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Reimagining the Classroom as a Space for Radical Inclusion: An ESL Teacher's Autoethnographic Reflection on Intercultural Praxis

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Keywords	Abstract
Autoethno-graphy, Critical Pedagogy, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Intercultural Teaching, Linguistic Diversity.	*Reflecting on my journey as a student in a world filled with diverse educational challenges, teaching methods, and content has been a thought-provoking and difficult pursuit of knowledge. Discovering effective strategies for seeking knowledge and understanding our educational shortcomings requires time. I am inspired by the most impactful approaches to education—those that transcend class, ethnicity, race, and power dynamics. Are today's teachers as influential and capable of sowing the seeds of knowledge and thought? Are they prepared to tackle the challenges of the modern world? What is the best way to achieve this? What defines effective teaching? These are some of the questions I wish to explore in this autobiographical paper. My analytical approach is comprehensive and addresses many aspects of classroom education. I have examined significant concepts, such as politics and power structures, that shape today's global language learning. Furthermore, critical discussions about race are crucial in defining the identities of students and teachers. Within these overarching themes, it is vital to focus on the needs and diversity of students in the classroom, which requires a thoughtful methodology, and this reflection mirrors my graduate school journey in the U.S. Additionally, the writings of Freire, Giroux, McLaren, Street, and Ladson-Billings provide a theoretical foundation for applying these practices. There is an urgent need for critical, political, and innovative approaches to education. Globalisation and neoliberalism have introduced numerous issues that must be addressed through meaningful education, and the responsibility for shaping our future increasingly rests on how we prepare our younger generations.*

INTRODUCTION

Reflecting on my journey as a student in a world filled with diverse issues related to education, teaching methods, and content, I recognise that *thinking with autoethnography* (Philips et al., 2022) has been a thought-provoking and challenging pursuit of knowledge aimed at effectively educating our students. Seeking factual knowledge and understanding what we have been deprived of in education takes time to comprehend. My curiosity is ignited by the ideal method of education—one that does not discriminate based on class, ethnicity, race, or power. Are today's teachers as influential and powerful in planting the seeds of knowledge and critical thinking? Are they prepared to confront the challenges of the modern world? What is the most effective way to accomplish this? What defines good teaching?

During my graduate studies, at the beginning of the semester, I felt uncertain about how to define literacy in various ways because I had always been accustomed to the mainstream definition. The

framework outlined in the syllabus was remarkable, providing numerous opportunities through assigned readings on diverse topics and class discussions with peers and instructors from different cultural backgrounds. The class's diversity was a tremendous asset for learning, allowing us to draw knowledge from textbooks and each other. I particularly benefited from engaging in group activities like discussions and presentations, interviewing classmates from different cultures, visiting various cultural centers, learning each other's languages, and gaining cultural insights from guest speaker presentations. I appreciated the course structure and how instructors and students collaboratively developed and co-constructed knowledge. This gradually introduced concepts from broader perspectives, such as culture and socialisation, to create individual identities connected to language, differences, and assimilation within societies (Agar, 2012). From the outset, from Module 1 to the practical teaching integration exemplified by Project Freire (Cucchiara, 2005), my appreciation for differences and recognition of various types of literacies were the strongest points I valued in the class. Another significant aspect that resonated with me was the connection between literacy inequalities (Street, 2011) and societal power dynamics. This appeared to be the primary reason for the devaluation of various literacies found in the world's most remote areas within the mainstream culture of knowledge and literacy (Alemayehu, 2009).

Reflecting on my experiences during class practices regarding understanding rich points, I truly appreciated how our discussions incorporated diverse perspectives to enhance interactions and bridge gaps. This approach opened my eyes to the importance of not excluding any form of literacy or learning method simply because it seems foreign or difficult to grasp. I realised that students are not one-size-fits-all; we come with varying backgrounds, languages, and learning styles. Likewise, teachers bring their own unique approaches to education. Power dynamics, interests, and trends certainly influence our educational landscape, but they raise the question: how do we define our standards? Throughout my journey, I have seen the value in exploring the world’s wisdom through ethnographic studies, striving to uplift voices from different parts of the globe, as each holds significance in its context. As I ponder why some children struggle with their studies, I ask myself if we should genuinely evaluate them all in the same manner. I am now more convinced than ever that every culture, language, and learning modality inherently possesses its own uniqueness, and it is vital to integrate these elements into our school curriculum.

My background in South Asia, a place with almost two thousand languages (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2006), is a valuable linguistic asset. For the first time, I have recognised how diversity can enhance one’s literacy. As a teacher, it’s essential for me to promote and acknowledge the languages and cultures my students bring into the classroom. I also want my students to share the forms of literacy they practice at home or within their communities, as families and communities—whether religious, ethnic, linguistic, or socioeconomic—possess unique funds of knowledge that students can contribute to their schools. For example, I recall my PhD class, where the instructor and his co-teacher hailed from diverse backgrounds, encouraging international students like me to openly discuss and share our unique experiences. I especially appreciate how the instructors highlighted Indigenous clothing and incorporated words from their native languages, such as “Cuaderno.”

A Political Background for Teaching Inter-Culturally

Educational literacy is essential for the advancement of societies and the enhancement of cognitive processes. However, detaching politics and power from education has always been a challenge. These dynamics appear in various forms, including race, social and economic class, numerical data, geography, and personal and religious identities. In a globalised world where these factors shape the education of our younger generation, how should teachers address these issues? Critical literacy, culturally relevant pedagogy, and an understanding of funds of knowledge are essential for effective teaching in this politically charged environment. Events in the outside world have direct or indirect impacts on children's learning in the classroom. Conversely, those same students must face the realities of the world after their education. Can we genuinely separate politics from education, or is education inherently political? How well are we preparing our students to tackle real-life challenges? I am particularly interested in the significance of critical pedagogy in the classroom. Can students learn more effectively through critical pedagogy if they are politically engaged? What is the role of politics and power in education, and is it necessary to hold them accountable?

The inquiry is essential to me because I witness visible and invisible persecution worldwide in the name of education, race, justice, peace, and friendship, among other things. Mostly, it is the unawareness of the oppressed (Freire, 2000) that perpetuates their oppression, compounded by their lack of knowledge about what has been done to them. Critical education empowers students to recognise their fundamental rights, enabling them to understand the distinction between privilege and deprivation, as well as the right to live free from persecution. An educator's role is to engage with these theories, encouraging students to think critically and act as facilitators in shaping a new system by educating future generations. This paper's theoretical framework aims to address existing theories such as critical pedagogy, critical race theory, culturally relevant pedagogy, and the acknowledgement of global literacies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ladson-Billings, in her two articles (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009), explains how race plays a negative role in the segregation of African American communities in the form of political choices, economic instability, and their geographical location at certain times. She chooses culturally relevant pedagogy to help the African American community feel less alienated. Building on this argument, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (CSP) (Paris & Alim, 2017) expands the framework for sustaining cultural relevance by perpetuating the significance of culturally relevant pedagogies. Similarly, Henry Giroux (2013) also claims that education is a political act, and it has to be taught to prepare students for the political challenges of the world (Barroso Tristán, 2012). He views the process of critical pedagogy as ongoing, aiming to purge systemic issues. Peter McLaren (2005) and Ira Shor (1999) discuss the link between power and critical literacy, highlighting how critical literacy affects students by retelling stories and examining the subjectivity of history. They outline strategies for implementing critical literacy in the classroom, fostering an environment where students feel safe to explore new learning methods and critique the existing order, advocating for education as a political concern. They share this view, arguing that the privatisation and commodification of education pose a threat to future generations. The term 'critical pedagogy' was first introduced by Henry Giroux in his book *Theory and Resistance in Education* (1983). He argued that critical pedagogy

arose from various social and educational radical movements, aiming to connect schooling with democratic principles and advocate for oppressed communities. Emphasizing that educational choices are often driven by political motivations and power dynamics, he notes that a narrow view of knowledge and a reluctance to accept diverse literacies and narratives hinder progress. According to McLaren (2005), 'the hidden curriculum' refers to "the unintended outcomes of the schooling process" (p.86). Over time, Freire's concept of critical pedagogy has evolved into theories that broaden the focus from class to include race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, and nationality. New theories, such as feminist, postcolonial, postmodern, and LGBTQ+ perspectives, have emerged, maintaining Freire's emphasis on critique, challenging oppressive regimes, and fostering social change while integrating postmodern ideas of identity, language, and power.

Potential Implications

This autobiographical note can serve as a methodological and theoretical model for classroom teachers to utilise tools that enhance awareness of differences, power, and inequalities within a diverse classroom. Students and teachers would engage in an ongoing dialogue about these critical issues present in society. It is essential to incorporate this debate into both future and current curricula. Cataldo (2022) has also revisited the CRP in the post-COVID era, emphasising the importance of teachers' ability to navigate the new spaces created in the modern world. Classroom practices, the curriculum taught, and student feedback (reflecting their inspiration from critical learning) could be assessed inside and outside the classroom by maintaining records of how they have become aware of these issues. However, as Cushing (2023) warned against falling into the trap of raciolinguistic ideologies, teachers can be critically aware and include minority groups in mainstream conversations. Class discussions can be invaluable for sparking dialogue among students, with the teacher facilitating the process. Since evaluation could undermine the spirit of these debates, recognising their participation should be the way to appreciate their ideas.

Project Freire (Cucchiara, 2005) exemplifies the promotion of community literacies by reconnecting community knowledge with schools and educating both students and the broader community. The Saturday Academies Project, inspired by Freire's critical pedagogy (Simandan, 2011), was implemented in New York schools, where students were tasked with identifying issues within their community and developing action plans to raise awareness and educate others about these issues. Challenges such as poverty, crime, disease, and racism were acknowledged, and students planned to write to media outlets (such as newspapers), create placards, and organise various awareness programmes that connected their domestic literacy with academic literacy in school and vice versa. Similarly, I envision teaching in a culturally diverse classroom with limited resources. For example, English is not my native language, which enables me to incorporate my cultural background into the classroom, complementing my linguistic skills. I want my class to visit cultural sites relevant to all students and to bring in cultural artifacts. These activities could occur both academically—through our class assignment of conducting cross-cultural interviews—and through plans to visit heritage sites or cultural locations (e.g., a Chinese family center). By providing students with an ethnographic perspective, it becomes easier for them to see and understand each other's challenges. Students could be encouraged to write to various newspapers or magazines about issues related to different cultures, involving in-depth research into the origins of these problems.

CONCLUSION

Critiquing the established notions requires power and privilege to make a difference. Such power is uniquely the part of educators' job in the classroom that can help students (re)think about the text and society and make their own meanings. Janks (2012) talks about how the power of reconstruction of fluid meaning can change the picture. However, it leaves us wondering how to equip the generation of children learning in school to cope with the societal discourse of power, which normally defies textbook teaching. In similar cases, the textbooks in my country (probably in many countries too) are imbued with the narrative of power (normally the government that controls education) and hardly provide any insight into the weak points of our history. This self-glorification and downplaying of the other merely shocks the students when they encounter different histories by neutral or foreign authors. I believe in and intend to practice pedagogical practices that prepare them to critically analyze any idea they are exposed to and develop the ability to think beyond the classroom discussion. Some students develop the skill to doubt the school curriculum because of a strong literacy and critical environment at home, and bringing the parental role into the lives of children can increase the opportunities for them to question and think. Breaking the myth of stereotyping, awareness of the privileges and assimilating and bridging differences needs a reconstructed way of thinking, for which children are ready if the seed is sown in time. According to Johnson(2006), "the trouble is produced by a world organized in ways that encourage people to use difference to include or exclude, reward or punish, credit or discredit, elevate or oppress, value or devalue, leave alone or harass"(pg. 16).

Throughout my career as an educator, I have recognised the importance of helping students become aware of the subtle political dimensions inherent in education. It is essential to convey this awareness in an engaging way that does not seem dull or overly serious. My experiences have underscored the importance of teachers thoughtfully acknowledging students' diverse backgrounds and considering how we can utilise these differences to enhance outreaching strategies. Rather than viewing these differences as sources of conflict, we can embrace them as opportunities to celebrate diversity. My goal is to design activities that honour our varied perspectives and cultural heritages, recognising these differences as vital to our mutual understanding. For instance, I would initiate a cultural awareness programme that begins with an unbiased historical overview of specific cultures, utilising documentary films and academic articles to showcase their rich narratives. I plan to have students from different backgrounds participate in joint presentations on traditional festivals, allowing peers from similar cultures to share their experiences while encouraging others to explore various cultural literacies. This collaborative approach not only enriches the sharing experience but also invites the audience to ask questions, further deepening their understanding and appreciation of diverse viewpoints. As I have discussed in various forums and workshops, equipping students with critical and political insights about standardisation and accepting diverse literacy forms can empower them to recognise the intrinsic value of all literacies. Providing students with a framework that helps them discern what truly matters in their lives is crucial. This transformative process can be achieved by educating both children and adults about human, cultural, and social values within our schools. In this way, I aspire to guide my students toward becoming better judges of their experiences. I want to instill in them a sense of purpose and awareness that extends beyond the classroom, shaping their views of the world and their roles within it.

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