Fostering Empathy, Unravelling Privilege and Ability: Films as a Pedagogic Tool in Initial Teacher Preparation

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Abstract

The theoretical frame of the paper is situated in the works of Paulo Freire, Pierre Bourdieu and Carl Rogers. The conceptual frame 'Socially Just Teacher Education' is rooted in the understanding and recognition of education and schooling as a site of philosophical, ideological and pedagogical struggle. The aim of teacher preparation then is to prepare teachers to be aware of the inequalities existent in the society while also empowering the prospective teachers to challenge these. Given this, the current research was undertaken as an action research whose aim was to use films to sensitise the student-teachers about the existent inequalities and make them critically reflect on those. The methodological frame of the research is qualitative. The data collection as well as the analysis of data were iterative processes done through open coding followed by theoretical coding. The emerging themes of the analysis are – 'Drawing out of 'social mutism''; 'Unravelling privilege and ability through critical and liberating dialogue'; 'Making it alive: Using films to evoke emotive responses'. The research highlights the possibilities of preparing reflective practitioners through use of critical pedagogy of films.

Keywords: *critical pedagogy, pre-service teacher education, higher education, films as a pedagogic tool*

Introduction

The debate around 'Education and Social Transformation' has intensified across the globe, more so in the current century. This intensification can be attributed to changing philosophical perspectives in reform movements as well as diverse population entering the schools and influencing the educational discourse. Critical theoretical constructs around questions of hegemonic educational discourse propounded by Paulo Freire (1968/1970), developed further with contributions of Pierre Bourdieu (1973), Antonio Gramsci (1978), Henry Giroux (1988) and Michael Apple (1999) amongst others view education as a site of ideological, philosophical and pedagogical struggle. More recent arguments critique neoliberal and non-conservative policies as deeply influencing the educational discourse and practice across the globe (Apple, 2011).

Despite a robust body of knowledge proposed by critical theorists; education and in particular, the praxis of teacher education has remained insular and disconnected. This is not to say however, that there hasn't been any work in the area. The strand of understanding education and teacher education not only as a contested site but also one that can garner possibilities for social transformation is an important one and has been conceptualized and advocated by several academicians as well as practitioners. However, political and sociological perspectives are still not legitimised in the educational discourse that has been historically dominated by the
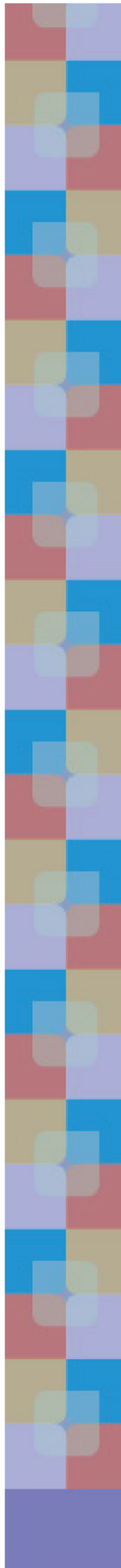
discipline of psychology. Current regulatory frameworks such as the recent National Education Policy 2020 also advocate teacher education to be grounded in sociology, history apart from psychology and other allied fields.

Theoretical Underpinnings

An attempt towards breaking the disciplinary boundaries in the discourse of teacher education and to arrive at a holistic perspective is made in the present research by drawing upon the work of three theorists – Paulo Freire, Pierre Bourdieu and Carl Rogers. The context of taking these chosen theorists is to understand the nuances of pedagogical discourse in teacher education from the vantage point of political thought, sociological discourse and from a psycho-social perspective. A brief theoretical frame of each of these theorists is presented below to build the conceptual framework.

Paulo Freire was an activist and educationist who while establishing that education is not a neutral process but a political act argued for education to be democratic (Freire, 1968/1970)1. Arguing that the dispossessed are socialised towards a 'culture of silence' (Freire, 1974/2005, p. 21), Freire diatribes understanding of education as a neutral act. Critiquing the prevalent educational systems which he labelled as 'banking concept of education' Freire contends that education needs to be 'libertian' to have an empowering and democratic potential (Freire, 1968/1970, p. 21). Further, Freire considers 'conscientization' (Freire, 1968/1970, p. 34) as an essential ingredient in making the

educational process meaningful and potent wherein literacy is not about 'understanding the word but the world' (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 45). Freire's work thus enables an understanding of the divisive society and the power structures embedded within these oppositional sectors and how the social, economic and political forces in society shape the educational discourse to retain and perpetuate the existing power structures (Freire, 1968/1970). Thereby, Freire advocates preparation of teachers who treat schools as non-neutral spaces; teachers who are empowered in refusing to blindly follow pre-packaged educational material prepared by some experts in their offices while pointing out the contradictions in the teacher preparation.

While Freire's analysis lays the field for understanding of education as a political act, the sociological frame of Bourdieu & Wacquant 2 (1992) is imperative to understand the complexity of the inequities in society and the significant role of education in granting legitimacy to the powers of the ruling state. Bourdieu's (1973) constructs of habitus and capital, are crucial peg points that challenge and transcend the dualism of structure and agency; of objectivism and subjectivism. Juxtaposing these constructs in the field of education, Bourdieu's and Passeron's 1977/1970 categorisation of capital and examination of cultural capital highlight how curricular and pedagogic practices of schooling work to reproduce class inequalities.

By favouring the primary habitus, schools legitimise the cultural capital of the dominant class while systematically devaluing those

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1. Paulo Freire has through his prolific writings, spanning over four decades laid out the politics of education while arguing for the democratic and libertarian education. In his seminal work — Pedagogy of the Oppressed (published in 1968, translated to English in- 1970), Freire professes dialogical method as the path for liberation of the oppressed as well as the oppressors for the sake of humanism.

2. Pierre Bourdieu has been instrumental in laying the foundations of sociology of educational discourse through the lens of power. Theory of power remained an important feature in Bourdieu's discussions of inequities in society, which he examined primarily through education. Bourdieu's piece on 'Cultural and Social Reproduction' (1973) unmasks the totalising nature of the state made possible through the strictures of education.

of the lower classes, labelling it as 'deficit'. Undertaking an extensive analysis of the process of schooling, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977/1970) argue how the school, which has the responsibility of inculcating the secondary habitus, becomes an extension of home for the children of the dominant class while the shift from home to school is artificial and alienating for the children of the lower classes. There is thus a systematic yet 'silent' initiation of the children to validate and perpetuate the existing social inequalities for which school becomes an instrument. Bourdieu's (1996/1989) premise about initiation as well as gradual acceptance and internalization of 'failure as fate' (blaming themselves for their failures) by the children of lower classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1970), finds resonance with the Freire's elucidation of how the oppressed become submerged in a 'culture of silence'. Thus, Bourdieu's examination of power through the concept of capital which 'functions both as a weapon and as a stake of struggle, that which allows its possessors to wield a power, an influence, and then to exist, in the field' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98, italics in original) has the potential to revolutionize the understanding of society at large and education and schooling in particular. It is in this backdrop that Giroux (1988) calls upon critical educators to "develop a pedagogy that confirms and engages the contradictory forms of cultural capital that constitute how students produce meanings that legitimate particular forms of life" (p. 106).

Bourdieu has often been hailed as the sociologist of education and the sociological discourse he propounded is fairly new in the field of education which has historically (ever since the inception of teacher preparation programs) been dominated by the discipline of psychology. The psychological discourse in turn has been predominately the frame of behaviourism with 'constructivism' and 'social constructivism' having entered the mainstream educational discourse fairly recently. Another paradigmatic shift teacher education is witnessing, albeit slowly, is the shift towards humanistic paradigm. The discourse of this redefinition can be understood by drawing upon the work of Carl Rogers[3] who called for an ideological shift in the 'politics of education'. Rogers (1977/1999) surmises that from the perspective of politics, power and control, person-centred therapy and by extension student-centred education[4] and person-centred approach[5] is based on the premise that the humans at the core are trustworthy organisms. It is in this way that he unravels the 'politics of education'. Rogerian approach turns the tables in education from 'You can't trust the student' to 'You can trust the student' (Rogers, 1951, p. 427) thus calling for a shift in power equations that characterise the educational space. Person-centred approach emphasises interpersonal relationship as the most crucial factor in learning and the need for a facilitator who is congruent, empathetic and acceptant above anything else (Rogers 1977/1999). Self, both for the facilitator as well as the learner still remains the main thread since " a person learns significantly only those things which he perceives as being involved in the maintenance of, or enhancement of,

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3. Carl Rogers is a prominent psychologist attributed to having revolutionized the field of therapy and counselling by laying the foundations of humanistic and phenomenological psychology. The seminal book 'Freedom to learn' published as two editions - one in 1969 and then in 1980 seeks to challenge the power equations of the therapist and the client; the teacher and the student.

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5. Rogers developed the view in counselling and psychotherapy first calling it 'client-centred therapy', subsequent to which he extended it to educational discourse and named it 'student-centred teaching'; since then the term moved to a wide variety of fields such as administration, intensive groups and Rogers thought it best to adopt a broad term - 'person-centred'.

the structure of self" (Rogers, 1951, p. 389). While Bourdieu and Freire enable us to understand education form a sociological and political perspective, it is the work of Rogers that enables us to charter a path to address inequities in the schools by empowering teachers and preparing them to be democratic educators. Even as India witnessed a series of progressive educational policies in the current century, ground realties continue to be dismal. Neito & Bode (2012) state that teachers are "woefully unprepared" to meet the needs of today's diverse classrooms with the rapidly changing demographics; a statement endorsed by several researchers as well as practitioners (Ball & Tyson, 2011; Cochran-Smith, Davies and Fries, 2004; Nambissan, 2009; Zeichner, 2011).

There is hence an urgent need to address the above concerns especially during the preparation of teachers. There is a dearth of studies addressing the question: How do teacher educators enable the student-teachers to question cultural capital and enable them to become empathetic teachers? Hence this research was designed to explore the pedagogical possibilities to engage student-teachers who can critically reflect on the inequities in the society and enable them to become empathic teachers. After careful deliberations it was decided to use films as a pedagogic tool to fulfil the above purposes. Films have enormous potential as a pedagogic tool which is yet to be realised in the discourse of teacher education. Films can be an excellent resource to bring multiplicity of perspectives to the fore by engaging in discussion, debate, and questioning (Buchanan & Hilburn, 2015; Chávez-Reyes, 2012; Matias & Grosland, 2016). However their use needs to be in tandem with well thought-of questions before, during and after screening of the films. Films are a non-intimidating medium to enter sensitive and sometimes elusive issues of religion and caste. Thus, films could be used during the interactions as a catalyst to discuss inequalities in society and in the process

challenge stereotypes. It is imperative that films be used in conjunction with readings to ensure that the discussions are not based on impressions rather they are grounded in a theoretical frame. This conceptual underpinning is necessary since there is a danger that discussions on sensitive and crucial issues of religion and caste be navigated on the basis of one's limited experiences and socialisation.

Methodology

The present research was undertaken as an action research that explored the use of films to engage 54 third year elementary pre-service teachers pursuing Bachelor of Elementary Education programme (BElEd) where the researcher has been teaching. In the spirit of action research a basic online questionnaire was given to the student-teachers (STs) to find out their conceptual understanding around issues of social inequalities. Henceforth the students were divided in groups of 5-6 students and were asked to choose from a set of films[6]. Each film was accompanied with 2-3 specific readings to help the STs for critical reflection. Students watched the film and discussed the film as well as the reading in their respective group while the researcher/ teacher facilitated the discussion. After a month of periodic discussions the STs presented a critical analysis to the entire class. The STs were asked to fill two more online questionnaires – one before the presentation and one after the presentation. These questionnaires included close-ended Likert scale type questions as well as open-ended questions. The data collection as well as the analysis of data were iterative processes. All the responses (including classroom interactions) were analysed qualitatively and theoretical codes were identified through the process of open coding. Analysis is presented in these three thematic categories — 'Drawing out of 'social mutism'; 'Unravelling privilege and ability

through critical and liberating dialogue'; 'Making it alive: Using films to evoke emotive responses'.

Findings

During the interactions and discussions with the STs several issues were raised and deliberated. Several changes were observed in the shift in perspectives of students about negative stereotypes through presentation of counter-narratives. All the STs unequivocally expressed a shift in their thinking pertaining to inequities existent in the society and attributed this shift to various aspects of the discussions in the class that were triggered by the films that they watched. This was evident in the Likert Scale type questions that pertained to how effective the films were as an effective tool. All except two STs chose the highest scale of very effective. A qualitative analysis of the responses of the student-teachers reveals an insight into their thinking and the shifts that entailed.

Drawing out of social mutism

It was observed in the classroom discussions that the use of films helped to initiate discussions around sensitive topics of discrimination and inequalities. For instance, when asked to talk about one's own privileges most students took recourse of feeling that they were the ones discriminated against even though most of the STs were coming from upper middle class families and upper castes. However, after watching the various films there was a deeper and critical realisation about privileges (discussed in next theme). Moreover, other STs such as those with 'disabilities' or who were from 'reserved categories' suddenly had a voice and raised concerns about their own struggles and challenges which they had been shying to talk about earlier. This theme resonates with the research carried out by Matias and

Grosland (2016) who illustrated through use of a documentary film how personalisation led to stopping of emotional distancing.

A ST who has a physical motor disability described: " *After watching these films I could sense that there are others like me, in my situation. Listening to Roshni (a character in one of the films) gave me confidence to share my journey as well. I also felt that my classmates would see what I also go through everyday... The film opened up conversations in the class I never ever thought will happen in a class. I spoke about how I don't have money for a lot of things and how I feel about my body... All these discussions I have never had in a class in my life".* A similar incident is described in research done by Chávez-Reyes (2012) who argues how films help in opening up the students to counter "social mutedness – silence about evasion of social differences in general" (p. 45). Another instance of how films helped the students to be open in sharing their thoughts was encountered when the issue of 'reservation' was discussed in the context of several films pertaining to it. Mostly the students who were from 'unreserved categories' participated in the classroom discussion before watching of the films and argued against reservation blatantly pointing out to 'reserved category' students being 'offered seats on a platter'. All this while visible discomfort could be seen in the students from the 'reserved category' who sat in the class silently. After watching the films and reading the texts accompanying the readings it was evident that the participation in the class changed and the students from 'reserved category' began to express their views as illustrated in this student-teacher's response in the questionnaire, *"I have always been hesitant to talk in favour of reservation. After all there is already a divide in the class and my classmates can guess from my name 'Meena' that I belong to a reserved category.*

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6. Use of the word Films in this research is an umbrella term that includes documentaries. The films chosen in this research included popular Bollywood films such as Hitchki, Aarakshan, Super 30; Hollywood films such as Mona Lisa Smile and documentaries such as Where Knowledge is Free and Schooling: A White man's Burden. Besides this the students were also given the option to suggest any film they wanted to watch and discuss.

I have always felt very small because of that. After watching all these films and reading about how discrimination is so prevalent in our society I have understood that it is not my fault. I have also realized that there are others like me who are struggling so so much. And my classmates have no ideas about our struggles so I started talking about them in the class with ma'am's support. The films helped to at least have an open discussion in the class." (Translated from Hindi)

Unravelling privilege and ability through critical and liberating dialogue

Through watching the specified films a shift took place in the thinking of the student-teachers from a 'deficit' perspective to a 'capability perspective'[7]. For instance the group that watched the films *Hitchki* and *Super 30* candidly admitted that they thought that the 'poor' students did not have the potential to excel which was challenged after watching the movies. This is illustrated in the response: "*I have always thought that people who come from poor backgrounds can never compete in schools. Only a few of them have an exceptional potential. After watching the films and listening to the presentations I realised that it is not the students, it is the teachers – their pedagogy and their belief that these children can do it*".

The students attributed the shifts in their thinking to the dialogic pedagogy that took place during the course of collectively watching the films as well as the readings. Another response that reaffirms this: "*During the discussion around caste and communities in school we have often talked about how all this happens. Very often we believed that children are engaged in work at home because they want to and they get money for it so they are umm satisfied with that. So, we think these children (those from lower class and caste) do not want to study*

and they don't have it in them to study but after watching the movie (Where knowledge is free) today I realized that it is us. We do not intend to teach them".

These shifts in their thinking were attributed to the dialogical discourse of the classroom wherein they specified that a democratic space in the classroom where the student-teachers can share and be listened to without being judged, is crucial for enabling a discussion on the constructs of how society and education shape and determine our ideology. This finds resonance in Freire's (1968/1970) contention that dialogue is crucial and the essence of education as the practice of freedom which all the teacher educators believed as imperative in a teacher education discourse. A ST shared: "*What I really liked in this assignment is that ma'am let us talk even when what we were talking was wrong or let me say I was biased. Ma'am did not immediately say what you are thinking about poor people not being intelligent or knowledgeable is biased. She let me watch the movies and gave me readings and asked questions to induce 'cognitive conflict' as she said. And I now realise that what I was thinking is being prejudiced. I would have never realised this if it had not happened this way*".

The pedagogical possibilities for dialogue were approached from two entry points – self and that of the society. It was imperative that the STs were given an opportunity to talk about themselves as well as the society. To do it is crucial that a horizontal relationship between the teacher and the student rather than a vertical one is established (Freire, 1974/2005b) to facilitate a truly dialogic pedagogy.

While for Freire this horizontal relationship is a pre-requisite for true dialogue to take place, for Rogers this ensures that learning, "[h]as a quality of personal involvement - the whole person in both his feeling and   cognitive

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7. Batra (2017) argues the importance of understanding the construct of 'capability deprivation' as distinct from 'educational provisioning' indicating a major paradigmatic shift in sociological discourse in education.

aspects being in the learning event" (Rogers, 1969, p. 5). According to Rogers, experiential learning is 'self-initiated', 'pervasive', 'evaluated by the learner' and has meaning at its essence (Rogers, 1969, p. 5). Hence, a focus on the importance of empathy as one of the key aspect of facilitation of inter-personal relationship imperative for learning was also kept in mind. This surfaced in the way the films helped in evoking the affective domains in the STs.

'Making it come alive: Using films to evoke emotive responses'

A significant thread that came up with the use of films is that they evoked emotional responses in the student-teachers. A visible discomfort could be seen in the STs as they watched some films. This was accompanied with emotive reactions of crying at times. A particular instance happened in the context of reservation. As stated earlier initially there is hesitancy on the part of the students to argue 'for reservation' due to the fear of being identified as 'one of them' (the reserved classes). This is how Freire (2004/2005b) reasons the 'culture of mutism' is perpetuated. It is done so silently that often those from the backward classes accept it as their fate (Bourdieu, 1977/1970) as could be in this case if reservation were to be discussed as mere 'theoretical construct'. However by showing through films how discrimination has been taking place historically, the STs are drawn into the conversation since it then becomes personal.

During the classroom discussion the strong emotive reactions in the STs enabled them to see the 'other' in their context and from their perspective, an essential 'as if' quality that is prerequisite for empathy (Rogers 1981). This empathy is built when one understands that one sees the world and 'others' through a lens, a lens that is coloured by virtue of one's life experiences and also recognizing that there are other who have a lens of different colour. A particular incident from a film was referred to by quite a few students — a scene where a young girl child is shown

digging the mud. Majority of the students (most of them have had an urban-metropolis upbringing) said that they could never ever in their lives imagine that this child is digging for water. They thought that the girl would be hiding something or potting a plant as they imagined that the film had to do with a child experimenting with knowledge and how children learn from experience and not this. They found it hard to imagine that the segregation shown in the film is real. Heated discussions about whether children from marginalised communities should go to separate schools ensued in the group. The discussion generated a lot of reflection and discomfort for the students. Many students expressed feeling 'depressed' and 'enraged'. Several of them felt that before they saw the movie they could rationalise 'discrimination' by thinking that – *"This (segregation and discrimination) happens like at some other place. But when we see it happen to real people as in the documentaries when we hear how some students in our class feel that there's a bias towards them, then it ... doesn't remain outside..... You know you have to then think what can we do about it. What can I do about it."*

Conclusion

The research highlights the tremendous possibilities of use of films in social sciences to enable the students to question the hegemonic structures of the society and in repositioning their stance around epistemological questions. A running thread in this discourse on dialogue is how the researcher/teacher educator felt the need to challenge the cultural capital in their class by challenging the cultural capital of the class itself. Hence, the teacher educator herself recognised that education is a site of struggle and perpetuates inequalities while bringing the same to the fore for student-teachers by being empathetic practitioners themselves. Student teachers felt humanised when they were heard in the class and their personal experiences were listened to. For many student-teachers who had not got such

opportunities in a secondary habitus this was a step towards equalisation of educational opportunities. This was a challenging job for the teacher educator since many students who deserved such opportunities were the ones in danger of being suppressed by virtue of the medium of language they used (Hindi); their social standing or physical 'capabilities'. The teacher educator also realised that students need a lot of support to navigate their own trajectories while issues of privilege and ability are personalised.

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