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Original Article

Touching the Lives of Learners from Head to Soul: An Autoethnographic Reflections

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Abstract

Teaching has become one of the most complex professions globally due to the need for learners in the changing world. The current need of learners is focused on developing 21st-century skills rather than rote memorizing. However, in the case of Nepal, the pedagogical practice is still dominated by a teacher-centric approach focused on technical interests (For example, the Banking model, lecture method, and one-size-fits-all) in most schools. Thus, making learners passive and disengaged in the learning process. Hence, this paper aims to advocate for a shift in the pedagogical practices from technical to critical. Using autoethnography, I critically reflected on my 17 years of experience in education as a teacher, teacher educator, and school leader through the lens of Habermas' theory of human interest and Mezirow's transformative learning theory. My story is characterized by perseverance, self-realization, and transformation as I began to play the role of a change agent to advocate critical pedagogy. I have presented my stories in three sections with some art integration (Poem): 1. How I became a teacher, and what kept me going? 2. What poked me to change my despotic teaching self? 3. Why and how am I advocating critical pedagogy? This study recommends that all teachers and educators critically reflect on their practices to transform their pedagogical practices from teacher-centric to learner-centric and create a holistic learning environment.

Keywords: *Critical Self-reflection. Transformative Teacher. Autoethnography. Reflection.*

Introduction

गुरू ब्रह्मा गुरू विष्णु, गुरु देवो महेश्वरा गुरु साक्षात परब्रह्म, तस्मै श्री गुरुवे नमः (Teacher is Lord Brahma, the creator, teacher is lord Bishnu, the preserver, teacher is lord Shiva, the destroyer, teacher is the supreme god, ….) This is a famous slogan used in Hinduism.

> *I grew up in a country where teachers were regarded as images of gods/goddesses, believing that they enlighten our path in life. Our parents always taught us to respect our teachers and obey them no matter what they did. Teaching was considered the most honorable job then, and people respected teachers above all. This became a deep-rooted ideology in learners, including me. I never questioned or complained against my teachers, thinking whatever they did was right and for our good. Guided by the teacher-centric pedagogy, I learned and replicated the same when I became a teacher until something struck and changed me….*

Drawing from nearly twenty years of experience in Nepal's education sector, this autoethnographic exploration is fueled by resilience, self-discovery, and growth. It also bridges my academic background and the schools I attended in India with my current professional practice in Nepal. While reflecting on my journey as a learner, educator, leader, and change agent, I explored the beads of pedagogical practices that shaped my thoughts and actions through the lens of critical pedagogy. I kept engaging in critical discourse through continued higher education, such as a master's in education (M Ed) and a master's in philosophy (MPhil). It pushed me to reflect on my experience as a learner and educator, arousing my critical consciousness. I have presented my critical reflection in the form of stories in three sections with some art integration (Poem): 1. How I became a teacher, and what kept me going? 2. What poked me to change my despotic teaching self? 3. Why and how do I advocate critical pedagogy? Thus, my study examines my transition from a conventional teacher to a transformative educator and leader. The central research inquiries explore the evolution of my teaching journey over time and the factors that facilitated this transformation.

My Teaching Journey

> *When I started teaching as a career,*
> *I taught in the same way as my teachers taught me,*
> *Where books and notes were our only learning resources,*
> *And teachers had the chalks and talks.*
>> *Learning was confined to the books and the rooms,*
>> *Nothing creative was allowed to come out of the box,*
>> *Rote memorizing was the only solution,*
>> *As exams were tough to get promotions.*
> *I had a stick, book, and pen in my hand,*
> *As that was the signature of the teacher, behold,*
> *Teaching was all about finishing the content on time,*
> *No matter what the student learned.*
>> *Little did I know,*
>> *Learning could be meaningful and fun as well,*
>> *By engaging the learners in the learning process,*
>> *Until I joined MEd at KUSOED.*

Teaching as an Option, Adaption and Transformation

I started teaching in 2006 after completing my degree in commerce (Hons) from Mizoram University. I came to Nepal, my hometown, to do something for my country and people. But unfortunately, there wasn't much choice in my hometown. I was new to the place, people, culture, and traditions, so I had difficulties adjusting and building networks for a few months. Additionally, none of my family were highly educated or in a position that could guide me. So, I grabbed the first opportunity I got, which was office assistant cum hostel warden. However, teaching as a profession wasn't my first career choice, as I had a commerce background with distinction in accountancy. I instead wanted to be a banker or a corporate house employee.

My Indian qualification gave me an advantage over other applicants as the school founders believed the Indian education system was better than Nepal's. Literature reveals that Nepalese parents believe that Indian teachers have better English language proficiency, so they prefer private schools with Indian teachers to ones with local teachers (Caddell, 2006; Phyak, 2016). And yes, the trend in Nepal was to hire teachers from India to teach in Nepali private schools to attract the parents as they had good English. That was how I initially started working as an office assistant and substitute teacher.

Without pre-service teacher training or experience, I started working in a school with a diverse community of 1200 students and nearly 100 teachers. The famous philosopher Jean Piaget argues that learners construct their knowledge through their own experience of the environment. Similarly, Pant (2017) also argues that teaching is a replicating process. They teach their students as their teachers taught them. I also imitated my teachers' traditional teaching style, thinking that Indian teaching styles were superior to Nepal's. Guided by the behaviorist theory, we were taught in a conventional way of teaching-learning by applying the banking model (Freire, 1970). It was primarily based on textbooks, lecture methods, question answers, and rote memorization. The teachers punished us with a stick if we failed to answer their questions. And if we responded that we didn't understand what they taught, they would scold us, saying where our attention was when they were teaching in the class. Nobody ever complained about the teachers; we accepted that that was the only way to learn, and it was our fault if we didn't understand. That was how I learned, and that was how I started teaching, too. I taught English and Health & Physical to grade two. My pedagogical practices were mostly about reading lessons from the book, asking learners to underline difficult words, dictating vocabulary from the lesson, asking a few questions, giving a question and answer, and asking children to copy and learn the lesson. I was a strict teacher and administrator, which I believed was crucial to maintaining discipline in class and school. Until seven years of service in my previous school, I didn't change much in teaching and dealing with the children except that corporal punishment was banned as the parents became aware and complained against corporal punishment. So, I converted the corporate punishment to academic punishment, making them write five times, ten times, twenty times, etc.

After coming to Kathmandu, I joined an M.Ed. in Leadership and Management at Kathmandu University School of Education for professional development and better opportunities. Throughout the study period, as I reflected on my experience as a learner and teacher, I started realizing the need to change my perception towards teaching learning because I could see myself in the little children and how our traditional way of teaching kills their creativity. Meanwhile, I also got an opportunity to work as a preschool head, which supported the practical skills I learned at the university. While doing so, I fell in love with my own passion for children, education, my community, and nation and being an agent of the change maker; I began thinking and acting how I could help my children in real-world problem solving rather than just engaging in rote memorizing, how I could make learning more exciting, fun, conceptual and practical in real life context. I continued my education in STEAM to understand further the philosophies of education, curriculum, and pedagogies that support meaningful and

authentic learning of the learners and enable them to develop their 21st-century skills like critical thinking, creative thinking, problem solving, collaborative skills, etc. Through this program, I became critically conscious of the gaps in our curriculum and pedagogies. So, I decided to explore more through research and contribute to the larger education community to make our education more inclusive, value and skill-orientated. For that, I have joined MPhil in STEAM.

Transformative Learning Theory as a Theoretical Referent

I often questioned myself about the purpose of being an educator;

> *"Why am I in the educational field?' Why was there any need to change myself? 'Have I been able to address the needs of the learners as an educator?' How can I improve my school's curriculum and pedagogies so learners can be engaged meaningfully?' 'How can I make my school more inclusive?' 'What is the purpose of education if it is not linked to real life?"* (Sunar, 2022, p. 337, conference proceedings)

These thoughtful inquiries led me to explore transformative learning theory. According to Jack Mezirow, this theory emphasizes critical reflection, creative problem-solving, and learner-centered discourse (Mezirow,1997). It encourages educators to engage in participatory and interactive teaching, fostering a shift from passive receptivity to empowered thinking. This autoethnographic inquiry portrays my journey, which has evolved with time, raising critical consciousness and working as a change agent in the education sector. Similarly, Boyd defines transformation as "a fundamental change in one's personality involving conjointly the resolution of a personal dilemma and the expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration" (p. 459, as cited in Boyd, 2003). Likewise, Luitel and Taylor (2006) argue that transformative learning empowers learners by increasing their engagement and awareness, moving them from inactive and disempowered roles to liberated, critical thinkers.

Research Methodology

In this qualitative study, I aim to critically reflect on my learning and serving experiences as an educator by subscribing to autoethnography as a research methodology. According to Adam et al. (2017), "Autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience ("auto") to describe and interpret ("graphy") cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ("ethno")." (p. 1). It involves deep self-reflection and aims to explore intersections between self, society, and education. Autoethnographic storytelling has further related and important functions. It can be therapeutic for the storyteller to work through difficult times, events and issues in his/her own life in the development of a preferred identity (Grant & Zeeman, 2012). As an autoethnographer, I am both a researcher and a participant, drawing the data from my experiences as a learner, teacher, and leader using a reflective journal and healing my previous self through self-confession and transformation. I am describing and interpreting educational culture, beliefs, and practices in the context of Nepal. In summary, my study combines personal experience, critical reflection, and cultural interpretation to explore educational contexts in Nepal and India. Autoethnography allows researchers to delve into their journey as an educator, rethinking values, assumptions, and beliefs (Ellis et al., 2011; Ellis & Adams, 2014).

In this study, I am applying multi-paradigm as mentioned by Taylor and Medina (2011) by drawing on various paradigms; educational researchers can significantly contribute to aligning curricula, teacher education, and pedagogical practices with the multifaceted needs of the 21st century. I have applied a multi-paradigm, which includes interpretivism as I will be

interpreting my experiences, criticalism as I am also looking into the critical component of justice to learners, and post-modern as I am using poems and vignettes to portray my experiences of being, becoming, and transforming educator and leader.

Culture of Threatening Pedagogy and Rote Learning

The queries that rooted threatening pedagogy

> *Did you do your homework?*
> *Why didn't you bring your book?*
> *What were you doing when I was teaching the lesson?*
> *Should I complain to the principal?*
> *Should I complain to your parents?*

In the past, I would walk into the classroom with a book, red pen, duster, and scale in hand. The students would greet me with a cheerful, 'Good morning, ma'am,' and I would respond with a warm 'Good morning, class.' 'Did you do your homework?' was the first question every time I began the class. If they said no or made excuses, I used to punish them either by heating with the scale or sometimes making them *'Uth bas'* (Stand and seat) 50 times. After that, I asked them to take out their books and turn to the specified page, and I'd scan the room to ensure everyone had their materials. If I noticed a student without a book, I'd ask why. Often, their response would be, 'I forgot, ma'am.' In such cases, I would use the scale I carried to discipline them. My philosophy behind this punishment was that it would encourage greater care in remembering their books next time. Then, I'd proceed to have them read the lesson one by one. When asked if they understood the content taught, they said yes, ma'am, but when I took the test, some of them were unable to tell the answer, and I used to scold them for not paying attention in class. Classroom instruction was limited to reading, writing, spelling tests, homework, revision, and exams. These were routines that I followed every day in the class.

Today, I questioned myself, "Why did I punish the children for not bringing their books and doing their homework?" Why didn't I reflect on my own experience of why we used to lie to our teachers, saying we didn't bring our books? As I reflect today, I feel sad to have left the wrong impression on children from this school. I blame myself for not being able to value their voice and interest, instead pushing them for rote memorization and number games. I realized that throughout my initial teaching career, I followed behaviorist theory (Stewart, 2021), where I believed that learning is all about developing cognitive skills and happens through practice and repetition. However, learning was not just about repeating and memorizing but rather understanding and conceptualizing through active participation.

The Beginning of Changing Perspective as an Educator and School Leader

Seven years later, I joined a master's in educational leadership and management at Kathmandu University School of Education, which was a turning point in my career. Within a few months of joining my master's program, I got a job offer and started working as a preschool head. During my study period, I came across many educational philosophies and started understanding how these philosophies supported student's learning, and my perception of educating and teaching learners started changing. From traditional book-based education and paper-based exams that determined learners' abilities, I started focusing on the active participation of the learners in classroom practices. I became familiar with the connection of head, heart, and hand to foster meaningful learning among learners. Literature supports the idea that the Head, Heart, and Hands (HHH) pedagogical approach to education is a holistic and

transformative method (Singleton, 2015; Virkkunen, 2021). They also argued that this approach emphasizes interconnectedness, engaging both body (Hands), intellect (Head), and emotions (Heart) to foster profound learning and meaning for students.

Moreover, my school learners were children of two to six years, making me calm and relaxed. I also attended many workshops and training sessions on progressive education, which helped me broaden my sense of quality education. I became soft and smiled more often when I saw the kids playing and jumping around. I began valuing kids' voices and interacting more often with them as I had learned that through social interaction and self-experience, learners construct a better understanding of the world.

My school's curriculum was well-researched, and we took the franchise of a pioneer international preschool curriculum provider, so I better understood what a child-centric curriculum meant and the benefit of its application. However, the issue was on the application part of the curriculum as the teachers were still practicing the traditional way of teaching, which focused on content, as most formal schools take entrance examinations to get enrolled. Though the pedagogical practices had more activities, they were more teacher-instructed, and learners used to follow them. Children were involved in the activity as the teachers directed and without actually letting them think and experiment on their own. Slowly, I started giving more in-service training to the teachers and interacted more with them regarding child-centric pedagogical practices like head, heart, and hand (HHH), why they are essential, and how we can engage the learners in the learning process for their holistic development. We started bringing more chances to our teaching and learning practices. More focus was given to children's readiness, interest, and learning profile while planning the lessons to meet individual needs. We started engaging the learners in play, hands-on activity, role play/ drama, music, storytelling, interaction, project-based learning, field trips, etc., to make learning more meaningful and fun. The focus of the curriculum was more on holistic development rather than content and marks. Everything was going smoothly; kids loved to come to school, parents were happy to see their children's progress, and investors were delighted to see the growth in the number of students.

At that time, a child from Singapore came and joined our school. He was physically fine and could talk in English however, he was moving here and there restlessly. My first thought was that the school environment in Singapore allows children to do free play and engage them in a play-based approach, so he was restless. Slowly, I realized that something was not entirely okay with him because he did not make friends and was stuck with only one person. He did not eat lunch at school but liked to eat crispy and junk food like biscuit chips and juice. At that time, I wasn't aware of the cognitive learning difficulties in children. Later, when I attended a training session, I got to know about ADHD and Autism and their symptoms in children. After this, I became more confident that the child needed some clinical support, so I requested the parent to get medical counseling help for him.

> *Me: Hello, ma'am, Namaste. Sanchai hunu huncha.* (How are you doing?)
> *Sudip's mom: Namaste, ma'am. Hajur ma thikai chu ma'am. Ani hajur lai kasto chaa ma'am.* (I am doing good, how about you, ma'am?)
> *Me: Ma pani sanchai chu ma'am.* (I am also doing good ma'am).
> *Sudip's mom: Hajur le babu ko bisai ma kehi bhannu cha bhannu bhayo, k hola ma'am.* (You wanted to say something about my child; what is it, ma'am?)
> *Me: Ma'am, hamile babu lai observe gare ko six months bhai sakyo, usko behavior ali farak khalko cha. Uh eklai basna maanparauncha, sathi haru sanga kheldaina, Class ma basna mandaina, classroom activities ma pani participate huna khojdaina ra khana pani khana mandaina. Usko umer ko bachcha haru khelna khana badi khojchan, sathi haru sanga guff garna ruchaunchan. Maile kehi din agadi auta training leko thiye ra*

bachcha haru ma esto samasya hune austim ko lakchan ho bhane thapaye. Feri hami le babu lai school ma rakhna sakdainau bhaneko haina baru uslai k samasya bhai rakhe cha tyo bujyobhani uslai madat hune gari hami sikchau. Mero anurod cha hajur lai ekchoti babu lai doctor ma lai janu hosh. (Ma'am, we have observed your baby for six months now; he behaves strangely, likes to stay alone, doesn't like to play with friends, and doesn't show any interest in classroom activities. At his age, children usually love to play with friends and chat with them. A few days ago, I attended training and got to know that these symptoms are of Autism. It's not that we don't want him to be in school, but we need to know his difficulties so that we can learn his ways of learning and help him. So, I request that you take him to a doctor. *Sudip's mom: Huncha ma'am. Ma babu lai ekchoti doctor ka ma laijanchu ni ani doctor le k bhannu huncha ma hajur lai khabar garchu* (Now, I will take him to the doctor, and let you know what he says).
Me: Hush ma'am, thank you (Sure, ma'am, thank you).

I felt sorry for Sudip's parents, but I was helpless. His parents took him to the doctor, and he was diagnosed with autism and ADHD symptoms and was suggested therapies. His mom took parent training on autism awareness and requested that we let her son continue regular school even after the therapy. At this time, I critically reflected on my actions and questioned myself, "Don't children with special needs deserve to be included in normal schools?" Then, I made a decision and agreed to support the child in every possible way, as I believed every child should have the right to quality education and a normal life. Moreover, by then, I started acknowledging the multiple intelligences in children; every child could learn if we provided a supportive environment. To make my school more inclusive and help children with Autism and ADHD, I and the grade teacher of that child took a 15-day teacher training program on Autism. This training helped us to be aware of the learning difficulties children with autism face and how we could create a supportive environment for them to learn in our school. My attitude towards teaching and learning changed, and I started believing and practicing that every child is unique and has the caliber to learn, grow, and succeed at their speed. I started attending more workshops on special child education and reading more papers on inclusive education and multiple intelligence. This expanded my horizon of making education inclusive to people in need.

Towards Becoming the Healing Educator (Building empathy among self and learners)

With continued education and professional development training on theories and pedagogical practices, I learned the true meaning of a constructivist classroom and the importance of the learner's active participation in the learning process. At the same time, I learned about integrated ways of learning through multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approaches. I also learned about multiple intelligences among kids and how it differs in each individual. I started focusing more on holistic development among learners. Additionally, while exploring STEM to STEAM through literature and classroom discussions, I realized the importance of ARTs integration in education and how it helps us to develop our ethical and moral values. According to Taylor and Taylor (2019), "The Arts focus uniquely on developing our creative abilities (ingenuity, imagination), our aesthetic appreciation (beauty, sentiment), our ethical values (virtues, human rights, social justice), and our rhetorical ability (expression, representation, persuasion)" (p. 4). Earlier, the critical aspects like, *'Why am I teaching?', 'Am I concerned about the learning interest of the children?', 'Do the learners benefit from what I am teaching? ' 'Am I preparing the learners to be real-world problem solvers?'* was missing in my pedagogical practices. Instead, I was more focused on the content 'What do I have to teach'

and 'How can I finish my course on time? ' Previously, the initial pedagogical practice was more teacher-centric and focused on content delivery and preparing for paper-based exams. Later, after doing MEd, I started implementing an activity-based approach and learning by doing pedagogy in my school, but still, that was more teacher-instructed. Do this, do that; all the worksheets were pre-planned. However, after attending STEAM education, I learned that it is through active participation, self-exploration, social interaction, and inquiry that the learners construct their understanding of the topic, as said by famous philosophers (Dewey, 1916 and Vygotsky, 1978). I critically started reflecting on my journey as a teacher/educator and now began valuing the learners' voices, interests, readiness, and needs. I started believing every child can learn, provided we work on their learning difficulties and develop differentiated learning strategies. *I have started questioning: Have my learners benefited from my teaching method? Why am I teaching them? What is the purpose of education if it is not connected to real-life situations?* The purpose of education should be to develop 21st-century skills among the learners to make them problem solvers. Nowadays, every Friday, when I sit with my teachers for weekly meetings and lesson plan sharing, I see the planning from the learners' perspective. I started focusing more on the learner's needs and interests and developing their problem-solving skills. Applying the STEAM approach, we integrated topics under themes, and learners were engaged in hands-on activities to make learning more experiential and conceptual. We take them out on theme-related field trips to connect what they have learned to real-life contexts. For example, they visit zoos to see different types of wild animals and birds under the fauna theme. Social interaction is essential for sharing and learning; children are now encouraged to interact often with teachers and peers. We have circle and peer interaction time and work collaboratively to create a meaning-centered learning environment in the classroom. This has made children more confident, expressive, creative, communicative, and knowledgeable.

Similarly, for children with Autism, I have been giving in-service training to my teachers so that they can understand the child's learning difficulties and plan and create a supportive environment for them to learn along with other kids. With the help of experts and therapists, I have also been organizing workshops for early childhood educators and leaders on awareness of Autism, the learning difficulties faced by children with Autism, and how to groom them as an independent individual. Children with Autism are not competing with the world but themselves; their learning is not just limited to academic achievements but rather doing little things independently to survive in the world. Likewise, children with Autism are also equally capable of learning if we provide them with a supportive environment. Furthermore, building empathy among other children is also equally important to make our world a better place for children with special needs. Thus advocating and developing socio-emotional intelligence among learners. As an educator and leader, I am working towards designing a more inclusive school with a supportive environment for needy children and applying differentiated learning approaches, including project-based learning, role plays, musical rhymes, play, inquiry-based approaches, and activity-based learning (to name but a few).

Final Thoughts

"Transformative education plays a central role in the articulation of a pedagogy of movement." Gardner, 2008, p.23). Although I initially chose teaching as my career, my journey in education transformed me into a learner, educator, leader, and human. Despite lacking teaching experience, my academic success as a top student gave me hope that I could be a good teacher. Similarly, Pant (2017) faced a similar dilemma, believing he could teach due to his problem-solving abilities but doubting himself due to lack of teaching experience. As a novice teacher, I followed my predecessors' traditional methods, resulting in passive student learning. Many

educators share this story, as there was no formal teacher training system. Teaching was often seen as an option rather than a deliberate choice, leading to frustration and ineffective teaching practices. Reflecting on my own experience, I now understand that learning is not merely a behavior; it involves understanding, application, and real-life context. Behaviorism, prevalent in many schools, has limitations in promoting meaningful learning. Transformative learning empowers learners to challenge established ideas and engage through participation and experience.

The paper also emphasizes that behavior and attitude can change over time, but learning is not a behavior. Instead, learning is connected to understanding, application, and real-life experiences. Behaviorists believe in the possibility of a science of behavior. Their theory suggests that behaviors are learned through reinforcement. However, this approach has limitations when it comes to promoting meaningful learning in a constructivist classroom. Despite this, behaviorism has been widely practiced in schools, dominating curriculum and pedagogy through traditional teaching that often involves physical punishment. Therefore, there is a strong need to advocate for transformative learning approaches that empower learners to challenge established ideas. Reflecting on personal experience, the author realizes that every child has the potential to learn in a supportive environment, and true learning occurs through participation, experiencing, conceptualizing, and applying their skills in the real world. During my studies at Kathmandu University School of Education, I discovered that meaningful learning occurs when learners engage in authentic tasks within a social and collaborative context. Guided by constructivist theory, I've implemented a thematic approach that fosters integration, active participation, communication, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Inclusive education, which ensures equal opportunities for all learners, emphasizes the right to quality education regardless of individual differences. Teachers play a crucial role in supporting differentiated learning strategies and building holistic development among learners.

Through critical self-reflection, realization, and action, I recognized my mistakes in punishing children and embraced a transformative journey. As a privileged individual, I shifted from a despotic teacher to a compassionate healer (Sunar, 2022). Mezirow (1991) describes transformative learning as a process that challenges our assumptions, making them more inclusive, discerning, emotionally open, and reflective. This personal evolution has brought me inner peace, satisfaction, and the determination to enhance meaningful and joyful learning experiences for students. I aspire to contribute to Nepal's education sector through further research and positive change.

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