

Original Paper

Multidimensional Role of Teachers as Pedagogues, Intellectuals and Activists for Promoting Social Justice through Education¹

Getahun Yacob Abraham*

* Department of Educational Work, University of Borås, Borås, Sweden

E-mail: getahun_yacob.abraham@hb.se

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Abstract

This study investigates roles teachers could play in developing their students' critical thinking and transforming society. The study is based on a literature review. Critical pedagogy is used as a theoretical point of departure. The results show three important roles of teachers, the pedagogical, intellectual and activist roles. Teachers acting as pedagogues can help their students understand the subjects they are focusing on and develop a critical understanding of their own and their society's situation. Teachers as intellectuals produce knowledge through research on their practice and other fields of knowledge, learn on how to disseminate such knowledge and understanding its consequences. As citizens, teachers use their own and their students' experiences and knowledge of needs of their community/society to play an activist role in transforming society. Thus, the ideal teacher plays a multidimensional role as a pedagogue, an intellectual and an activist.

Keywords

Activists, injustice, intellectuals, pedagogues, society, students, teachers

1. Introduction

While recognizing the teacher as an expert in the academic subject that she/he is teaching, it is possible to consider teachers' roles from additional different angles. Teachers are more than just subject specialists (Biesta, 2015). According to Biesta (2015), teachers are expected to work with different functions of education, such as qualification, socialization and subjectification. While qualification refers to subject knowledge and skill, socialization refers to helping pupils understand their role and place in society, and subjectification refers to preparing students to be reflective individuals i.e., to be "subject of initiative and responsibility rather than an object of the actions of others" (Biesta, 2015, 77).

While the role of teacher education is supposed to help in equipping teachers to play their multi-dimensional role, it is currently taking another direction. Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015), state that “there is an ongoing tension within educational policy worldwide”. They show us which direction education policy especially teacher education is taking based on their two years research on implementation of the Scottish *Curriculum for Excellence*:

As the first speculation, we wish to suggest that much teacher education may have become geared towards the instrumental side of the spectrum—that is, getting the job done—and has been steered away from a more intellectual engagement with teaching, school and society (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015, 638).

The authors’ “speculation” is that there is an influence from decision makers that is pushing education towards instrumentality. This focus on instrumentality comes at the expense of something relevant. First, it deprives teaching students of general knowledge related to teaching, schooling and society. Second, it is limiting future teachers in the preparation they receive to play a multi-dimensional role in their profession.

Limiting teachers’ role through education policy reforms is experienced in Sweden too during the last two decades. Teachers are burdened with documentation of detailed learning activities, competition was preferred to cooperation at different levels of education, teachers were exposed to much control and accountability. These new reforms forced teachers to focus only on subject knowledge that could be measured through international tests such as PISA, in the expense of helping their students in critical thinking skills and preparing them as future citizens (Nilsson Lindström & Beach, 2015; Parding & Berg-Jansson, 2016; Ryder, Lidar, Lundqvist, & Östman, 2018; Hardy, Rönnerman, & Beach, 2019; Erlanson, Strandler, & Karlsson, 2020). As a result of limiting teachers’ role as policy implementers, “teachers themselves are no longer being addressed as thinkers, designers, and co-developers of education” (Hardy, Rönnerman, & Beach, 2019, 362).

While there are currently different hindrances to teachers becoming critical professionals, there are still and there will be in the future critical professionals. Kincheloe (2008) describes these teachers in a critical context as:

Teachers working in a critical context rebel against the view of practitioners as information deliverers, as deskilled messengers who uncritically pass along a canned curriculum. Highly skilled scholarly teachers research their students and their communities and analyse the curricular topics they are expected to cover. In light of such inquiry, these teachers develop a course of study that understands subject matter and academic skills in relation to where their students come from and the needs, they bring to school... (Kincheloe, 2008, 118).

The author is not defining what he meant by “critical context” and whom he considers as “highly skilled scholarly teachers”. He refers to teachers in that context and highly skilled teachers who reject the passive role that others are trying to impose on them. These teachers research what they are supposed to teach, their students and the community where their students are coming from. According

to him they use these knowledges in the teaching and learning processes with their students.

These teachers have access to their students' experiences, through their day-to-day life reading and conducting research have usable knowledge about their communities. Through participation in teachers' unions, women's organizations, environmental groups and cultural and social associations, they are well informed about the current issues, needs and demands of their society. Due to their experiences, knowledge and active participations they are taking an activist role in their communities.

While it could be difficult for teachers to fulfil all the expectations placed on them, there is always the possibility of having an ideal type of teacher who has high qualification and attempts to deal with such expectations. Teachers, as trained professionals, support their students in developing their academic skills. They, as reading and writing intellectuals, are also supposed to critically view what is happening in their classroom, school and society at large. As members of their community, they understand the basic problems of the neighbourhoods they live in. When they are standing as activists within their community and demanding improvement, they are doing in practice what they are teaching their students about.

This study investigates how teachers prepare themselves to play their diverse role in ultimately developing their students' critical thinking through dialogic methods. It focusses on how teachers help their students understand the power relations in their society, the injustice that some sectors of society experience and how to work to gradually transform society for the better. The emphasis is on teachers as subjects and their role in preparing "critical citizens" (Moyo, 2013) who will promote democracy and social justice.

2. Theoretical Approach Theoretical Approach

My attempt to understand the role of teachers is inspired by critical pedagogy, which views teaching as a relational approach (Smyth, Down, McInerney, & Hattam, 2014). Teachers who believe in teaching as a relational approach, work together with their students as partners in developing knowledge in their classrooms. They create interest within their students about the topic they are discussing; they are willing to both teach and learn (Freire, 1970).

These teachers raise issues through "generative themes" (Freire, 1970) that are relevant for school subjects, for pupils' day-to-day life and for society at large. By using a "dialogic method" (Freire, 1970; Shor & Freire, 1987), these teachers gradually approach the issues from different angles and this enables them to critically scrutinize the theme along with their students

Teachers who are willing to give space to their students and encourage them to be critical-thinking citizens are considered "problem-posing educators" (Freire, 1970) and "radical teachers" (Giroux, 1983). According to Freire (1970), these teachers recognize the roles of "teacher-student" and "student-teacher"; they teach their students, but they also learn from their students' reflections and life experiences. These teachers go beyond teaching subjects; they also promote democracy and social justice.

Critical pedagogy emphasises teachers' roles as intellectuals. In this perspective, teachers are considered as both "public intellectuals" (Giroux, 2011) and "transformative intellectuals" (Giroux 1988). These teachers are concerned not only with their work in their classrooms with their students but also with understanding the society at large. They will seek knowledge about the needs and problems faced by their society. This knowledge will help them to get involved with others in solving certain problems and transforming their society for the better.

Teachers' work should not be considered as "instrumental and technical"; rather, it is intellectual work (Smyth, 2011). Teachers are supposed to undertake research on their areas of practice, to use relevant theories and, when necessary, to develop theories. Thus, teachers can play the role of critical intellectuals who are humble but who also strive to transform their society (Mayo, 2013).

Reasons for teachers' activism varies from case to case or context to context. As their pupils come from different classes of society and different neighbourhoods within society, committed teachers are interested in finding out about the communities from where their students come (Smyth, 2011) and work to improve the situation for their students and their communities. There are also cases where the teachers themselves belong to a marginalised group due to the social and economic position of their parents and have exposed to different types of discrimination. This previous experience of discrimination can lead some teachers to be activists (Collay, 2010; Kokka, 2018).

Teachers, by establishing a social network within the community, can participate in supporting the disadvantaged groups in society, with the goal of transforming certain situations. In some cases, teachers can be intensely and widely involved in the cases they are sympathetic towards. Due to this ability, teachers need to proceed with all necessary caution and not try to take over the struggle of these groups and thereby suffocate the voices of these disadvantaged groups (Smyth, Down, McInerney, & Hattam, 2014).

3. Review of Relevant Literature

I reviewed literature that addresses the different roles of teachers, including that describes teachers as facilitators, partners and mentors in the process of developing their students into future critical-thinking citizens. This literature comprises studies about teachers who are both fulfilling their obligations as teachers and showing their willingness to learn from their students (Freire, 1970). Some of the literature emphasized on teachers practice and theories relevant for further developing their work. The review used studies which show that teachers are not passive technicians; rather, they are creative and active thinkers and professionals (Giroux, 2011; Smyth, Down, McInerney, & Hattam, 2014). There are also studies that portrayed teachers standing against both measures taken to weaken education systems and the injustice in their society. In some of the texts, these teachers are regarded as agents of transformation (Montano, Lopez-Torres, DeLissovoy, Pacheco, & Stillman, 2002).

Experiences of critical pedagogues were assessed to understand the roles these teachers play in different context. Through their lectures, writings and actions, these teachers inspire their colleagues

and their students. They also work to develop a critical understanding of the educational system in their own context and their society at large (Giroux, 1983).

The authors of the articles and books used in their writings their long-term experiences as teachers and researchers. Based on empirical studies, some of them wrote about how they and/or their colleagues have used certain critical methods to create awareness about the power relations and injustice in society (Smyth, Down, McInerney, & Hattam, 2014). Some of the literature provided good examples of how students are encouraged to investigate beyond the limited information provided by the mass media and other official channels. There are also cases discussed where students are encouraged in self-reflection and in digging deep into the injustice in their society (Smyth, 2011; Mayo, 2013).

Teachers as Pedagogues

To be employed as a qualified teacher, for example in Sweden, one needs to complete a degree program in teacher education, apply for formal certification and obtain the certificate from National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2020). The knowledge gleaned from a formal education and practical experiences through work provides teachers with what they need to play their role as pedagogues. They need content and method knowledge to be able to share their knowledge and experiences with their students. They need to know what to teach, how to teach and why they are teaching a specific subject and its content. Their knowledge and experiences even prepare them for how to take care of their students and to organize them in groups to work together, learn from each other and think together to solve problems.

One of the major roles of the teacher as a pedagogue is to encourage, facilitate and train their students to gain critical-thinking skills. I would like to give two examples from the literature I reviewed. The first concerns an American high school teacher who brought a leather soccer ball into the classroom and put it in front of his global studies students. He asked them to write what they considered important about the ball; he told them that they were allowed to go closer to it, to touch it and to examine it as they wanted. The students examined the ball and wrote about it from different perspectives, but they missed the text in small letters on the ball that stated that the ball was "Made in Pakistan." When the teacher showed them this text, the students started wondering why it was made in Pakistan, who produced it, what the working conditions were like for those who produced it, etc. This led the students to critically reflect and discuss issues related to materials produced abroad and the possible exploitative relations involved in this process (Smyth, 2011).

The second example concerns students from poor farmer families in the Tuscany region of Italy. Their teacher, Don Lorenzo Milani, helped them to be aware of their underclass non-privileged position and how it reflected in their education and school condition. Eight students from this school, the Barbiana school, wrote a book titled *Letter to a Teacher (Lettera)*. In their book, they criticized both the school system for failing them and the privilege that middle-class children received at their expense (Mayo, 2013).

In these two examples, the teachers helped their students to see beyond the academic subjects discussed in the class they were teaching. They opened their students' eyes to the complex relations between the powerful and the dominated. In the first case, the teacher helped his students question the possible exploitative relations between poor Pakistani labourers who produce sports balls and consumers in the US. In the second case, the teacher helped his students understand the class-based relations in their community.

When it is appropriate teachers could include the creation of a systematic awareness among students about what is experienced and defined as injustice and inequality within their context. Such teachers are expected to reveal a hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968/1990), where children from different groups in society obtain different qualities of education. In general, these teachers need to create awareness among their students regarding hierarchical relationships in their societies.

Teachers as Intellectuals

Due to their nature, some professions are classified as intellectuals; this includes the teaching profession. In his prison notebooks written between 1930-32 and edited and translated by Buttigieg (2011) among others, Gramsci includes in the intellectual category priests, lawyers, notary, doctors and teachers. He considers as having high intellectual quality those working as "creators" in various fields. This quality includes, at a minimum, being humble as "administrators and disseminators" of the intellectual wealth of their tradition and their solidarity with those they represent.

Gramsci further classifies intellectuals in two major groups: traditional and organic. The traditional intellectuals represent the hegemonic group and would like to keep the status quo in the society, while organic intellectuals are those who represent social groups; they work to create homogeneity and raise consciousness in the group (Gramsci, 1930-1932, edit. transl. Buttigieg, 2011). The two categories stand separately; the traditional intellectuals stand for maintaining the norms and values that an academician should be neutral and should not ally with any group, while the organic intellectuals strive for improving and transforming the existing reality within their profession and the society at large (Giroux, 1988; Yogy & Michaeli, 2011; Muff & Bekerman, 2019).

Traditional intellectuals mainly focus on keeping the status quo and emphasize reproducing the existing knowledge. On the other hand, the organic intellectuals will attempt to understand the existence of a hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968/1990) and how the related advantages and disadvantages impact different group of students. These intellectuals will even work to understand how the education system is organized to reproduce the culture of the dominant groups in the society (Bourdieu & Passon, 1990). Furthermore, they will work on finding out how the system is facilitating the maintenance of the existing class system by preparing students from disadvantaged groups to follow in their parents' footsteps and enter a labour market consisting of low-income and low-status work (Willis, 1981).

Traditional elites deny the intellectual role of teachers and would like to keep this role for themselves. They support and are supported by a neoliberals that would like to reduce teachers to technicians who will do what they are told to do (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015; Hardy, Rönnerman, & Beach,

2019). This is a rejection of a teachers' role as intellectuals who will strive to transform society towards gaining social justice for the underprivileged and deprived sectors of society (Apple, 2013; Kohli, Picower, Martinez & Ortiz, 2015; Yogve & Michaeli, 2011).

Giroux writes against reducing teachers to mere "technicians and corporate pawns" as follows:

...A critical pedagogy should, in part, be premised on the assumption that educators vigorously resist any attempt on the part of liberals and conservatives to reduce their role in schools to either that of technicians or corporate pawns. Instead, progressive educators might redefine their roles as engaged public intellectuals capable of teaching students the language of critique and possibility as a precondition for social agency. Such a redefinition of purpose, meaning, and politics suggests that educators critically interrogate the fundamental links between knowledge and power, pedagogical practices and social consequences, and authority and civic responsibility. (Giroux, 2004, 40).

From this quotation, it is possible to understand that teachers have their own agency and also prepare their students to be capable of building their own "social agency". It is the part of the intellectual role of the teacher (educator) to prepare students to be critical-thinking citizens, as well as to investigate the relationships between education, power, pedagogical practices and their consequences. Teachers are intellectuals who problematize and raise questions about the issues relevant for their societies (Foucault, 2000). For Kincheloe, teachers are intellectual workers who are producing knowledge and working towards their own development (Kincheloe, 2004).

Intellectual teachers do more than teach a given subject matter; they motivate their students to understand situations in society at large (Picower, 2013; Listen & Zeichner, 1987). These teachers have a deep general knowledge about what is happening in the world, as well as about the historical, economic, political and social realities of their society. They acquire this knowledge by reading, following local media and through direct communication with members of their communities. While sharing their experiences and knowledge, they also encourage their students to investigate by themselves and to make determinations about the power relations and injustice in their community and the needs of their society, which these students might in the future be working to resolve.

Teachers as intellectuals work at different levels. As individuals, they are increasing their knowledge to be competent teachers and citizens. In their role as teachers, they are sharing their deep knowledge with their students and helping them to be capable of investigating reality and to reach conclusions with a deeper understanding of the phenomena they are gaining knowledge about.

Teachers as Activists

It is becoming common in many countries to see demonstrations that demand change. Some of these protests are against undemocratic systems, social injustice or violence that people experience in their daily life. The protests against climate change that is leading to global warming has been gaining ground in recent years. A large number of young activists, such as the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg, are involved in climate-related protests (Jung, Petkanic, Nan, & Kim, 2020).

An activist teacher is a teacher who is not only concerned with what happens in the classroom but also thinks beyond and is willing to contribute to the struggle for justice in the larger society. Picower writes, “Teacher activism can be defined as educators who work for social justice both inside and outside of their classrooms (NYCoRE, 2003)” (Picower, 2012, 562). The NYCoRE (New York Collective of Radical Educators) defines teacher activism further by explaining their activist mission as follows: “We are educators who believe that education is an integral part of social change and that we must work both inside and outside the classroom because the struggle for justice does not end when the school bell rings” (NYCoRE, accessed 2020).

An example of the activist role of a teacher is given in an article by Perumal (2016) as follows:

Current educational policies recast teachers as transformative intellectuals tasked with promoting the constitutional values of the South African rainbow nation, as opposed to being state functionaries. This requires them to champion the values of deep democracy, social justice and equity, non-racism and non-sexism, ubuntu (human dignity), an open society, accountability (responsibility), respect, the rule of law, and reconciliation (Perumal, 2016, 747).

Here, expectation to “promote the constitutional values” by teachers refers to the post-apartheid South African context. Teachers in other contexts could also “champion” values recommended in the quotation above. At the same time, they are not expected to adhere to norms and values that they consider violate citizens’ rights, they rather could challenge it by standing with their society.

The reasons that teachers to decide to be activists could vary from case to case. Some teachers decide to be activists due to their own life experiences with being discriminated against and marginalized as youths and students (Collay, 2010; Kokka, 2018). In other cases, teachers’ knowledge and the experiences of the students who come to their classroom/school from marginalized communities influence their decisions to become activists.

While it takes effort for teachers to be connected to partners outside the school who are working against injustice in different ways, engagement as activists will benefit not only the marginalized groups they want to support but also themselves in their role as teachers and teachers who believe in “democratic professionalism” (Sachs, 2000). This connection gives these teachers the opportunity to work with their students, the parents of their students, activist organizations, local communities, politicians and other decision makers. In this process, teachers can gain relevant organizing skills, and they also have the opportunity to relate their lessons to the realities of their society at large (Montaño et al., 2002).

Due to the neoliberal policies in many countries, schools are receiving fewer materials and manpower resources (Giroux & Filippakou, 2020; Hill, 2006). This is usually caused by miscalculated economic development policies that emphasize saving resources by allocating fewer resources or reducing budgets for the welfare sector to invest in the economic sector, instead of keeping a balance between these two important sectors that are relevant for society.

A lack of sufficient resources could usually lead to teacher unemployment and a reduced quality of education. Also, it is not unusual in some privately-owned schools to have few teachers from the

beginning or to reduce the number of teachers gradually to maximize the profit without due concern for the effects on both students and teachers. In addition to the shortage of materials and manpower resources, there are educational policies that put both teachers and students in disadvantaged positions. In such situations, activist teachers are vanguards in coordinating and leading protests against decision makers.

Teachers work with children who come from different socio-economic backgrounds. Some of these schools are located in the middle of the disadvantaged communities from where both students and teachers come. Knowledge about and experiences of difficulties in these communities encourage some teachers to be activists within their community and “speak back to power” (Smyth, Down, McInerney, & Hattam, 2014) by standing with their community.

According to Giroux, “... radical teachers will have to establish organic connection with those excluded majorities who inhabit the neighbourhoods, towns, and cities in which schools are located...” (Giroux, 1983, 237). The activist teachers Giroux referred to as “radical teachers” work with different interest groups with the aim of ameliorating the problems of their community. These activist teachers serve as bridges between their classrooms/schools and the larger society. They understand and believe in the importance of fighting for a just society. Both as teachers and citizens are role models for their students (Wieder & Soudien, 2006).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The literature used for this article rejects teachers’ prescribed role as passive technicians who accept policies and other directives and implement them just as they are (Kincheloe, 2008; Giroux, 2004). Rather, they are active subjects with agency ((Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). They think and act consciously in accordance with their reality and their working context.

As pedagogues, teachers are supposed to be more than academic subject experts who reproduce existing knowledge through their students. They are supposed to make their students become aware of the current situations within society. This role includes initiating their students to think critically and beyond the reality of the classroom (Smyth, 2011; Mayo, 2013).

Teachers are among the intellectuals in society, and as organic intellectuals, are considered progressive forces standing for change (Gramsci, 1930-1932, edit. transl. Buttigieg, 2011). For Giroux, these progressive teachers stand with the “excluded majorities” and would like to change the suffering of people into better lives; due to these roles, he describes these teachers as “public” and “transformative” intellectuals (Giroux, 1983, 1988, 2011; Perumal, 2016).

As activists, teachers are expected to understand their surroundings, the local community and society at large (Giroux, 1983). An activist role is a voluntary and teachers choose the activist role due to their own experiences with discrimination, their students’ life experiences or their own general knowledge about society (Collay, 2010; Kokka, 2018). They are working to alleviate the problems that their societies are facing and to deepen the democratic process within their context (Perumal, 2016).

Along with the above-mentioned roles, Biesta (2011) includes providing academic knowledge and skill, supporting students in the socialization process and preparing them as independent motivated persons who take initiative for actions among the roles that teachers are expected to play; for playing these roles, teachers can gain beneficial ideas from critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970). Critical pedagogy recommends that a teacher should avoid being an authoritarian and should consider her/his students as partners in the teaching and learning process. It also encourages teachers to decide on themes for discussion together with their students, to take a dialogical approach in their discussion of the themes, to identify problems and to reach solutions for working together to transform the situation for the better.

While thinking about the different roles of the teacher, it is not difficult to find a narrow-minded academic and political elite that would like to limit the role of teachers (Kincheloe, 2008; Giroux, 2004; Hardy, Rönnerman, & Beach, 2019). According to these elites, a teacher should function an authoritarian and a source of knowledge, and their main role should be to transmit knowledge to her/his students.

The motives for such a view could be reactionary conservatism or naive narrow mindedness. Naive narrow-minded individuals think that a teacher's role is limited to pedagogic work and that they have no time or obligation to do anything outside the given local curriculum. On the other hand, reactionary conservatives think that teachers should not engage in politics and that school should be a platform only for transmitting knowledge by teachers to their students, i.e., the knowledge inherited through generations. These are traditional intellectuals (Gramsci, 1930-1932, edit. transl. Buttigieg, 2011) who think that transforming society is not their main concern and that they should not involve in a politics that could disturb the status quo (Giroux, 1988).

As teachers belong to different classes and interest groups and have different ideological convictions, they have diverse views on what is going on in their society and what the future should look like. Teachers with critical orientations are interested in the change and development of their societies (Apple, 2013; Giroux, 2004). In many countries, teachers are part of the progressive and forward-looking groups. This could be due to their day-to-day experiences or their confrontations with the reality of their students' lives in their classrooms. Understanding the injustice in their community through their own or through their students' experiences motivates them to be a part of the struggle to transform society.

To play their multidimensional roles, teachers need preparation before they start to serve in schools. While training as teachers to legitimize their pedagogical role, teacher students need to refresh their knowledge through job training and by following developments in the field through different media. By engaging in research, reading research results and participating in knowledge-based discussions, these teachers have the possibility of developing their intellectual role. As members of their society and local community through their contact with the parents of their students, by following the different mass media and by attending different meetings, these teachers can obtain first-hand experiences and

knowledge about the problems facing their local community and their society at large. This knowledge and experience will help them to play their role as activists to transform their community and society (Giroux, 1983, 1988, 2011).

In today's general reality, the dominant discourse is neoliberal in nature and the new form of public management is interfering (Hill, 2006) in the welfare sector to limit resources and to apply strict control in all social sectors of society. This is also true for schools. Beyond limiting the number of general materials and manpower resources, schools are systematically controlled regarding what knowledge they can give their students, how many students they should have in each class, how many resources they should utilize on what subject, what subjects to prioritize over the others, which subject content should be prioritized over citizenship orientation and what focus should be placed on the results of examinations. Due to the policies on reducing costs in the welfare sectors, teachers are dealing with a large number of students per person and per class room with meagre resources, and they are also burdened with administrative functions.

While recognizing all the obstacles they are facing, it is still necessary that teachers strive to play their different roles. An ideal critical and progressive teacher is a teacher who attempts to fulfil his or her pedagogical, intellectual and activist roles.

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