagogy will succeed in integrating the voices and lived experiences of students from all segments of society into their classroom and instructional activities. Teachers should give learners the sense of belongingness, dignity and academic autonomy to engage in learning process and to take responsibility for it. For this, teachers should create cultural circles and devise their activities in ways that allow students to relate their life experiences throughout learning process. Giroux (1997) contends that radical educators have failed to develop a practice that engages schools as sites of possibility, where students are engaged in building the knowledge and skills of democracy. Some educational researchers (e.g., Brantlinger, 2004; Lather, 2008; Popen, 2009; Shor, 1992) have expressed their concerns over the mere use of "fairness," "inclusion," "empowerment in educational reforms," while educational practitioners continue to embrace traditional pedagogical practices.

In the end, teachers need to focus on reflective practices through action research and collegial learning at local levels to empower themselves and become critical teachers, practitioners and researchers. Hence, we educators, teachers, and researchers cannot be neutral against oppressions which still persist in our society today, in race, gender, color, casts and creeds, ethnicity and so on. It is not enough to simply know the needs and desires of students and their communities, but to assimilate their needs and desires into the learning environment.

Acknowledgement: I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr. Shadow Armfield for his support and cooperation.

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