



Critical Pedagogy in Social Studies Education: Empowering Students Through Democratic Dialogue

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Abstract

This study explores how critical pedagogical practices are enacted and experienced within a social studies classroom through a qualitative case study approach. Drawing on critical pedagogy, the study examines how dialogical teaching shapes students' participation, meaning making, and emerging critical awareness over time. The classroom is treated as a bounded case, enabling close attention to pedagogical processes as they unfold in everyday instructional practice. Data were generated through classroom observations, in depth interviews with the teacher and students, focus group discussions, and students' reflective journals collected over one academic year. An interpretative analysis was conducted to trace patterns of interaction, shifts in classroom dialogue, and participants' evolving understandings of learning. The study does not aim for generalization but seeks to develop contextual and process oriented insights. Findings show that critical pedagogy functioned as a relational and evolving practice rather than a fixed method. Classroom dialogue gradually shifted from teacher centered exchanges toward more collective meaning making, with students becoming more willing to question assumptions, engage with multiple perspectives, and connect social studies content to broader social issues. Moments of tension and emotional discomfort emerged as integral to learning, supporting reflection and deeper engagement rather than hindering instruction. This study contributes to critical pedagogy scholarship by demonstrating how dialogical practices develop over time within a single classroom and by highlighting the value of qualitative case study methods for capturing the relational and affective dimensions of critical learning.

Introduction

Social studies education stands at a critical juncture in contemporary schooling, torn between its traditional role of transmitting cultural knowledge and national narratives, and its democratic potential to develop critical, engaged citizens capable of interrogating and transforming society (Burgos-Videla et al., 2025; Baidon & Sim, 2009). In an era marked by increasing social polarization, misinformation, persistent inequalities, and democratic erosion globally, the question of how social studies education can meaningfully prepare students for active citizenship has never been more urgent (Wood et al., 2013; Angela, 2014; Crawford et al., 2025).

Traditional approaches to social studies teaching often emphasize memorization of facts, dates, and names, presenting history and social issues through singular, dominant narratives that rarely invite students to question whose perspectives are centered and whose are marginalized

(Guajardo & Vohra, 2023; Nautu, 2025). Critical pedagogy, rooted in Paulo Freire's seminal work "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" and developed through contributions from scholars such as Henry Giroux, bell hooks, Peter McLaren, and Gloria Ladson-Billings, offers a radically different vision for social studies education.

Rather than viewing students as empty vessels to be filled with predetermined knowledge, critical pedagogy positions learners as co-creators of knowledge who bring their lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, and critical questions into the learning process (Lee & Givens, 2012; Essabari & Mhamed, 2025). At its core, critical pedagogy challenges the "banking model" of education where teachers deposit information into passive students, instead advocating for problem-posing education that engages students in dialogue about meaningful social issues.

Democratic dialogue serves as the central pedagogical mechanism through which critical pedagogy operates in social studies classrooms (Joseph, 2020). Unlike traditional classroom discourse dominated by teacher questions seeking predetermined correct answers (Rusli et al, 2025; Nystrand et al., 2003; Leung & Mohan, 2004), democratic dialogue creates space for genuine inquiry, multiple perspectives, disagreement, and collaborative meaning-making. Through dialogue, students learn to articulate their own thinking, listen carefully to diverse viewpoints, challenge assumptions, and develop positions grounded in evidence and ethical reasoning (Siregar et al., 2025; Karousiou et al., 2025;

This dialogical approach recognizes that knowledge is not neutral or value-free, but is instead socially constructed and intimately connected to relations of power in society (Masood & Haque, 2021; Duncan & Morrell, 2023; Del, 2024). The relevance of critical pedagogy to social studies education is particularly pronounced given the discipline's explicit connection to citizenship education and social understanding. Mariati et al. (2021) said that, social studies encompasses history, geography, civics, economics, sociology, and anthropology all fields fundamentally concerned with how human beings organize societies, distribute resources and power, and create meaning collectively.

When approached through critical pedagogy, social studies becomes a site for examining whose stories get told in history textbooks, how economic systems create winners and losers, why certain groups face systematic marginalization, and how ordinary people have organized for social change throughout history (Ford, 2015; Lunevich, 202; Campbell, 2022; Darder et al, 2023). However, implementing critical pedagogy in social studies classrooms faces significant challenges. Standardized curricula often prescribe specific content to be covered, leaving little room for student-driven inquiry or extended dialogue (Rusli & Yasmin, 2024; Stone-Danahy, 2024).

According to Braun (2004) High-stakes testing emphasizes recall of factual information rather than critical analysis or civic engagement. Teachers may lack preparation in facilitation techniques necessary for productive dialogue, or may feel uncomfortable addressing controversial issues in the classroom (Ruiz-Mesa & Hunter, 2019; Kraatz et al., 2022). School cultures may prioritize order and compliance over questioning and debate. Parents and community members may object to curriculum that they perceive as political or ideological (Giroux & Giroux, 2008; Dwikamayuda, 2024).

Despite these challenges, numerous educators and researchers have demonstrated the possibility and power of critical pedagogy in social studies contexts (Magill & Salinas, 2019). Students engaged in critical social studies show deeper understanding of social issues, greater ability to analyze multiple perspectives, increased civic efficacy, and stronger commitment to

social justice. They learn not just about history and society, but how to read the world critically and imagine alternatives to current arrangements. This study examines how critical pedagogy operates in practice within social studies classrooms, what conditions support its implementation, and what outcomes it generates for student learning and development.

Methods

Research Design

The current research design utilized a qualitative case study to complete the in-depth analysis of the process of implementing critical pedagogy in one social studies classroom, the manner of which the democratic dialogue functions as one of the key pedagogical processes in the same classroom. The researchers made it easier to have a highly contextualized interpretation of the pedagogical practices, interactions, and meanings through the use of one case that developed over time within a prescribed educational context. Instead of engaging in a comparative or general investigation, the case study structure allowed a narrow analysis of classroom processes, educator decision-making and student sense-making in the light of critical pedagogy. This methodological position is consistent with the epistemology of critical pedagogy, which prioritizes situated learning, relationship learning, and the necessity to question educational activities in terms of their social and institutional levels. The case was selected intentionally because it is related to the focus of the research. The classroom served as a setting where the teacher overtly made an attempt to use dialogical and inquiry-based methods that are consistent with the postulates of critical pedagogy, which makes it a theoretically important object of deep research.

Research Context

The study was conducted during one school year in one social studies classroom of a single public secondary school to cover students of middle or high school level. The school followed the national curriculum format, which entails the core content but has a slight flexibility in instruction. The classroom situation was not only predicted but an essential factor that predetermined the performance of critical pedagogy. Instructional possibilities and constraints were impacted by the institutional expectations, curricular pacing requirements, student demographics and the community norms. A thorough analysis of these contextual issues was not only necessary to understand the ways in which there was a preservation of democratic dialogue and critical inquiry in the daily classroom activities

Participants

The interviewees involved were a single social studies teacher and the students in the chosen classroom. The identification of the teacher was based on purposive sampling, which was informed by his/her provable interest in critical pedagogy, past experience in dialogical instruction, and readiness to pursue the reflective practice in the long term. Student respondents were representative of the heterogeneity in the school population in terms of social and cultural background. Consenting to participation was voluntary and stringent ethical practices were followed to ensure informed consent and confidentiality. Students were treated as active participants whose views were very essential in explaining both experiential and interpretive aspects of critical pedagogy in practice.

Data Collection

The nature of the data collection was intended to attain the complexity of the instructional and learning processes in the case classroom over time. The major source of data was classroom observations. The non-participant observation took up under half a day of X hours of

observation during the academic year, but with a focus on the normal activities of instruction as opposed to exceptional lessons. The observations provided some knowledge about the establishment and maintenance of conversation, student engagement, and framing of social issues and promotion of critical inquiry by the teacher. Verbal interactions, patterns of participation, incidences of tension, and changes in classroom atmosphere were recorded by detail field notes. The teacher was interviewed using semi-structured interviews on several points in the study to understand pedagogical beliefs, instructional intentions, and reflective learning about classroom practice. Focus group discussions and reflective journals were used to get student views, which provided a subtle insight into how students perceived dialogue, voice and critical engagement as time went by. The observational and interview data were supplemented with document analysis. Lesson plans, teaching materials, student work samples, and assessment tasks were examined in a bid to determine the manifestations and realizations of critical pedagogy in curriculum design.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data was performed following a constructivist grounded theory approach, which was done in a progressive manner along with the data collection. Open coding of field notes, interview transcripts, focus group discussions and student reflections identified salient actions, meanings, and patterns of interaction that were related to democratic dialogue and critical inquiry. Categories were then coded and grouped into specific categories that summarized recurrent practices in pedagogy, student reactions and situational circumstances. Analytic themes were developed by way of constant comparison and they connected classroom level interactions to larger theoretical constructs of critical pedagogy. Memoranda were used in the process of analysis in promoting reflexivity and transparency, so that the researcher could track interpretive decision making and the progress of understanding. The analysis focus was on apprehending processes and meanings in the case instead of cross-sites comparisons.

Results and Discussion

Since the empirical investigation is presented as an endpoint with clear findings, this paragraph outlines the results of the empirical investigation based on a full data-supported explanation of a singular social studies classroom conceptualized as a limited case. In accordance with the qualitative approach to the case study methodology, the findings prefigured processes, interactions, and meaning-making of participants in the long term, but not the results in terms of pre-answered indicators. It was based on the systematic observations in the classroom, discussions with the teacher and students, focus-group discussions and reflective journals kept by the learners during a single academic year. The results are thematically presented to demonstrate how critical pedagogy can be enacted, experienced, and negotiated, or, in other words, to show how it can be practiced in the day-to-day life of the classroom.

Enactment of Critical Pedagogical Practices Within the Classroom

Consistent with the single case study design, the findings are presented as an interpretative synthesis grounded in the specific classroom context. Rather than treating instructional events as isolated moments, this section traces patterns that emerged through sustained engagement with teachers and students over time. Interviews, observations, focus group discussions, and reflective writings collectively reveal that critical pedagogy was enacted not as a fixed technique but as a lived pedagogical orientation shaped by context, relationships, and ongoing reflection. Within the classroom, the teacher described the enactment of critical pedagogy as a gradual and often demanding shift in how instructional roles were understood. The teacher

spoke about consciously loosening attachment to content completion and redirecting attention toward questions capable of provoking sustained thinking. As the teacher explained,

“I stopped asking myself whether I finished the material and started asking whether students were still thinking about the questions when they left the classroom.”

This shift altered classroom dynamics in visible ways. Dialogue became less centered on teacher approval and more oriented toward students responding to and extending one another’s ideas. As the teacher noted,

“When I don’t rush to judge their answers, they begin to talk to each other, not just to me.”

The specific classroom context played an important role in shaping how these pedagogical commitments were enacted. Classroom discussions were frequently grounded in students’ everyday experiences, including local social issues and familiar community dynamics. Over time, a clear developmental pattern emerged. Students initially relied on surface level explanations that emphasized individual behavior. As dialogical practices were sustained, students began to question rules, institutional arrangements, and historical processes. Reflecting on this shift, the teacher observed,

“At first they talk about personal choices, but later they start asking who made the rules and why some groups always seem to lose.”

Sustaining dialogical practices also involved significant emotional and professional work. Allowing uncertainty to remain unresolved challenged familiar expectations about efficiency and control in classroom teaching. The teacher described early discomfort with silence and disagreement, particularly in moments when students struggled to articulate emerging ideas. Over time, these moments were reframed as productive spaces for thinking. As the teacher reflected,

“Silence used to scare me because I thought the lesson wasn’t working. Now I see it as a moment when students are actually thinking.”

This reframing marked an important pedagogical turning point within the classroom.

Student Experiences and Meaning Making Within the Classroom

Students’ perspectives provide critical insight into how dialogical pedagogical practices were experienced within the classroom. Early in the academic year, many students described dialogical lessons as confusing and unsettling. Several students explained that they felt unsure how to participate when discussions did not lead to a single correct answer. One student stated,

“I was used to the teacher telling us what was right, so at first I didn’t know what I was supposed to say.”

These accounts suggest that democratic dialogue required students to unlearn familiar classroom norms before new forms of participation could emerge. As dialogical practices became more consistent, students began to describe classroom dialogue as a collective learning process rather than an individual performance. Students reported listening more carefully to peers and recognizing that understanding developed through interaction. One student explained,

“Now I know that talking in class isn’t about being right. It’s about helping everyone understand the problem better.”

This shift was evident not only in students' willingness to speak but also in their openness to perspectives that challenged their own assumptions. Student reflective journals further illustrate how meaning making evolved over time within the classroom. Early entries often framed social issues such as inequality or poverty in individualistic terms, emphasizing effort or personal responsibility. Later reflections increasingly referenced broader structures such as policies, historical legacies, and institutional power. One student wrote,

"Some rules look fair, but when you think about history, they don't affect everyone in the same way."

Although the pace of this shift varied among students, the overall pattern indicates a gradual development of critical consciousness rather than a sudden transformation.

Tension, Emotion, and Dialogical Learning Processes

Moments of tension and emotional discomfort emerged as recurring features of dialogical learning. Classroom observations captured episodes of prolonged silence, visible hesitation, and disagreement when students confronted controversial social issues. Rather than resolving these moments quickly, the teacher often allowed discussions to remain open and revisited them in subsequent lessons.

As the teacher explained:

"If I close the discussion too quickly, students don't really get the chance to struggle with the ideas."

Students' reflections indicate that these moments were experienced as challenging but meaningful. One student wrote:

"Sometimes the discussion makes me uncomfortable because it challenges what I believed before, but it also makes me think more deeply."

Both teacher and student accounts suggest that emotional discomfort functioned as a catalyst for reflection rather than an obstacle to learning. This highlights the affective dimension of critical pedagogy as integral to dialogical inquiry.

Emerging Outcomes of Critical Pedagogical Practice Within the Classroom

Over time, sustained engagement with critical pedagogy was associated with noticeable shifts in student participation and orientation toward social studies learning. The teacher reported that students increasingly posed their own questions, justified their views by drawing on broader social contexts, and connected classroom discussions to issues beyond school. Reflecting on these changes, the teacher noted,

"By the end of the year, students were bringing up examples from the news without being asked."

Students likewise described a growing sense of responsibility in how they approached social issues. Several students reflected that they no longer felt comfortable accepting information at face value. As one student stated during a focus group,

"Now I feel like I should think more carefully about social issues, not just accept what I hear."

Importantly, these outcomes did not appear as immediate results of individual lessons. Rather, they developed gradually through repeated dialogue, ongoing reflection, and the cultivation of trust within the classroom community. The findings suggest that critical pedagogy in this social

studies classroom functioned as a relational and context sensitive practice that reshaped not only what students learned but how they understood the purpose of learning itself.

This work enhances comprehension of the critical pedagogy of the social studies through foregrounding the emergence of the critical pedagogy as a lived, relational and temporally situated practice and not a fixed model of instruction. The results indicate that critical pedagogy neither comes into the classroom as a set of ready-to-use frameworks to be applied in the same way to lessons. Rather, it is built up progressively in the process of continuing interaction between teachers and students, which is structured by trust, emotional risk-taking, and frequent exposure to dialogical norms. This view is consistent with recent critical pedagogy research which supports the idea that critical pedagogy should not be narrowed to a regiment of measures but rather, it should be viewed in terms of its ethical, relational, and political aspects as negotiated in daily classroom life (Darder et al., 2023).

A highly conspicuous part of this work is that it describes dialogue as a process of development. The dialogue in the classroom did not necessarily acquire the democratic or critical nature. The initial contacts were characterized by reluctance, dependence on the teacher and indecisiveness about how to contribute meaningfully when responses are not given beforehand. However, over time, dialogue developed into a mutual space of inquiry in which the students started responding to the ideas of each other and collectively making sense. This progressive move resonates with the results of Tingle (2021) who states that acceptance of dialogical pedagogy of students is observed through the sustained exposure and no longer the initial excitement. It is also echoed by the argument of Mitra (2008) and Flint & O'Hara (2013) that student voice is not granted but developed as a result of repeated practices of being heard and listened to within learning communities.

With the increased establishment of the dialogue, the manner in which the students interpreted the social issues was transformed in substantive manners. Instead of turning problems into particular issues of personal conduct or moral decision-making, students started to focus more on the social situations and organizations at large, their historical contexts and institutionalization. This shift in the direction of structural analysis represents the emergence of critical consciousness in its conceptualisation in modern critical pedagogy studies. In this research, Masood & Haque (2021) posit that critical learning requires a transformation of individualistic explanations to a systemic critique, in which the reflective journals and classroom assignments of students were evidently moving towards in this study. Similarly, Ng et al. (2022) point out that critical pedagogy helps learners to create new perspectives that play with the normative assumptions and provoke more profound questioning of the social reality. The current results indicate that this type of change is not a consequence of some special critical lessons but the outcome of the dialogical interaction that can be maintained over time.

The findings have a specific meaning in the framework of the social studies education. The social studies have always been founded on the orientation of the student to take part in democracies, although the methods of instruction are usually focused on memorising the facts rather than on the interpretation and morality. However, recent research has contended that in the absence of dialogue and critique possibilities, social studies may produce dominant narratives instead of training students to challenge them (Guajardo & Vohra, 2023; Nautu, 2025). The current research builds on this point by showing how dialogical pedagogy helped students to relate the material in the curriculum to lived experience and social problems of our time. By doing that, social studies learning changed not only its content but also its meaning such that the students are seen as interpreters of social knowledge and not as passive recipients of social knowledge.

The other essential aspect of this study relates to the issue of emotion and discomfort in dialogical learning. Silences, disagreement and observable awkwardness were not regarded as interferences with the teaching process but as part of the educational process. This observation is consistent with the recent research on the importance of affective aspects of critical pedagogy. A study by MacMaolir & McGillicuddy (2023) reveals that a dialogue can be more intense with an emotional appeal when students are made to feel that their experiences and worldviews are hearkened. Lockton & Fargason (2019) also believes that when learners are discomforting, it is usually an indication that they are going through concepts that are upsetting the status quo. The reflection of students in the present research indicates that moments like this encouraged deeper thinking instead of withdrawal, which implies that emotional tension acting as a pedagogical tool served as an asset to learning instead of a hindrance to it.

The contribution of the role of the teacher towards maintaining these dialogical and affective situations proved to be at the center of implementation of critical pedagogy. Instead of working as the ultimate source of knowledge, the teacher slowly shifted to facilitative position and emphasised questioning, listening and responsiveness. This transition meant that the teacher needed to have tolerance to uncertainty and avoid the urge to put discussions to an early end. Recent research in professional change in teachers is also showing the same trends. The document *Educational Ideals and Classroom Realities* (2024) records the changes in the personal professional identity of educators working with dialogic and critical pedagogies when negotiating power and control in the classroom. The current results support this perspective by demonstrating how the change in pedagogy took place in combination with reflective practice and emotional labour.

Meanwhile, the study reveals the constraints of structure within which critical pedagogy was practiced. The curriculum pacing demands and with the content expectations caused a continuous conflict between the depth of dialogue and what is covered by the instruction. This stress is broadly recorded in the modern educational studies. According to Rusli & Yasmin (2024), the conventional curricular models typically do not give much time to the inquiry-based learning requests, and Dwikamayuda (2024) states that an educator adopting transformative learning should find a way to address the institutional demands where efficiency and compliance are privileged. Notably, though, the results indicate that these limitations were not applicable to critical pedagogical practice in their entirety. Instead, critical dialogue became an obligatory material, which proves the point by Philpot & Smith (2018) that context-specific enactment enables critical pedagogy to be adjusted instead of withdrawn in limited conditions.

Over the academic year the cumulative impact of the practice of dialogical use was becoming more experienced in the orientations of the students to learning and social responsibility. Students reported that they did not feel so opportunistic about the information being given without questioning and paying more attention to various viewpoints. Such changes are consistent with the recent literature that argues that critical pedagogy will help to cultivate civic dispositions as it helps to motivate learners to perceive themselves as both moral and political agents (Campbell, 2022; Sari et al., 2024). It is interesting to note that these results did not manifest as instant or equal-like changes but as a slow process molded by the constant interaction, relationship trust and thoughtful dialogue.

The results can be added to the current discussion of critical pedagogy as it focuses on the process, rather than the product. The study places emphasis on the construction of critical learning based on daily interactions that are relational, affective and highly contextual, rather than to promote predetermined outcomes, which critical pedagogy is supposed to bring about. The process-oriented approach is a reaction to recent literature that has urged critical pedagogy

scholars to cease making instrumental judgments about the success or efficacy of critical pedagogy and focus more closely on the way critical pedagogy is lived and experienced in actual classrooms (Darder et al., 2023; Del, 2024; Jones et al., 2025).

Through a qualitative case study design, this study provides a rich description of the process of critical pedagogy as it takes place during a period of time in one social studies classroom (Karwadi et al., 2025; Song et al., 2025; Barry et al., 2025). By so doing, it will supplement the large-scale and outcome-oriented studies by shedding some light on aspects of critical learning that cannot be quantitatively determined. The paper highlights the usefulness of the qualitative study in the development of critical consciousness through the intersection of dialogue, emotion, and agency. In sum, the results indicate that critical pedagogy in social studies is less concerned with the application of certain instructional methods and rather with the development of pedagogical relationships where teachers and students can think, question, and imagine together in the challenges of the modern social life.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that critical pedagogy in social studies classrooms is best understood as an evolving and relational practice rather than a fixed instructional model. Through sustained dialogue, inquiry, and reflection, teachers and students co constructed learning spaces that supported critical engagement with social issues and fostered the development of student voice, confidence, and critical consciousness. The findings suggest that when dialogue is positioned at the center of pedagogy and when students' lived experiences are treated as legitimate sources of knowledge, social studies learning moves beyond content acquisition toward deeper meaning making and democratic participation. In this sense, critical pedagogy functioned not simply as an approach to teaching, but as a pedagogical orientation that reshaped classroom relationships and the purposes of learning itself. At the same time, the study highlights that the enactment of critical pedagogy is inseparable from the institutional and contextual conditions in which it occurs. Teachers navigated ongoing tensions between dialogical depth and curricular demands, revealing that critical pedagogy requires not only pedagogical commitment but also supportive structures within schools and educational systems. These findings underscore the importance of attending to context, process, and teacher agency when examining critical pedagogical practice. Future research may build on this work by exploring how sustained engagement with critical pedagogy influences students' civic participation beyond the classroom and how institutional policies can better support dialogical and justice oriented teaching in diverse educational settings.

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