

# Critical Pedagogy and Social Justice in Education: Exploring its Relevance for Transformative and Democratic Pedagogical Practices in the 21st Century

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## Abstract

Cultural marginalisation and the issues of promoting social justice and democratic engagement in the twenty-first century have become critical issues, so the role of education in this process has gained critical importance in the context of growing socio-economic inequalities. This work examines the philosophical basis and modern uses of critical pedagogy as a model of transformative and socially just learning. Taking a qualitative conceptual research design based on philosophical inquiry and interpretative analysis, the paper discusses the major theoretical contributions of critical pedagogy, social justice theory and transformative learning theory. As it is shown in the analysis, the critical pedagogy founded on the work of Paulo Freire and elaborated by other scholars like Giroux and McLaren, puts dialogue, critical consciousness, participatory learning, and emancipatory knowledge in the centre of the democratic education. The author identifies four key dimensions in her findings, namely development of critical consciousness, significance of dialogical and democratic pedagogical cultures, promoting socially just and inclusive learning environments, and the importance of transformative learning in developing civic engagement. The research suggests that structural inequalities and democratic participation can be addressed using critical pedagogical principles in curriculum design, teacher education, and educational policy. Moreover, it shows that critical pedagogy offers a strong normative and theoretical approach to reformulating education that is not technocratic and market-oriented. The article is relevant to the modern discourse of education, since it provides a combined system that not only connects critical pedagogy with social justice and transformative learning but also advances inclusive, equitable and democratic educational practises.

**Keywords:** Critical Pedagogy, Social Justice, Democratic Education, Transformative Learning, Critical Consciousness, Educational Equity

## 1. Introduction

The twenty first century has been typified by far reaching social, economic and technological changes in the world that have greatly reformed education systems in the world. The globalization processes, the growing cultural diversity, the growing technological advancement (digitally), and the growing socio-economic inequalities have transformed the role of education

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Published: 27 March 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i3.45620>

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and educational expectations in the modern societies. Consequently, education is being considered as both a means of making people develop a cognitive knowledge and technical skills as well as an important institution in fostering democratic citizenship, ethical understanding, and social responsibility among learners (Biesta, 2015; Nussbaum, 2016). The schools of the contemporary democratic societies are supposed to educate people who will be able to critically think, constructively interact with different points of view, and will develop inclusive and fair societies.

Regardless of these goals, researchers claim that in lots of modern educational systems, technocratic and market-oriented policy models still dominate that put more emphasis on economic competitiveness, measurable results, and standardised performance indicators. These measures are usually linked to neoliberal reforms in education and leave it as a rather instrumental process the main purpose of which is to create a highly skilled workforce instead of fostering a democratic ethos and social consciousness (Apple, 2012; Giroux, 2011). According to critics, such models often replicate the social disparities that are already present by giving precedence to mainstream cultural representations of knowledge and overlooking the lives and the views of historically disadvantaged groups of people (Apple, 2012; Au, 2016). As a result, an increasing academic interest has developed in relation to whether the modern educational systems can effectively deal with the social justice and democratic engagement problems.

In this regard, critical pedagogy has become a powerful philosophical and pedagogical paradigm that tries to confront the oppressive social order and restructure education to a direction that is democratic and emancipatory. Critical pedagogy is based on the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and theorises conceptualisations of education as a liberating process whereby learners integrate the ability to critically examine social realities and confront systems of domination and inequality. Freire (1970) believed that in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that traditional schooling is usually a banking model of education, where students are passive receptors of knowledge disparate of functioning as active agents in the process of creating meaning. Freire came up with a different form of dialogical pedagogy of education that focuses on critical thinking, dialogue, and joint production of knowledge as part of transformative learning.

Freire based his philosophy on the notion of critical consciousness (*conscientização*), which can be defined as the attainment of the understanding through which a person becomes able to acknowledge and challenge societal, political, and economic types of oppression. Critical dialogue and reflection allow learners to become active agents who can change unfavourable social conditions (Freire, 1970). Critical pedagogy has been broadened by scholars like Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Bell Hooks, who have gone on to elaborate the theoretical horizons of critical pedagogy by focusing on how education contributes to democratic participation, cultural critique, and social change (Giroux, 2011; Hooks, 2014).

Critical pedagogy highly values dialogue, critical inquiry and participatory learning as the central elements of the democratic education. This style of teaching, instead of making students passive receivers of information, promotes group learning experiences in which teachers and students can critically discuss social forces and disparities in power relationships. These

pedagogical strategies are meant to develop critical thinking, ethical accountability, and civic behavior in the learner (Giroux, 2011; McLaren, 2015).

Simultaneously, the ideas of social justice in education are becoming more prominent in the modern discussions of the field of educational philosophy. Social justice here is understood as not just about the equal access of educational resources and opportunities but also about the acknowledgement of cultural diversity, redistribution of benefits of education, and empowerment of the marginalised communities (Fraser, 2008). According to scholars, education must become transformative in terms of overcoming systemic inequalities and creating inclusive societies in which different identities and experiences can be appreciated (Noddings, 2018; Fraser, 2008).

In this respect, critical pedagogy presents an effective theoretical framework that allows including social justice principles in the educational practise. Critical pedagogy helps learners to reflect critically on issues like power, inequality and cultural representation, and make them conscious of wider social and political environments in which they learn. Therefore, it offers a template of reconsidering education as a democratic and transformative process instead of a strictly technocratic and economic activity.

It is on this backdrop that the current study aims at the exploration of the philosophical underpinnings of critical pedagogy and the relevance of critical pedagogy to the advancement of transformative and democratic pedagogical practises in the twenty-first century. Through the evaluation of significant theoretical contributions in the discipline and the implication of these contributions to the modern education practise, the research work would add to the current academic debate on how education can promote social justice, democratic engagement and critical citizenship in the ever more complex global society.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Historical Development of Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy is a movement that came into view in the late twentieth century, and it is a powerful trend in educational philosophy and aimed to question the connexion between education, power, and social disparity. It has intellectual origins in critical social theory, specifically the output of the Frankfurt School, whose theorists, such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, analysed how cultural institutions, including education, could be used to reproduce or challenge systems of domination in capitalistic societies (Giroux, 2011; McLaren, 2015). In this tradition, education was not considered a neutral, knowledge transmission process but a socially situated practise, which is determined by power relations and ideological forms.

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire was among the most influential figures who contributed to the development of critical pedagogy and whose works affected the educational theory and practise in the rest of the world. Freire (1970) in his groundbreaking book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* condemned what he referred to as the banking model of education, which is a teaching method where instructors put information into students who are organised as passive consumers of knowledge. As Freire notes, this kind of schooling strengthens hierarchical

relations of power and restrains the ability of learners to think critically and take part in a democratic process.

Freire came up with a different model of pedagogy based on dialogue, critical thinking, and participatory learning. The school in this orientation transforms education into a participatory process where the teachers and students interrogate each other and build knowledge. Students acquire what Freire referred to as critical consciousness (*conscientização*), consciousness that allows them to identify any form of oppression, be it social, political or economic and to mobilise themselves, acting collectively to change any form of unjust condition (Freire, 1970).

The thoughts of Freire were inspirational to a large spectrum of scholars who contributed to the theoretical and political expansion of the critical pedagogy. One such scholar was Henry Giroux who believed that education ought to serve as a democratic civic space in which students are trained to critically deconstruct social problems and engaged in civic life (Giroux, 2011). On the same note, Peter McLaren stressed the importance of critical pedagogy to reveal the ideological systems of forms that influence educational institutions and reproduce social inequality (McLaren, 2015). Collectively, these scholars have helped to make critical pedagogy an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses the contributions of sociology, cultural studies, political theory, and philosophy of education.

In later years, critical pedagogy has also become an international intellectual movement, one that questions conventional ideas about schooling and promotes educational practises that are based on democratic engagement, social justice, and human emancipation (Apple, 2012; Giroux, 2011). This has contributed to a continuous impact of the critical pedagogy on the modern discussions about the role of education in dealing with social inequality and making democratic citizens.

## **2.2 Critical Pedagogy and Social Justice**

Social justice is now a key theme in the modern educational research, especially within the contexts of educational equity, cultural acknowledgment and distribution of opportunity in schooling systems. Social justice in education entails the elimination of structural disparities that influence access to resources, representation and involvement in learning institutions (Fraser, 2008). School theorists believe that schools tend to recreate the same social stratifications in which dominant cultures, cultures, and knowledge systems are favoured and other voices of the minority groups and underserved communities are minimised (Apple, 2012; Au, 2016).

Critical pedagogy provides a significant model in the analysis and response to such inequalities. Through foregrounding the correlation between education and power, critical pedagogues believe that schooling must empower the learners to question and challenge systems of domination that constitute social, political, and cultural institutions (Giroux, 2011). Giroux (2011) believes that education must be a democratic realm over which learners are able to critically explore social issues and gain intellectual and moral capabilities required to participate democratically.

At the centre of this view is the fact that knowledge is not neutral and that it is influenced by historical and cultural contexts. Consequently, critical pedagogy has been focusing on the need

to adopt culturally responsive methods of teaching which consider the different experiences and identities of learners. These pedagogical strategies aim at building inclusive classrooms in which the students belonging to marginalised groups can be enabled to express their voices and be actively involved in the knowledge building process (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Moreover, researchers stress that the change of the classical mode of power relations in the classroom is the key to socially just education. Instead of having teachers as the authoritative source of knowledge that is transferred down to students, critical pedagogy encourages a participatory learning process in which students and teachers live together and learn together (Hooks, 2014). These processes give learners skills in critical thinking, ethical sensitivity and social responsibility, which help them to create more equitable and democratic societies.

Critical pedagogy in this regard is not confined to classroom teaching but it also deals with more social problems like racial inequality, economic injustice, and cultural exclusion. Critical pedagogy would help to turn education into a place of democratic empowerment and social change by instituting social justice principles in educational practise (Apple, 2012; McLaren, 2015).

### **2.3 Critical Pedagogy in Contemporary Educational Contexts**

Over the past few decades, critical pedagogy principles have been utilised in numerous educational settings, as evidenced by an increasing scholarly interest in the interrelation between education, democracy, and issues on the global level. The reforms in modern education are progressively focusing on the significance of multicultural education, global citizenship education, and inclusive pedagogy as a way of equipping students to survive in complex and diverse societies (Banks, 2015).

Under the multicultural education, critical pedagogy has been influential in the development of curriculum that acknowledges cultural identities and experiences of the diverse student groups. According to scholars, it is important to include the most popular practises of education and embrace the many-sided view that can support democratic discourse and cultural awareness (Banks, 2015).

Likewise, the global citizenship education field asserts the need to cultivate critical consciousness of global inequalities, environmental sustainability and human rights. Critical pedagogical thinking will promote reflective inquiry, ethical participation on the part of the learner to explore contemporary global challenges in the form of poverty, migration, and climate change (De Andreotti, 2014).

Simultaneously, the blistering development of digital technology has altered the outlook on the educational sphere and provided the access to knowledge and cooperative learning with new opportunities. Online learning platforms and the digital environment have widened the opportunities of communication and sharing of information that cross geographical boundaries. The scholars however warn that technological innovation is not a panacea to ensure educational equity. The digital technologies can support the preexisting disparities regarding access, representation, and participation without critical awareness (Selwyn, 2021).

In these respects, critical pedagogy is most applicable to analysing the social impacts of a technological change and fostering an approach that is reflective of digital knowledge system.

Critical pedagogy offers a conceptual framework to handle the ethical and social issues that digital education is related to by promoting reflection on the source of information, challenge the leading narratives, and engage in the process of democratic discourse.

All in all, critical pedagogy remains relevant to the current challenges of combating serious challenges in the world like social inequality, cultural exclusion, and decline of democracy. With the education systems facing these hurdles, critical pedagogy should provide useful information to enhance pedagogical practises that advance critical thinking, social responsibility and democratic participation in the twenty-first century.

## **2.4 Knowledge Gap**

Despite the fact that the area of critical pedagogy has grown considerably during the last 50 years, there are several significant gaps in the modern educational research. The available literature has given a great deal of theoretical illumination to the philosophical underpinnings of critical pedagogy, both in the work of Paulo Freire and subsequently of Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Bell Hooks (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011; McLaren, 2015). The works have made critical pedagogy an effective paradigm to analyse the connexion between education, power and social change. But much of the early literature was mainly concerned with the theoretical denunciation of the traditional school systems instead of taking a look at how important pedagogical principles can be applied methodically into the current educational settings.

In addition, much of the current literature is inclined to focus on ideological and philosophical aspects of the critical pedagogy without giving much coverage of its practical implications on contemporary education systems influenced by globalisation, technological revolution and policy changes in neoliberalism. According to scholars, several schools and universities still focus on technocratic pedagogies of teaching and learning that focus on standardised testing, quantifiable results, and financial efficiency (Apple, 2012; Au, 2016). Although these models are meant to enhance efficiency and accountability, they tend to ignore greater democratic and ethical aims of education.

The other literature gap is the way critical pedagogy is connected with the discussion of social justice in education that is currently being transformed. Whereas a number of the scholars have examined the significance of equity, recognition, and inclusion in the educational systems (Fraser, 2008; Noddings, 2018), the number of studies that focused on how the principles of critical pedagogy could offer a holistic approach to the incorporation of the previously mentioned dimensions into the pedagogical practise is rather low. Specifically, it is possible to note that the conceptual analyses, which would connect critical pedagogy with the current discussion of culturally responsible teaching, democratic citizenship education, and inclusive learning environments, are still needed.

Moreover, the scientific changes in the world of digital technologies and international communication systems were changing educational spaces at an unprecedented pace, and they did not have an effect that was predicted in the previous body of critical pedagogical literature. Although online learning environments present novel possibilities of knowledge production in collaborative teams and access to information, they also give way to the issue of digital inequality, algorithmic discrimination, and commodification of knowledge (Selwyn, 2021).

Although these new challenges have risen, comparatively very little research has been done to examine and find solutions to the ethical and social consequences of digital education using critical pedagogical approaches.

Thus, one can still conclude that it is necessary to conduct the additional conceptual research that allows placing critical pedagogy into the scope of the contemporary educational change in the twenty-first century. The current research is aimed to fill this gap in the literature by exploring how the principles of critical pedagogy can be relevant to the modern discourse on democratic education, social justice, and inclusive learning. To be more specific, the research will give a philosophical discussion of critical pedagogy and the implications it would have on the creation of transformative and democratic pedagogical practises that can be applied in the educational issues of the twenty-first century, which are quite complex.

### **3. Research Questions**

The research questions that the study particularly discusses are the following:

1. What are the major philosophical maxims of critical pedagogy?
2. In what way does critical pedagogy help in advancing social justice within the education system?
3. What does critical pedagogy mean in the modern practise and educational policy?

By answering such questions, the study adds to the existing debates about the role of education in the process of enhancing democratic values and social change to an ever more complex global society.

### **4. Theoretical Framework**

The current research is based on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that incorporates the point of view of critical pedagogy, social justice theory, and transformative learning theory. These three views offer different complementary conceptual lenses to understand the way education can be used as a transformative process that facilitates democratic participation, critical awareness and social equity. Whereas critical pedagogy focuses on emancipatory power of education and the cultivation of critical consciousness, social justice theory focuses on equity, recognition and redistribution in educational institutions. Transformative learning theory, in its turn, concentrates on the cognitive and reflective actions wherein individuals are revising their assumptions and creating new viewpoints. These frameworks should be used together to offer an integrated framework on how the educational practises can assist in bringing about socio-change in the twenty-first century.

#### **4.1 Critical Pedagogy**

The main theoretical foundation of the present study is critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is conceptualised in the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who saw the process of education as the way to liberate people, to be able to critically analyse the realities of the surrounding reality and to fight against the forms of oppression. Freire (1970) contended in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that the contemporary model of schooling is somehow based on what he referred to as the banking model of education whereby teachers put something inside the student without allowing them to challenge or even argue it. Such pedagogical

practises, according to Freire, have the effect of reinforcing hierarchical relations of power and deny learners the ability to challenge the social inequalities.

Freire suggested a new mode of education, which is centred on dialogue, reflection and collaborative learning whereby teachers and students interact in reciprocal processes of knowledge production. The main idea of this model is the so-called critical consciousness (*conscientização*) which can be defined as the creation of the awareness, allowing people to perceive the social, political and economical contradictions as well as take action in response to the oppressive social conditions (Freire, 1970).

Based on the work of Freire, critical pedagogy has been developed by researchers like Henry Giroux as a model to democratic education. According to Giroux (2011), education is supposed to serve as a democratic common ground whereby learners are given the opportunity to think critically about social issues and acquire the intellectual abilities to be democratic citizens. In this view, teachers can be of great help as transformative thinkers that can help engage in critical discourse and challenge students to overcome dominant ideologies.

Critical pedagogy therefore focuses a lot on the significance of participatory learning space that helps to cultivate critical thinking, moral consciousness, and political activism. Critical pedagogy aims to turn education into an activity that promotes individual empowerment as well as social justice by urging learners to study the social contexts of knowledge production (McLaren, 2015).

#### **4.2 Social Justice Theory**

Whereas critical pedagogy is based on emancipatory possibilities of education, social justice theory offers a more comprehensive perspective on the structural inequalities on which education systems are built. Social justice in education deals with the inequalities in the access to resources, appreciation of cultural affiliations, and chances of engagement in educational institutions (Fraser, 2008).

In the analysis of educational inequality, the theory of social justice presented by Nancy Fraser provides a rather helpful conceptual framework. According to Fraser (2008), three dimensions of social justice are recognised, namely redistribution, recognition and representation. Redistribution can be defined as fair distribution of resources and opportunities in the society. Recognition refers to the process of appreciating and recognising cultural identities and experiences of different groups of people. The representation relates to how people and groups are able to engage in decision making processes, which impact the lives of those people and communities.

When applied in the educational context, these dimensions underline the significance of providing inclusive learning environments that will tackle the material inequalities as well as the cultural marginalisation. There have been claims by scholars that social hierarchies are a common practise in educational institutions whereby dominant cultural norms are favoured at the expense of the minority views (Apple, 2012). Therefore, welfare of educational promotion should not only involve increasing the access of educational opportunities, but also changing the cultural and institutional modes of inequality.

The critical pedagogy is similar to the social justice theory in that it gives significance to education in empowering the marginalised groups and questioning the oppressive structures. Through the incorporation of social justice concepts in its design and pedagogies, education can help to build more just and democratic communities.

### **4.3 Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformative learning theory is the third theoretical component of this framework which was first developed by Jack Mezirow. A transformative learning theory is based on the fact that people can critically review their assumptions and build new ideas with the help of reflection and dialogue. Mezirow (1997) defines transformative learning as a learning process in which the learner critically reflects on beliefs, values and experiences, a process resulting in a change in the worldview of the learner.

Transformative learning focuses on the importance of critical thinking, dialogue and experiential learning in promoting significant teaching experiences. Reflective inquiry enables learners to recognise the social and cultural assumptions that influence the interpretation of the world and learn to redefine the assumptions in more open and socially accountable forms (Mezirow, 2015).

The transformative learning theory has been developed further by other scholars who have emphasised emotional and social aspects of learning. As an example, Illeris (2014) stresses that transformative learning is associated not only with cognitive reflections but also with identity shifts, value shifts and social relations shifts. These views are close to the ideas of critical pedagogy that renders significance of dialogue and critical consciousness when questioning oppressive social constructs.

In the framework of social justice education, transformative learning offers a useful leverage in the analysis of how education experiences may trigger the change in attitude, values, and behaviours. Transformative learning is important in the development of reflective and engaged citizens because it helps learners to critically analyse their assumptions regarding power, inequality, and social responsibility.

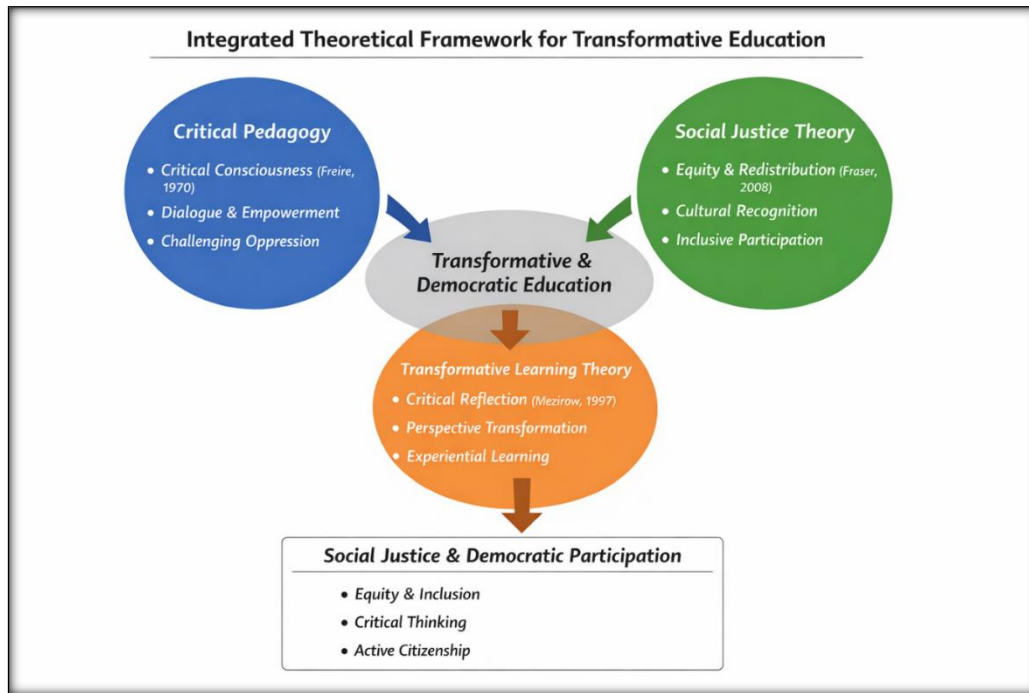
### **4.4 Conceptual Synthesis**

The combination of the critical pedagogy theory, the theory of social justice, and the theory of transformative learning offers an exhaustive conceptual approach to the issue of education as the leading force of democratic participation and social change. Critical pedagogy stresses upon the emancipatory promise of education, and the role of dialogue and critical consciousness. The social justice theory discusses the inequalities that are structural in educational opportunities and the requirement of an equal and inclusive education system. Meanwhile transformative learning theory provides explanations on cognitive and reflection processes that help people to develop new views and take part in social change.

Combining these theoretical points of view implies that education must not remain confined to technocratic models which are narrow and focus on economic performance and standardisation. Rather, education must practise fostering the ability to think critically, maintain moral consciousness, and be democratic to learners. Education can serve as a potent means of advancing social justice and democratic engagement in the new societies of the present making

it a form of reflective inquiry and prompting learners to study the social conditions of knowledge production.

**Figure-1, Integrated Theoretical Framework Model**



### **Explanation**

The conceptual foundation of this study is the Integrated Theoretical Framework Model that is shown in Figure 1. The model combines three theoretical approaches, such as, critical pedagogy, social justice theory, and transformative learning theory, to elucidate how education can be used to make a contribution to transformational and democratic pedagogical practises in the twenty first century.

The first element of the framework is critical pedagogy that offers the main philosophical foundation of the model. Critical pedagogy, first theorised by Paulo Freire, idealises the idea of education as an emancipation process whereby learners become astute to social inequalities and oppressive social relations of power. As Freire (1970) suggests, conventional schooling tends to be hierarchical in nature with the knowledge being passed down that restricts critical thinking by students. Against this, dialogue pedagogy promotes contemplative dialogue between students and teachers thus learners can acquire what Freire referred to as critical consciousness (*conscientização*) that is, the awareness that lets people to identify and resist social injustice. This view was later developed by other scholars who focused on the importance of education as a democratic civic space where students are allowed to think critically about issues in society and acquire civic consciousness (Giroux, 2011; McLaren, 2015). Within the context shown in Figure 1, the areas of critical pedagogy that provide important points include dialogue, empowerment, and critique of oppressive social structures.

Social justice theory is the second element of this model since it offers structural approach to inequality in education systems. The theory of social justice developed by Nancy Fraser is especially useful in this respect since it regards justice in three dimensions that are related to

each other as redistribution, recognition and representation (Fraser, 2008). The redistribution deals with the fair distribution of resources and opportunities; recognition refers to the awareness of the cultural identities and experiences of the diverse groups; and representation is involved in the inclusive involvement in the decision-making process. These principles emphasise the need to establish an inclusive learning environment that takes into account cultural diversity and structural inequalities in the learning environment, which is a key part of education. According to scholars, the failure to meet these dimensions could lead to education systems that replicate the status quo and marginalised voices are not heard (Apple, 2012). The social justice theory thus adds the normative ideals of equity, cultural acknowledgment and inclusive engagement in the integrated framework.

Transformative learning theory is the third element of the model, created by Jack Mezirow, which describes the mental and introspective activities that allow people to reconsider the things they have assumed and even create new ones. Transformative learning takes place when individuals are critically reflective of what they believe and experience that results to a change in their worldview (Mezirow, 2015). This process entails critical reflection, dialogue and experiential learning, which provides the learners with a possibility to redefine their social reality and create more inclusive and socially responsible views. Subsequent studies have highlighted that transformative learning has emotional and social aspects of learning that contribute to identity formation and moral growth (Illeris, 2014). Within the context illustrated in Figure 1, transformative learning adds the processes by which critical awareness and social engagements may be cultivated in the context of education.

The combination of all three theoretical views will result in a holistic model of transformative and democratic education. Critical pedagogy offers the emancipatory orientation of education, social justice theory offers the structural conditions of equity and inclusion, and transformative learning theory offers an explanation of how learners come to be equipped with critical orientations and a sense of ethics. A combination of these theoretical ways of looking at education implies that it must no longer be viewed through the prism of technocratic views of education that are only concerned with the financial productivity of education; the idea instead should be to promote critical thinking, moral accountability, and democracy.

Figure 1 shows the combination of these three frameworks results in the emergence of transformative and democratic pedagogical practises that in turn result in more encompassing outcomes like social justice, inclusive education, and active democratic citizenry. Incorporating these theoretical views, the framework offers a conceptual background to discuss the ways in which education can be a force of transformation that can be able to deal with the complex social issues in the twenty-first century.

## **5. Methodology**

### **5.1 Research Design**

The current research uses qualitative conceptual research design of the philosophical inquiry and interpretative analysis. Conceptual research has been extensively used in the field of educational philosophy to investigate the theoretical construct, examine conceptual relations, and examine the implication of philosophical frames to educational practise (Biesta, 2015). As

opposed to empirical research designs where the main emphasis is made on quantitative or qualitative data collection, conceptual research is concerned with systematic analysis of the existing theoretical information with a view of getting new insights and interpretations in a certain field of study.

The conceptual approach is especially suitable in the current study context since the major goal of the research will be to investigate philosophical bases of critical pedagogy and determine its applicability to the facilitation of transformational and democratic pedagogical practises in the twenty-first century. Through the comparative examination of the major theoretical contributions made by the critical pedagogy, social justice theory, and transformative learning theory, the study aims at coming up with an integrated conceptual framework through which the role of education will be understood in dealing with modern issues regarding social inequality, democratic participation, and cultural diversity.

The conceptual research has been widely accepted as a valid methodological technique in education theory and philosophy of education since it enables researchers to critically examine concepts, demystify theoretical concepts, and create links among various channels of educational thinking (Burbules and Warnick, 2006). Such analysis will mean that conceptual research will help in development of theoretical frameworks to inform not only educational research but also the pedagogical practise as well.

## **5.2 Sources of Data**

The paper relies on the documentary review of academic literature, both primary theoretical and secondary academic texts on critical pedagogy, social justice theory, and transformative learning theory.

### **Primary Sources**

Primary sources are the original works of most significant theorists whose ideas form the conceptual basis of the study. These include:

- Critical pedagogy and emancipatory education writings by Paulo Freire.
- Henry Giroux Democratic education and critical pedagogy.
- Nancy Fraser is the author of the work on the theory of social justice.
- The theory of transformative learning as developed by Jack Mezirow.

These formative texts offer the theoretical groundwork of comprehending the link between education, social justice and democratic participation.

### **Secondary Sources**

The sources under the category of secondary sources can be characterised by peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and policy reports that address the use and understanding of critical pedagogy in current educational settings. These are the sources covering the literature on:

- Critical pedagogy, democratic education.
- social justice and equity in education.
- reflective pedagogy and transformative learning.

- education and social inequality in debates around the world.

The presence of secondary sources allows the research to place the theoretical work of the main authors in the context of the wider scholarly discussion of the issue of educational philosophy and pedagogical practise.

### **5.3 Method of Analysis**

Philosophical analysis and thematic interpretation are the main methods of analysis used in the study. Philosophical analysis is a critical examination of theoretical arguments, finding conceptual relations, and figuring out the assumptions underlining certain educational theories (Biesta, 2020).

The analysis in the research was carried out in three phases.

#### **Stage 1: Conceptual Analysis of Critical Pedagogy**

The initial phase was a critical interpretation of the major concepts of critical pedagogy in the works of Paul Freire and its further elaboration by such authors as Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren. Specific focus was also put on some of the fundamental ideas such as critical consciousness, dialogical pedagogy, and emancipatory education (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011). This step was intended to determine the philosophy behind critical pedagogy and its consequences of democratic education.

#### **Stage 2: Comparative Theoretical Analysis**

The second phase was the comparative analysis of the critical pedagogy and the other related theories especially social justice theory and transformative learning theory. The transformative learning theory proposed by Mezirow (2015) and the social justice theory by Fraser (2008) gave perspective on the structures of inequality in education and their roles in changing the assumptions of individuals and allowing them to create different views and perspectives.

Through a comparison of these theoretical approaches, the research established points of conceptual intersection which can be used to bone a comprehensive framework of the analysis of transformative and democratic pedagogical practises.

#### **Stage 3: Conceptual Synthesis**

The last step was to synthesise the results of the earlier steps to build a complex theoretical framework, which connects critical pedagogy, social justice, and transformative learning. The synthesis allowed the study to scrutinize the way in which these theoretical approaches can together inform the current discussions of the idea of democratic education and socially just pedagogy.

As a result of this conceptual synthesis, the study determines the main pedagogical values, including dialogue, critical reflection, and inclusive participation, as the primary ones that should be promoted in order to build a democratic and transformative learning process.

### **5.4 Scope and Limitations**

Although the conceptual research design is very useful in terms of theoretical implications, it also has some shortcomings. Since the analysis of the study is not based on data collection, but

rather on theoretical work, its findings are interpretative and might not completely reflect the issues of the educational practise in various institutional settings.

The current study can be furthered in future studies through empirical inquiry, i.e., case analysis or classroom research to discuss the application of the critical pedagogical principles in the practise of real educational institutions. These studies may bring more knowledge concerning the practicalities of the issues and opportunities related to implementing the critical pedagogy in the modern educational systems.

However, the theoretical methodology assumed in the present study offers a valuable theoretical input to the discussion of the philosophical principles of critical pedagogy and the applicability of the concept to the discussion of modern-day educational issues concerning social justice and democratic involvement.

## **6. Findings and Discussion**

The conceptual discussion undertaken in this research paper points to some important insights that can be made on the applicability of critical pedagogy in fostering socially just and democratic pedagogical practises in the twenty-first century. The synthesis of critical pedagogy, social justice theory and transformative learning theory in the analysis helps to see how education can also serve as a transformative process, which enables the learner to critically analyse social inequalities and engage in active participation in the democratic life. The analysis revealed four primary themes (1) development of critical consciousness, (2) democratic and dialogical pedagogy, (3) encouragement of socially just educational settings and (4) transformative learning and civic engagement.

### **6.1 Development of Critical Consciousness**

Among the main results of the research is the fact that the critical consciousness remains a relevant aim of education. Critical pedagogy is concerned with the idea that students must not just learn facts, but also be able to think critically in order to study the form of social organisation as well as being able to understand the existing power relations that define social and educational institutions (Freire, 1970). The processes of dialogue and reflection will help the learners be conscious of the social, political and economic situations that affect their lives and the experiences of learning.

The theory of conscientização, as formulated by Freire, emphasises the idea that education must allow a person to rise above being a subject of passivity with regards to accepting the prevailing social norms and instead should be critical and conscious of injustice and inequality. Freire (1970) believes that this kind of awareness can enable learners to overcome oppressive systems and that they can also be engaged as active participants in the social transformation processes. This view has found a massive following in modern educational studies where scholars acknowledge the significance of critical thinking and reflective questioning in creating democratic citizens who can solve elaborate societal issues (Giroux, 2011; McLaren, 2015).

The recent studies on the educational theory also imply that critical consciousness leads to the advancement of civic engagement and social responsibility of learners. Research has shown that those students who critically discuss issues affecting the society have high chances of becoming part of democratic processes and community related programmes that seek to related

social inequalities (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). Thus, critical consciousness is an important part of the education, which aims at enabling the learner to be a full participant in the democratic societies.

## **6.2 Dialogical and Democratic Pedagogical Practices**

The other important finding is regarding the application of dialogue and participatory learning as a way of fostering democratic learning environments. Critical pedagogy questions the old hierarchical approaches to teaching where the teacher is the authoritative figure and the student is the passive participant of the learning process. Rather, it proposes dialogical learning institutions where teachers and students are involved in the process of knowledge building together (Freire, 1970).

Dialogical pedagogy focuses on the value of open conversation, critical questioning and joint reflection as the fundamental components of the significant learning experiences. Giroux (2011) argues that these methods of pedagogy can help learners to challenge the prevailing discourses and acquire a better sense of the social and cultural aspects under which knowledge is generated. Dialogical learning classrooms promote democracy in the classroom through the encouragement of students to discuss their opinions and interact with different perspectives.

In addition, democratic pedagogies foster the approach towards educators to rethink their involvement in the learning process. Teachers are less and less considered as mere sources of knowledge but are seen as guides of critical thinking and reflective communication. In this view, the classroom is a participative environment as both the teachers and the students work together to build up the knowledge and understanding (Hooks, 2014).

The effectiveness of participatory and dialogical teaching methods is also supported by research in the field of educational psychology. Research has demonstrated that learning in groups helps to boost the engagement, critical thinking and problem solving abilities of students (Brookfield and Preskill, 2012). The findings support the fact that dialogical pedagogy is critical in the creation of democratic and inclusive learning conditions.

## **6.3 Promoting Social Justice and Educational Equity**

The discussion also shows how important the principles of social justice can be in determining the modern-day practises in education. Social justice in education deals with the inequalities in access to educational resources, diversity in the advocacies of the various cultural views, and access to participation in educational institutions (Fraser, 2008). Researchers believe that the school systems tend to reproduce social inequalities by enforcing majority cultural tendencies and excluding the experiences of the minority groups (Apple, 2012).

Critical pedagogy can provide a valuable concept to redress these inequalities by promoting a practise among educators to question the social and cultural presumptions inherent in curriculum development and the instructional process. Through embracing the multicultural views and acknowledging the experiences of learners whose backgrounds are different, teachers can establish more inclusive learning spaces that empower marginalised students (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Culturally responsive pedagogy has been adopted as an important extension of the critical pedagogical thought. Culturally responsive teaching acknowledges the existence of cultural identities and experiences in the learners as an asset to the learning process and aims at bringing the perspectives in the classroom learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Such practises will facilitate fairness and inclusion to allow voices of different kinds to be heard in the educational discourse.

Moreover, the researcher points out that in order to deal with educational inequality, there is a need to change the structures of the learning institutions. Fraser (2008) states that attaining social justice does not just require acknowledging cultural diversity but also taking remedies in regard to the systemic inequalities in the distribution of both resources and opportunities. Critical pedagogy thus challenges teachers to look wider into social and institutional frameworks that influence the results of education.

#### **6.4 Transformative Learning and Civic Engagement**

Another important observation is connected to the contribution of transformative learning processes to developing critical awareness and democratic participation. The transformative learning theory stresses that significant learning process is characterised by new assumptions being evaluated with respect to those formed beforehand, and the establishment of new perspectives through critical thinking and discussion (Mezirow, 2015).

Transformative learning in the context of critical pedagogy happens when students critically analyse their assumptions related to social issues and get more inclusive and socially responsible ideas. This process is usually accompanied by emotional involvement, reflective dialogues, and experience of learning that provokes the current worldviews (Illeris, 2014).

Studies recommend that transformative learning experiences can provide strong impacts on students, which affect their social justice attitudes as well as their views on democratic participation. Indicatively, learning programmes with a built-in service learning, community service and reflective conversation have been found to support students in gaining knowledge about social inequalities and promoting civic engagement and participation (Eyler and Giles, 1999).

In addition, the modern discourses in education have placed greater emphasis on educating the learners to be global citizens in a fast moving world. The world is facing global issues like global warming, migration and economic disparity which demand individuals that can critically analyse and solve complex social problems and work together despite cultural barriers (Banks, 2015). The transformative learning techniques offer useful pedagogical methods to acquire such competencies.

#### **6.5 Synthesis of Findings**

The combined results of this research can be concluded to imply that critical pedagogy is an effective conceptual framework that could be used to rethink the purpose of education in modern society. Critical pedagogy offers a complex approach to education by underlining critical consciousness, dialogical learning, social justice, and transformative learning as a way of going beyond the technical skills and economic productivity of the view.

Unlike the technocratic models of education, which focus on standardised testing and measurable results, the concept of critical pedagogy emphasises where education has more democratic functions. It promotes the critical approach of learners to the social realities, confronts the mechanisms of inequality, and makes learners actively involved in the democratic processes (Giroux, 2011).

Moreover, the combination of both critical pedagogy and the theory of social justice and transformative learning offers an in-depth construct to address the modern issues in education. The focus of such an approach is that education is not merely a process that passes on knowledge, but it must also be able to instil ethical awareness, social responsibility, and democratic involvement into the learners.

Since the challenges faced by educational systems concerning inequality, cultural diversity and democratic participation still prevail in education, the knowledge offered by the critical pedagogy can be of great use today. Education can be important in bringing more just and democratic societies because it can encourage critical thinking, constructive conversation, and democratic participation through educational means.

## **7. Implications for Educational Policy and Pedagogical Practice**

The implication of the findings of this study has a number of significant implications on the educational policy and pedagogical practise in modern education systems. With the current trends of rising challenges confronting the global societies regarding social inequality, cultural diversity and democratic participation, learning institutions are being forced to re-evaluate their functions in creating critical awareness, social responsibility and inclusive learning environments. Based on the combined paradigm of critical pedagogy, social justice theory, and transformative learning, the following section identifies the implications of the paradigms in the research on curriculum design, teacher education, classroom pedagogy, and educational policy reform.

### **7.1 Reorienting Educational Policy Toward Social Justice**

Among the main implications of the current research is the necessity to restructure the educational policy in favour of equity and social justice. Neoliberal policy frameworks, which focus on market efficiency, accountability systems and standardised assessment systems, have continued to impact educational systems all around the world (Apple, 2012; Au, 2016). Although these policies are intended to enhance education and institutional responsibility, critics claim that, they tend to make education an economic tool and disregard its more democratic and social functions (Giroux, 2011).

According to the vision of the critical pedagogy, education is supposed to be a democratic organisation that allows students to have a critical approach to the societal problems and train the ability to be an active part of society (Freire, 1970). Educational policies therefore ought to put emphasis on equal access to learning, acknowledgment of cultural differences and shared governance in learning institutions. The redistribution, recognition, and representation framework by Nancy Fraser (2008) is an effective guide that can be used by a policy maker to resolve structural inequalities in the education systems.

Redistributive policies can be some more investments in schools that are under-resourced, an equal allocation of education resources, and that marginalised student groups will be aided more. Recognition policies are associated with the need to recognise cultural diversity in educational curricula and make sure that the voice of minorities should be reflected in teaching resources and classroom discussions (Banks, 2015). Representation involves the involvement of various stakeholders in the process of making decisions concerning educational governance such as students, teachers and communities.

Governments and institutions can use the principles to design educational systems that will facilitate the attainment of academic success as well as social justice by incorporating the principles into the educational policy.

## **7.2 Transforming Curriculum Design**

The results also indicate that there should be a considerable change in the curriculum design. The conventional curricula usually focus on the impartation of disciplinary knowledge and readiness to enter the labour market. Although these purposes are still valued, researchers believe that the modern education should also offer the development of critical thinking, moral thinking, and civic activities (Biesta, 2015).

Critical pedagogy proclaims the creation of programmes that stimulate students to study such social problems as inequality, discrimination, environmental sustainability, and human rights. These curricula focus on critical inquiry, interdisciplinary learning, and problem-solving processes that can allow learners to relate academic knowledge to real-life problems (Giroux, 2011).

Moreover, curriculum frameworks ought to be culturally responsive to the development of inclusive learning environments. It has been demonstrated that using teaching content that takes into consideration various cultural views can increase the involvement of the students and facilitate the complexity of social diversity (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Scholars in the field of multicultural education point out that diverse communities and their experiences, as well as their historical background, should be represented in inclusive curricula so that learners could acquire a more complex view of society (Banks, 2015).

Moreover, modern reforms in education tend to underline the significance of global citizenship education that is intended to equip the learners to work in an interconnected and diverse world. The Carney (2022) claims that global citizenship education prompts students to be critically aware of global problems like environmental sustainability, social justice, and human rights. The inclusion of these themes in the curriculum design can be used to produce socially responsible and ethically conscious citizens.

## **7.3 Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Development**

The other implication is also related to the significance of teacher training in facilitating transformational pedagogical practises. The teachers are in the centre of influence in creating classroom settings and enabling effective learning. Thus, the teacher education programmes should provide teachers with knowledge and skills to realise the critical pedagogical methods.

Critical pedagogy highlights the importance of teachers as critical thinkers that help students challenge the mainstream discourse and get them to reflect in thought (Giroux, 2011). This view dictates that teachers will need to shift their focus away off the old traditional modes of instruction and embrace more participatory and inquiry based modes of instruction.

The teacher education programmes must thus include training in such areas like:

- dialogical methods of instruction.
- culturally responsive pedagogy.
- Critical thinking and reflective practise.
- inclusive classroom management.

Studies indicate that professional development packages that focus on reflective instructional actions are likely to impact considerably on the capability of educators to promote critical learning settings (Brookfield, 2017). Reflective practise persuades teachers to review their assumptions and their approaches to teaching so that they can become more effective and responsive towards their students.

Moreover, teacher education must be provided with a chance to work with the wide-ranged communities and to learn more about the social and cultural contexts that may affect the learning experiences of students. Through such experiences, teachers can be able to establish pedagogical strategies that are sensitive to the needs of various learners.

#### **7.4 Promoting Dialogical and Participatory Classroom Practices**

On the classroom pedagogy level, the results of this research can be used to emphasise the significance of establishing dialogical and participatory learning spaces. The dialogical approach to teaching should stimulate students to take part in the dialogues, challenge the assumptions, and be involved in the collaborative process of knowledge construction (Freire, 1970).

Participatory classroom practices can be:

- Collaborative group learning.
- critical debates about the society.
- project-based learning
- community based learning experiences.

This type of approach encourages increased involvement in the learning process and the acquisition of critical thinking skills. Studies have shown that cooperative learning systems can improve the problem-solving skills, communication and critical thinking skills of students (Brookfield and Preskill, 2012).

Moreover, experiential instructional techniques like service-learning and community involvement can offer useful experiences to the students to explore the relationship between theory and actual social problems. Research has indicated that, service-learning programmes have the potential to improve the civic engagement of students and increase their understanding of social inequalities (Eyler and Giles, 1999).

### **7.5 Integrating Transformative Learning into Educational Practice**

Transformative learning theory can also give other reflections on how education can foster societal consciousness and moral growth. Mezirow (2015) notes that transformative learning happens when people question their assumptions and form new worldviews in a reflective dialogue and learning.

Transformative learning can be applied in the educational setting by using pedagogical methods that help learners think about their assumptions and work with different points of view. Reflective journaling, social issues discussion, and group inquiry are all classroom activities that may assist the students in becoming critical thinkers and develop empathy.

Illeris (2014) states that transformative learning entails cognitive reflection and emotional and social participation as well. Thus, teachers ought to develop learning space where open dialogue and mutual respect and shared exploration of problematic issues in society thrive.

Through incorporating transformative learning methods into the classroom practise, teachers will be able to assist students in gaining the required critical awareness and ethical responsibility to respond to the modern societal issues.

### **7.6 Synthesis of Policy and Practice Implications**

On balance, all the implications mentioned above are to note that fostering socially just and democratic education is multidimensional which means that policy reform, curriculum transformation, teacher professional growth, and the new ways of pedagogical practise are the key factors of the mentioned process.

Institutions of learning should leave behind the tight-fisted technocratic approaches that emphasise normalised testing and academic performance. Rather, they ought to adopt academic systems that allow them to think critically, engage in democracy, and be socially accountable.

The education systems can achieve this goal by incorporating the educational principles of critical pedagogy, social justice theory, and transformative learning into the educational policy and practise and will help to build a more inclusive and democratic society that would be able to manage the multifaceted challenges of the twenty-first century.

## **8. Conclusion**

The current research has analysed the philosophical basis and current usefulness of critical pedagogy as a model of ensuring socially fair and democratic educational practises in the twenty-first century. In a conceptual analysis based on the theory of critical pedagogy, social justice theory, and transformative learning theory, the study attempted to answer the question of how education might help to develop critical awareness, democratic participation and social responsibility in learners.

The research results have shown that critical pedagogy is an effective theoretical and pedagogical approach to solutions to challenges that modern educational systems have. Technocratic and market-oriented policies that focus on standardised assessment, economic productivity, and measurable outcomes still influence education in most areas of the world (Apple, 2012; Au, 2016). Although such policies are meant to increase efficiency and

accountability they tend to overlook the larger social and democratic goals of education. Such a limited vision is put to test by critical pedagogy which focuses on education as a process of transformation that enables learners to critically analyse social inequalities and engage in the process of democracy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011).

The discussion showed that critical consciousness development is pivotal in the transformational capacity of education. Through challenging the learners to critically reflect about the social realities and examining the power relations inherent in knowledge production, education can bring about a greater insight into the issues of inequality, cultural marginalisation, and social injustice (Freire, 1970). This process helps the learners get out of passive acceptance of the dominant social structures but rather give them the ability to challenge and change them.

The other important discovery is that of the significance of dialogical and participatory pedagogical practises. Dialogical pedagogies promote cooperative education, discussion, and inquiry, which thus result in the establishment of democratic classrooms in which the learners are actively involved in generating knowledge (Hooks, 2014; Brookfield and Preskill, 2012). This sort of pedagogical method does not solely improve the intellectual work of the students but also helps in the cultivation of the democratic aspect of the students i.e. respect, empathy and collective responsibility.

Another important point brought out by the research is the applicability of the social justice theory in mitigating the structural inequalities in the education systems. Schools and colleges tend to recreate the existing social hierarchy in favour of dominant cultural norms and at the expense of the minority point of view (Fraser, 2008; Banks, 2015). The implementation of social justice principles in educational practise needs to touch upon the problems of equal resources allocation, acknowledgment of cultural diversity, and involvement in the educational decision-making process.

Moreover, the incorporation of the transformative learning theory brings some useful information on how the educational experiences might contribute to the change in the perspectives and values of the learners. Transformative learning also focuses on critical reflection, dialogue, and experiential learning as the means by which people update their assumptions and more inclusive worldviews (Mezirow, 2015; Illeris, 2014). Transformative learning techniques used in conjunction with critical pedagogy can also enable learners to build ethical consciousness and civic accountability that they require to work towards complex social problems.

In general, the combination of these theoretical outlooks indicates that education cannot continue being limited to the instrumental models but rather should be grounded on more complex vision that is inclined to critical thinking, democratic engagement and social justice. In a growing globalised and diverse society, education systems should equip learners to not only be economic players but responsible citizens and ethical actors of the global issue and problems.

## **9. Future Research Directions**

Although the current research offers the conceptual inquiry of critical pedagogy and its

consequences in the current education system, there are a number of spheres that may be filled with additional academic inquiry. The theoretical observations conducted in this study can be used to inform future studies on the subject by examining the practise of critical pedagogical practises in a variety of educational settings.

To begin with, there is the necessity of the empirical studies that would explore the practise of critical pedagogy in the classroom. Although conceptual and theoretical research has indicated the transformative potential of critical pedagogy, empirical studies are able to shed some light on the way teachers put dialogical and participatory pedagogical teaching practises into practise. Such studies would look at the impact of critical pedagogical methods on the critical thinking, civic and social awareness of students.

Second, the connexion between critical pedagogy and digital education needs to be investigated in the future. The high rate of digital technology development and the online educational system has revolutionised the education sector generating opportunities and challenges towards democratic education. Even though digital technologies can provide access to knowledge and global cooperation, they can also support existing inequalities of access to the digital and information literacy (Selwyn, 2021). The research on the ways in which critical pedagogical strategies may be incorporated into digital learning spaces is a significant area to pursue in the future.

Third, the comparative study of the situation in various national and cultural settings would yield the useful information on the way critical pedagogy is perceived and implemented in the context of various educational systems. Policies and cultural traditions of different nations are quite different, and the knowledge of how these aspects affect the application of critical pedagogical practises can help create educational systems that are more context-specific.

Lastly, it is important that future studies be conducted on how critical pedagogy relates to the emerging trends of education including global citizenship education, sustainability education, and inclusive education. Since education systems are actively combating global issues like climate change, migration, and social inequality, critical pedagogical views can be incorporated into these new areas and can be helpful in creating more balanced and sustainable approaches to education.

To summarise, the relevance of critical pedagogy remains in its ability to redefine education as a process of democratisation and transformation. Education by facilitating critical awareness on the one hand, inclusive dialogue on the other, and participation in civic affairs can be significant in overcoming the social and ethical problems of the twenty-first century.

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