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## Investigating Teachers' Practices of Critical Pedagogy: A Phenomenological Study

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the practice of critical pedagogy to enhance quality teaching in social sciences classrooms. To achieve this purpose, a phenomenological approach was employed. Tana Hayk Preparatory School which is found in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia was chosen using simple random sampling technique. Using lottery method, ten participants were selected from 5 departments which were taken using convenient sampling technique. An in-depth interview was employed to collect rich data. The results were analyzed through thematic analysis technique using interpretations and direct quotations. The findings of the study, therefore, revealed that teachers limit the students to bring their personal experiences to the class. It also revealed that there is top-down power relationships between the teacher and students wherein students are regarded as the only knowledge receivers from the teacher who is regarded as all-knower. Moreover, the finding showed that the banking model of education still exists in the teachers' classrooms. In addition, teachers seemed to accept the idea that the primary purpose of education is to transform the society into one that is more socially just; however, they were not in a position to ground these issues in their classroom. Thus, it is suggested that teachers should value the basic tenets of critical pedagogy in their teaching. It is also recommended that the school principals should prepare training sessions whereby teachers can integrate the masterpieces of critical pedagogy in their classroom teaching.

**Keywords:** quality teaching, critical pedagogy, phenomenology, Paulo Freire

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## **Introduction**

Most can agree that the goal of education for a student is to achieve academic success; however, definitions of 'academic success' vary greatly. According to scholars from critical pedagogy, the goal of academic success for each student is to be active citizens in a fully democratic society. The purpose of education, in this regard, is for social transformation toward a fully democratic society (Freire,1970), where each voice is equally shared and heard, where one critically examines oneself and one's society, and where one acts upon diminishing social injustices. Teachers, therefore, are faced with exciting yet daunting challenges to prepare students toward successful academic achievement and to prepare themselves to actively challenge existing social injustices. This paper, therefore, deals with the practices of critical pedagogy by social science teachers based on the features of critical pedagogy described by Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed'.

Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, the originating, most popular text of critical pedagogy, appeared in 1970, and it embarks from a criticism of the conventional pedagogy and its optimism about formal education's progressive contribution to social change. Freire sets out from the assumption that the dominated have internalized their oppression, and that this domination is reinforced through a 'banking' system of education in which teachers pour knowledge into the supposedly empty brains of their students. There is, however, an alternative pedagogy, Freire (1970) argues, based on dialogue between teachers and taught around problems originating with the student. This requires working with students outside of formal education, bringing education to their communities, neighborhoods, and villages.

Scholars working within the tradition of critical pedagogy have identified several disciplinary practices within the classroom that contribute to the reproduction process. For example, Apple (2002) points to the existence of a hidden curriculum whereby students are socialized and behaviorally conditioned to accept hierarchical structures of power, and Shor (1992) describes the authoritarian classroom where students are conditioned to become passive, conformist, and obedient members of society, thus generating easily manipulated workers and passive, apathetic citizens. Reproduction also occurs when teachers promote a set of cultural ideologies that serve to legitimate existing class dominance. In addition to advancing consent through discipline, curriculum, and ideological content, schools also reproduce the established social order by omitting certain forms of knowledge including serious analyses of inequality, oppression, exploitation, imperialism, revolution, class struggle, and labor movements that might raise critical questions about capitalism (Apple, 1990). Thus, from a critical pedagogical perspective a successful education system will not only resist forms of capitalist reproduction but will necessarily take positive steps to facilitate social change by promoting the development of a counter hegemony. This would include theories, practices (praxis), values, morality, and an overall culture that acts as critique and negation of corporate, capitalist hegemony (Shor, 1992).

Critical pedagogy, in general, attempts social reformation. In other words, based on critical pedagogy, schools should be considered as places for social change and evolution. Schools should not only foster critical thinking to the students, but they should also teach them how to change their surrounding environments. According to Freire (1970), the purpose of critical pedagogy is, thus, to enrich students' overall life.

In such an approach, students are given the chance to challenge others' accepted hypotheses and also to explore the relationship between their society and the content of their educational environment. Through these opportunities' students can comprehend their position in the society and they can take positive steps to amend their society and ultimately eliminate problems, inequities and oppressions in their future life. Likewise, critical pedagogy helps students be empowered with and capable of achieving self-awareness and self-actualization to transform their inappropriate conditions into a better one. For this purpose, traditional methods of education are challenged, and critical thinking-based education and dialogue and learning-based cooperation education will be replaced with the traditional methods.

### **Rationale**

There were three reasons that pushed me to conduct this study. First, the experience I come across as a student and a teacher tells me that teachers are regarded as powerful agents who usually control the classroom situation where students are sitting to receive what the teacher and what the course book (textbook) declares. Second, experience has also been a witness that university graduates are found to be incompetent in their respective disciplines, and this has always been connected to poor quality teaching in which all the necessary elements of education are overlooked. Last, I notice that the present generation of Ethiopia is experiencing paradoxical movements; on one hand, it raises political agendas to the betterment of the social justice, equality in terms of distribution of wealth, solidarity, and so on; on the other hand, it is observed as being political, social, cultural victims of the Western world which is obviously destructing the values, cultures, norms, religions of the people. Hence, raising these issues as a point of discussion with colleagues, I was reminded of the basic elements of critical pedagogy and I found these issues in the book "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" which is written by Freire (1970). Hence, going through this book, I began to think that the education system of the country has to share the blame for the problems discussed above. I believe that critical pedagogy 'gives voice to the voiceless; gives power to the powerless, because it is all about change from transmission to transformative and from passive to active' (Wink, 2005). In this case, I wanted to assess how social science teachers at one preparatory school practice the essence of critical pedagogy in their classrooms.

Hence, in this paper an attempt was made to assess whether social science teachers of Tana Hayk Preparatory School practices critical pedagogy in their classrooms. It tried to see their lived experiences in terms of the core elements of critical pedagogy as described by Freire (1970). Thus, it intended to:

1. Examine whether or not the participants make a connection between theory and practice in their classroom teaching.
2. Look into the extent to which social science teachers incorporate the experience of their students into their teaching.
3. Explore the extent to which teacher- student relationships are deconstructed.
4. See how teachers avoid the banking model of education to place themselves in an environment whereby both teachers and learners are educators and learners.

5. Examine the social justice issues and the political nature of education.

**Basic elements of critical pedagogy**

Freire (1970) in his book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' attempted to outline the core elements of critical pedagogy through which social transformation can be made. These elements are discussed hereunder.

**Theory and practice in critical pedagogy**

Connecting theory and practice is critical to Freire's work in education. The term, praxis, was used by Freire (1970) to describe the point at which theory and practice meet. Freire did not believe in using theory and practice in isolation, but instead, he viewed both as equally significant. As with his theory of problem-posing, Freire (1970) discussed the importance of continuously becoming on the part of the teacher-student as well as the student-teacher. Consequently, Freire (1996:162) connected his passion for truth by stating, "If a teacher truly believes in democracy, he or she has no option, upon realizing his or her incoherence, than to shorten the distance between what he or she says and does." In the statement, Freire portrayed his desire for the melding of theory and practice while arguing for truth from the pedagogical position of the teacher. Later in his discussion of democracy, Freire (1996:163) argued through the questions he asked:

How can a racist teacher speak about democracy, unless it is a very special democracy, on that sees blackness as diminishing it? How does a sexist teacher speak about democracy, unless it is a democracy indifferent to the presence of women? How can an elitist teacher speak about democracy, unless it is democracy for the aristocracy that dwindles in the presence of popular classes?

**The 'Banking' concept of education**

In this form of education the teacher deposits in the minds of the learners who are considered to be empty or ignorant, bits of information or knowledge, much like we deposit money in a bank account. This is why Freire called this model of education 'banking education'. Freire (1970) criticized this model of education because he believed it made students into passive objects to be acted upon by the teacher, and he saw this as false generosity from the dominant group (oppressors) and a way of dominating and controlling the people (the oppressed) to improve or maintain their own interests (Freire,1973).

Some of the tools a banking education model might use include a pre-prescribed curriculum, syllabus or course book, which either takes no account or makes assumptions of learners' views or knowledge of the world. Freire called these pre-prescribed plans and course books primers (Freire, 1973). Freire argued that conventional learning was the tool of the elite because it treated students as objects upon which knowledge is "deposited." Genuine learning for Freire, could only be achieved through lived experience, critical reflection and praxis. The banking education is, thus, not the best method of instruction; learners should be allowed to participate and also bring out what has been learned from their surroundings and earlier experiences.

### **A problem-posing model**

To challenge the banking education model, Freire proposed a problem-posing model of education. In this model, the teacher and learner discuss and analyze their experiences, feelings and knowledge of the world together. Instead of the belief that learners' and teacher's situation in the world is fixed, as the banking model suggests, the problem-posing model explores problems or realities people find themselves in as something which can be transformed (Mclaren, 2000).

It is not the job of the teacher to provide answers to the problems, but to help the learners achieve a form of critical thinking about the situation, Freire called this conscientization (Freire, 1973). This makes it possible to understand that the world or society is not fixed and is potentially open to transformation. It becomes possible to imagine a new and different reality (Freire, 1973).

In order to undertake this process successfully, the people (oppressed) must challenge their own perception of the dominant group (oppressor). Freire argued that the oppressed think of themselves as 'less than' or something lacking. He suggested that they have been conditioned to view the practices and behaviors of the dominant groups as complete, whole and correct. To become whole complete and correct means to simulate the practices of the dominant culture. To counter this perception means engaging the learner in a process of identification with dominant culture/oppressor and to help the learner to imagine a new being and a new life according to their own rationality (Freire, 1973). Thus, learning can best be achieved through critical thinking and analysis of one's experiences and feelings.

### **Praxis (action / intervention)**

True knowledge, Freire (1970) contended, emerges only through restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful, critical inquiry with other people about their relations to the world. Therefore, he advocated that instead of learners receiving, filling and storing deposits made by educators, learners should be allowed to develop praxis, an inventive way of life that encourages free, creative reflection and thoughtful action in order to change the world.

A core component of Freirian theory is that learning begins with action is then shaped by reflection, which gives rise to further action. Learning is thus a continuous process, directed at enhancing the learners' capacity to act in the world and change it. Freire put forward the notion that authoritarian forms of education such as banking education prevented learners from 'knowing' the world and seeing it as something which can be changed. He believed that authoritarian forms of education inhibited the liberation and freedom of the oppressed. Freire argued that change could come through a process of dialogue and reflection leading on to change through action or intervention and or political change. Freire called this process praxis (Freire, 1973).

### **Dialogue**

Freire (1970) advocated for dialogue, constant communication unlocks doors for prosperity and victory in any situation. When teachers and learners dialogue, there are always breakthroughs. Dialogic action challenges mediating social realities by posing them as problems that can be analyzed critically by those who have direct experience of them (Freire, 1970). He argues that dialogue is not just about deepening understanding

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but is part of making a difference in the world. It becomes a form of collective praxis directly concerned with unveiling inequitable conditions obscured by the ruling classes. The process is important and can be seen as enhancing community and building social capital that leads to justice and human flourishing.

To enter into dialogue presupposes equality amongst participants. Each must trust the others; there must be mutual respect and love (care and commitment). Each one must question what he or she knows and realizes that through dialogue existing thoughts will change and new knowledge will be created (Mayo, 1999). Freire's (1970) emphasis on dialogue has struck a very strong harmony with those concerned with popular and informal education. Informal education is dialogical or conversational and involves respect and people working with one another (cooperative activity).

In sum, in Freire's terms, learning based on group dialogues is liberating for everyone involved in the process. By contrast, teaching based on individual monologues in an imposed language leads to silence and apathy, and is the ultimate form of oppression.

### **Methodology**

A Phenomenological approach was employed to study the experiences of social science teachers towards the core issues of critical pedagogy. This kind of study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. A Phenomenologist focuses on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). This description consists of what they experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Generally, phenomenology is essentially the study of lived experience or the life world (van Manen, 1990).

Tana Hayk preparatory School was selected to be the research setting using simple random sampling technique. In this school, social science teachers were taken to be samples of the study using stratified sampling technique. Therefore, from five departments: English, Amharic, Geography, history, and Civics, two representatives for each department were selected using lottery method.

To collect the necessary data, semi-structured interview was used wherein opening questions are structured, leaving the respondents to describe their lived experiences without the researcher's interferences. This data collection tool is found to be appropriate in a phenomenological study since it has unlimited advantages to uncover the life world or human experience as it is lived.

To analyze the data gathered through the interview, thematic analysis technique was employed. Initially, the data were recorded and transcribed. Then, analytic task was performed, which involved identifying and producing categories by classifying details, events, and situations represented in each networks of concepts out of the data.

### **Findings and discussions**

When analyzing the content of the interviews, several themes emerged, including the mismatch between theory and practice, construction of the oppressor student, student-teacher power relations, the limits to students to bring their experiences in the classroom, social justice issues, the implementation of the banking concept of education, and the political nature of education. Participants lived experiences of these

issues are discussed hereunder.

### **The mismatch between theory and practice**

Almost all the participants disclosed that in their teaching, there is lack of connection between theory and practice. In their reflection, the absence of the theory- practice alignment is attached to curriculum and lack of real life applications. The participants who mentioned the curriculum as a bottleneck to make a connection between theory and practice highly emphasized that the practical aspect of the subject they teach are not well addressed in the curriculum (textbook). This revealed that the participants are well aware of the relationship between theory and practice though they are unable to make a balance between these two essential elements of critical pedagogy in their classrooms.

Teacher D (geography teacher), in this regard, uttered:

Everything we do takes place in the classroom, and the classroom teaching is guided by the curriculum. You know the curriculum we are implementing is a reflection of groups of people who are not professionals or experts in the area. So, how can I put the theory to practice while the curriculum does not say so?

In addition, for English teachers, teaching English is like preparing students to create awareness on the elements of the language and to pass exams; according to these teachers, the curriculum emphasizes on the theoretical aspect of the language than the practical ones. They said that since there is no English outside, they tend to teach the structures which they claim are theory-oriented. This is well articulated by the English teacher, who puts:

I teach the theoretical aspect of English language because the curriculum opens a room to students to study the language elements than to practice. The other thing is the students cannot find the language elements in the real world. That is to say there is no English outside the classroom.

Likewise, for history teachers, teaching history is like preaching the past. According to their reflection, it was understood that teaching the past has significant contributions to keep the momentum of the present in terms of culture, value, economy, norm, etc by acknowledging the past events. However, the reflection revealed that teachers hesitate to make alignment between theory and practice thinking that the historical events represented in the teaching material do not fully capture the interests of the students and are somehow a reflection of the political system which is in power. In addition, it was noticed, from the reflection, that the present generation does not seem to have interest to learn history as it has become a victim of the global events than the national ones. A History teacher, for instance, stated:

How can I make my students be interested to learn history while students and I are aware of the fact that the politics uses it as a political issue to keep itself in power? Plus, what we practically observe is that students are highly motivated to hear about the world; they do not seem to hear about their surroundings.

Generally, from the teachers' lived experience, it was realized that teachers do not align

theory and practice thinking that the curriculum does not favor the practical aspect of the course they teach as well as the absence of the real-world applications of the theory due to political and global factors. This showed that the very essence of critical pedagogy is missing in the teachers' classrooms. But, Freire (1970) advised teachers that they must pose existential and concrete situations to the people as a problem which challenges them and requires a response-not just at the intellectual level, but at the level of action. Here, we can deduce that not only we focus on thinking (theory) but also on action (practice).

### **Constructing the oppressor student**

The other emerging theme is construction of oppressor students. The teachers' lived experience showed that the current practice of the education system is giving recognition to clever students undermining slow learners. Participants from the interview reflected that one-to-five grouping structure which is regarded as the 'order of the day' seems to open the door to fast learners to exercise their power over the slow learners. They added that the organization itself stands for 'one powerful person over four powerless persons', which is to diminish the efforts slow learners make in order to become confident in their learning. This, according to the participants, creates dependency on the part of the slow and average learners to believe that they are guided by other powerful students.

A Geography teacher uttered:

One-to-five grouping system appeared to be advantageous for other colleagues, but I personally see the other side of it, because the students who are chosen to assist the other four students are believed to dominate them so that these students feel they are not accepted by the school as well as by their subject teacher.

In fact, such practices in the education system, according to Freire (1970), limit the learners to transform what they learn to a concrete situation, which in other way is the indicator of domination in which the dominated tend to develop a fear of freedom. Freire (1970: 47) further added:

....the oppressed, who have adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become resigned to it, are inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires.

### **Student- teacher power relations**

With the exception of civic teachers, the rest of the participants mentioned that the classroom situation gives authority to the teachers. They openly demonstrated that the teachers are in charge of the classroom situation thinking that the students contribute less to the teaching learning process. On the other hand, Civic teachers seemed to experience encouraging students to contribute they share to the classroom situations. They expressed that limiting student's contributions while learning may bring unfavorable condition in which the students view the teacher as the only source of knowledge, which may discourage students to be critical thinkers.

An English teacher, in this regard commented, "*The teacher is the authority and that*

*students do not have sufficient knowledge to contribute to classroom learning.”*

In sum, from the finding, most teachers were found to exercise their power over students. They think that the teacher is the only decision maker and does whatever he/she wants while the students are there to do what the teacher asks. In other words, teachers are assumed to give tasks to students with limited consideration of students' background knowledge and level of understanding; students have to do what is told by teachers. This shows that students are conditioned to accept what the teacher declares, and teachers have the power to order, to ask, to refuse and so on, and whatever they do they are considered right, which in other ways shrinks students' critical thinking skills. Freire (1996), in this regard, stated that such exercise of power in an educational sphere is like the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer.

### **The limits to bring students' experiences in the classroom**

From the lived experiences of the teachers, it was perceived that teachers were aware of the importance of relating subject-specific content to students' experiences. However, most of the participants demonstrated that they usually limit the experiences of students believing that students do not come up with concrete input which can be shared to other fellow members. A geography teacher, for example, remarked that, *“in geography, we find a definite science and I find students to feel ambiguous to relate the concept of the subject to their experiences. Because of that I just simply lecture and asses students according to the principles and concepts of the subject”*

In contrast, a Civic teacher felt that the very nature of the course requires students to bring their real life experiences. He believes that the more the subject content is related to students' experiences, the better they are in a position to make learning lifelike and contribute to the overall classroom teaching and learning.

Therefore, from the reflection, it can be noticed that most of the participants do not appreciate students' experiences, and it seems that they oppress students to accept only what they say and declare. However, students must be provided with opportunities to learn with understanding because deep understanding of subject matter transforms factual information into usable knowledge. If this element is missing, according to Freire (1970), it can be a sign of marginalizing the oppressed that are not people living outside society but have been inside the structure which made them 'beings for others'. Freire (1970:19) goes to claim:

If students are not able to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge, they will never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing.

### **Social justice issues**

According to Freire (1970), part of a critical education is learning about marginalization and oppression in students own communities and around the world such as poverty, gender issues, slave, and violent conflict. In here, we notice that teachers are expected to raise issues related to the aforementioned concepts and help learners to take part in solving them in their environment so long as the ultimate purpose of education is to improve the lives of the society.

In line with this, the experience of the participants highlighted that they rarely make discussions on social phenomenon demonstrating that the curriculum (textbook) does not allow learners to be able to talk about social justice issues. They also spelled out that the political situation of the country does not create favorable situations to argue about issues relevant to peoples' lives in general and students' life experiences in particular. Nonetheless, the very soul of critical pedagogy is inculcating the real experience of students- their problems and sufferings. Such a claim is supported by Freire (1970:45), who puts:

The lesson.... must come, however, from the oppressed themselves and from those who are truly solidary with them.....Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who suffer the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation?

### **Implementation of the banking concept of education**

Teachers in their interview highlighted that they devote much time to teach rather than to make students learn how to learn. Their teaching emphasizes on the 'what' aspect of learning as opposed to the 'how'. Moreover, it was understood from the reflection that students always have expectations from the teachers, considering teachers as transmitters of knowledge. An Amharic teacher, for instance, stated, "*The possibility of engaging students in my teaching is discouraging because students do not learn to be critical learners. They come to take not to challenge.*"

Moreover, a History teacher remarked:

Students are not preparing to comprehend and question what is written in the textbook. They do not want to familiarize themselves with historical events, and they accept the cultural, social, economical, and political aspects declared in the content of the subject. What I should do is simply to speak out what is prepared in the teaching material.

From the teachers' reflections, thus, one can comprehend that students view teachers as source of knowledge which, according to the interview, could be scientific, political, economical, social, and cultural. This means that the banking concept of education, which considers learners as empty vessels, still exists in the teachers' classrooms. In line with this, Freire (1970) argued that the goal of 'banking education' is to demobilize the people within the existing establishment of power by conditioning them to accept the cultural, social, political status quo of the dominant culture. In the banking education model knowledge/education is seen as a gift given to the student by the teacher who considers the learner as marginal, ignorant and resource-less. He also articulated that, "*Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.*" (Freire, 1970: 72).

### **The political nature of education**

The finding of the interview revealed that most teachers are aware of the importance of talking about the political nature of knowledge. Very few participants are reluctant to reflect on why people need education.

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For the teachers who understand the political nature of education believe that education is used as political tool for maintaining the status quo. For instance, a History teacher explained that the curriculum of Ethiopian education is a duplication of Western and other Asian countries. He further said, *"We teach histories of other countries without sufficiently addressing ours."*

A Civic teacher also reflected, *"We are studying a very particular content and a very particular curriculum, the curriculum of the Western world where democracy is largely flourished and social justice is somehow maintained."*

However, asked about how they put these into practice, most agreed that they do not have the courage to talk about these issues fearing the political situation which is in turmoil. A Civics teacher, for example, argued that if he discusses political issues in class, he believes that his life will end up in prison. Moreover, an English teacher reflected that there is not enough time to talk about political issues in the classroom. He said that teachers are not accustomed to brief political matters to students.

In sum, the experience of teachers revealed that teachers are aware of the political aspect of education that education can be used as a politics to maintain the political system which is in power. However, they are reluctant to openly discuss these concepts with students; however, they try to teach critical thinking skills through which students can indirectly question political agendas. This finding is somehow against the very principle of critical pedagogy which regards as education should help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action (Fereire, 1970).

### **Conclusions**

From the lived experience of the participants, the following conclusions were made.

- Teachers seemed to be aware of most of the basic elements of critical pedagogy; however, they are not practicing the principles in their teaching. This offered an indication of how desirable and feasible it was to use ideas from critical pedagogy among teachers who do not put the principles into practice due to a number of reasons.
- The participants, moreover, do not seem to make a connection between theory and practice. They were reluctant about grounding their teaching in real-world applications.
- The finding also confirmed that oppressive environments are created in which the teachers exercise their power over students. It was also found that students who are assigned to be group leaders in a one-to-five grouping structure exercise dominance power over their fellow group members.
- The finding again proved that most teachers, though they were aware of the political dimension of education, hesitated to discuss its social impact in their classroom teaching.
- It can also be concluded that most of the participants did not appreciate students' experiences. They seemed to oppress students to accept only what they say and they declare. This means that the banking concept of education, which considers learners as empty vessels, still exists in the teachers' classrooms.

- From the result, it was also concluded that though teachers have little prior experience with the basic tenets of critical pedagogy, they believe in the importance of rooting their teaching in real world social issues. However, since they experience fear of politics, they seem to be unable to inculcate their students with real -life political, social, economical, and cultural issues.
- Based on the above conclusions, recommendations were made. These include: teachers should value the basic tenets of critical pedagogy in their teaching. It is also suggested that the school principals should prepare training sessions whereby teachers can integrate the masterpieces of critical pedagogy in their classroom teaching.

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