

UNDERSTANDING POVERTY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF TEACHER EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

The central concern of this paper is to argue that the framework of teacher education curriculum must include issues and debates that are central to political economy and the economics of education. Participation of teacher education departments in everyday life and real life situations of people enable them to understand the underlying social realities, power structures and political relations. And also empower them to critically reflect on public policy debates and governance of people. Education is considered as one of the most important factors in improving the quality of life of the people. Quality schooling and good education help people to access economic, social and political resources and opportunities available in the society. Historically the dominant discourses in teacher education have systematically marginalized debates around the complex relationships that exist among poverty, caste, power, knowledge, culture, ideology, inequalities and schooling. Teacher educators ought to understand the principles and philosophy of the Constitution and must emerge as leaders in evaluating the public policies and state interventions and developmental programmes. Such critical engagement and creative participation in civic education would transform teacher education departments and make them relevant to people and society. An attempt is made in this paper to work out a framework to understand the contesting perspectives of poverty and its implications to teacher education.

Keywords: Disciplinary practices, Ideology, Poverty, Multiple Poverty.

DISCIPLINARY AND TECHNICAL RATIONALITIES OF TEACHER EDUCATION

Historically the dominant discourses in teacher education have systematically marginalized debates around the complex relationships that exist among poverty, caste, power, knowledge, culture, ideology, inequalities and schooling. These overriding discourses of teacher education represent education as ahistorical, apolitical and universal. Disciplinary practices centered on mechanistic behaviorist and positivist models of understanding decontextualize learning and various other associated process of education.

Such institutional processes over a period of time nurture teacher educators psyche and construct their consciousness. This is clearly evident in their classroom pedagogic practices, institutional rituals, stories, research activities, workshops, seminars, curriculum, timetable, calendar, almanac and evaluation and assessment practices. By and large, majority of practices in teacher education departments focus on preparing teachers to develop technical competence and procedural rationalities and conform to the existing school structure.

Institutionalized individualistic approaches to education brought teacher education departments very close to state politics and made them important campaigners and ambassadors of the state sponsored so-called development schemes, programmes and interventions. In the process, teacher educators got transformed into rule followers and disciplined bodies. This is the prevailing state of affairs across the teacher education departments of this country. There is an immediate need to shake these departments and instill the values of critical thinking, sociological imagination, and historical sensitivity among students and teacher educators. We need to demystify the so-called value neutral practices and dismantle the rigid disciplinary structures and deconstruct concepts, theories and methodological approaches of the teacher education departments. This is very much important in the present context of economic reforms and its associated processes like privatization, liberalization and globalization.

By creating learning spaces around some basic economic issues and negotiating with the day to day life activities and lifestyles”, we may raise the critical consciousness of teacher educators and student teachers. If our teacher educators cannot evaluate and critically reflect on economic and social arguments and issues ,they can do very little but watch the day to day happenings from the sidelines and step into the fray partially blindfolded. And they cannot creatively engage students and develop critical literacy skills. Hence ,we need to empower the departments of teacher education and provide an intellectual direction to them so that they can participate in production of knowledge in the field of critical teacher education studies.

The central concern of this paper is to argue that the framework of teacher education curriculum must include issues and debates that are central to political economy and the economics of education. Participation of teacher education departments in such existential and real life situations and conditions of people enable them to understand the underlying social realities, power structures and political relations. And also empower them to critically reflect on public policy debates and governance of people. An attempt is made in this paper to work out a framework to understand the contesting perspectives of poverty and its implications to teacher education.

UNDERSTANDING POVERTY

Poverty is a political, economic, cultural and highly emotional condition of human life. Poverty is hunger, lack of shelter and being sick. It is not having access to basic resources and powerlessness and lack of representation and freedom. In other words, it is the lack of necessities. According to Valentine (1968), the essence of poverty is inequality and it is basically relative deprivation.

In our multicultural settings students come to the classrooms with multiple poverty backgrounds. The dominant individualistic official intellectual models do not allow teachers to explore the ramifications of poverty and the deep structural realities. A cursory look at the institutional practices and principles of student assessment, evaluation procedures and beliefs and interpretations of teachers about students' performance and academic achievements would reveal the narrow and rigid frameworks of teachers and teacher educators about poverty and various other poverty related issues. The failure of our system of education in extending intellectual and emotional support to students is partly due to wrong and erroneous beliefs and theories of teachers and teacher educators about poverty and experiences of poverty.

Poverty has many dimensions and faces. It is a condition in which a person or community of people is deprived of essentials for a minimum standard of well-being and life (Gordon and Spicker: 1999). Poverty is also construed in terms of lack of opportunity to develop meaningful connections with other people in society (Nancy Krieger: 2001). According to Eric Jensen (2009), "Poverty is chronic and debilitating condition that results from multiple adverse synergistic risk factors and affects the mind, body and soul". Economists and social scientists widely disagree in answering the following questions. Some of the burning questions are (Marie-Therese Feuerstein: 1997)

What does poverty and deprivation mean?

What are the causes of poverty ?

How are poverty and caste related ?

How are poverty , inequality and vulnerability related ?

What are the different faces/dimensions of poverty ?

Who are poor, the disadvantaged and the vulnerable ?

Are the poor always vulnerable and vulnerable always poor ?

Why are poor and more vulnerable to denial of basic needs ?

Why are women and children particularly affected by poverty ?

Can people escape from a cycle of poverty ?

Who decides how many people are below a poverty line and how are such lines drawn ?

There is no consensus among economists, social scientists and policy makers on the answers to the above questions. They take different ideological and philosophical positions in defining, understanding, theorizing and addressing poverty and poverty eradication. It is in this context that one needs to understand Amartya Sen's (1992, 2001) contributions to the field of welfare economics. Amartya Sen construed poverty as a condition that results in an absence of freedom to choose arising from a lack of what he refers to as the capability to function effectively in society. This multidimensional idea of poverty goes beyond the conventional and narrow definitions of poverty as being solely related to a lack of financial resources. Inadequate education and poor health conditions are considered by economists as a few important forms of poverty in many societies (Servasvander Berg: 2008).

The implications of Amartya Sen's idea of poverty are widely debated and recognized by economists as an important contribution to the field of welfare economics and it is extensively applied to understand the hidden complexities of poverty. Today, poverty is construed not in terms of economic insufficiency but primarily as lack of opportunities, prospects and openings to move towards a better life. It is also construed as lack of access to resources, assets, possessions and properties. Moreover social exclusion is considered as one of the basic aspects of poverty. The implication of this understanding is that the individuals, families and communities need to command and create sufficient resources to satisfy a socially acceptable minimum standard of living (Eastern Cape-South Africa Report:2009). In what follows, an attempt is made to present various aspects of poverty(Marie-Therese Feuerstein:1997).

Types of Poverty:

1. **Inherited Poverty / Generational Poverty/Caste Poverty:** This occurs in families where parents and grandparents pass on their poverty to their children
2. **Situational Poverty/Instant Poverty:** Poverty caused by a sudden crisis or disaster (Natural or Man- made).
3. **Absolute Poverty:** Poverty due to deprivation of elements necessary to sustain life and health, such as adequate food, safe drinking water, shelter, land, employment and personal security. People in absolute poverty face day-to-day survival problems and they can found or placed in at risk conditions as a result of war, famine, or natural disasters. According to Berg (2008), "absolute poverty is the absence of financial

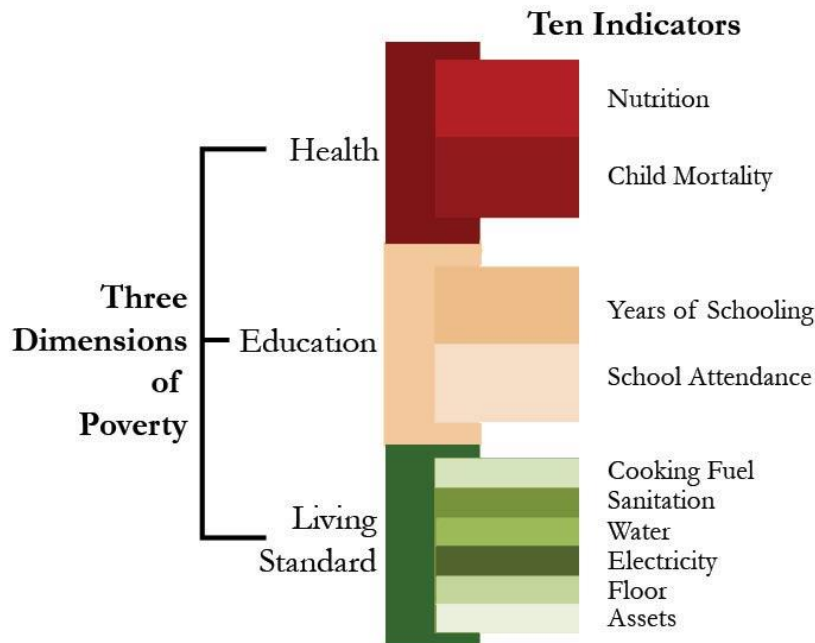
resources required to maintain a certain minimal standard of living. For example, an absolute poverty line can be set ,based on factors such as the financial resources needed for the most basic needs or the income level required to purchase basic food needs”.

4. **Relative Poverty:** This refers to the economic status of a family whose income is insufficient to meet its society’s average standard of living. According to Newman (2011), relative poverty includes individuals with poor health, low levels of education and skills, the inability or unwillingness to work, individuals with high levels of disruptive and disorderly behavior, problems with alcoholism and substance abuse and mental illness. Individuals whose inability and whose dysfunctional conditions do not allow them to fully participate in the community, are also considered in this category. In other words, people who are excluded from the mainstream of economic and social life experience relative poverty because of social marginalization, lack of education, low income, poor language skills, and other factors that prevent a genuine integration into mainstream society (Berg:2008)
5. **Hidden Poverty:** This condition is similar to relative poverty in that people may have adequate food and shelter, but lacks other basic needs, such as sufficient heat in cold weather or access to health care and do not report such needs. Also deprivation of remote populations may be hidden.
6. **Terminal Poverty:** Those who are poor at the beginning and the end of their lives.
7. **Endemic Poverty:** Poverty caused by low productivity and poor resource base, reflected by low income, poor nutrition and health, often affecting smallholders on rain-fed farmlands, displaced banana workers, small –scale fishermen and herders.
8. **Overcrowding Poverty:** Population is heavily concentrated into area of high density.
9. **Income Poverty:** It is the condition of not having enough income to meet basic needs for food, clothing ,and shelter.
10. **New Poverty:** Poverty caused due to globalized economies, high rates of unemployment, inflation and recession, including low rates of farmers’ products, high rates of loans etc. This also include poverty due to expansion of market interests of MNCs, TNCs and other national and international players.

Multidimensional Poverty (Index):

Poverty has multiple interdependent dimensions. Prioritization of these dimensions depends on the ideological positions of the policy makers and political leaders. The recent Human Development Report -2011 of UNDP has re-constructed MPI. This international measure of poverty index (MPI) “complements income-based poverty measures by reflecting the multiple deprivations that people face at the same time. The MPI identifies deprivations across health, education and living standards, and shows the number of people who are multidimensionality

poor and the deprivations that they face at the household level. It uses ten indicators across three dimensions, as the diagram below shows” (OPHI: 2011).



Source: Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative, Oxford Department of International Development, University Of Oxford.

From the above diagram it is clear that MPI of UNDP construes poverty in three (3) critical dimensions (Health, Education and Living Standard) and measures the same with respect to ten (10) indicators. What is interesting about the MPI is that it also reflects on the intensity of poverty. This index not only identifies who is poor but also how they are poor. It enables us to understand the various sources of poverty and to understand shifts in the composition of poverty over time.

All the above types of poverty are directly or indirectly relevant to education. Understanding the poverty conditions of students is crucial to uncover their hidden energies, unleash creative potentials and develop capabilities. Before discussing the relationship between education and poverty, it is desirable to briefly present some of the dominant approaches and perspectives on poverty.

Theories of Poverty:

Economists and social scientists have classified theories of poverty in different ways. However, from a comprehensive review of research and classical and modern debates on poverty, we may identify the following five important theories about poverty.

1. Theory of Individual Deficiencies:

According to this theory, poverty stems from individual deficiencies and individuals are responsible for their poverty situations. An extreme version of this theory believes that poor people basically lack intelligence and creativity. Because they are born with such weak and scrawny genetic qualities they have become poor. Advocates of this theory attribute reasons for being poor as a personal failure. Hence causes for becoming poor are within individuals, but not beyond them. This explanation of poverty has roots in some religious doctrines, which believed that poor people exist in this world because they are punished by God. And the punishment is for their misdeeds and sins committed. Neo-classical economics reinforces these beliefs by stating that the individual is largely responsible for his/her individual choices. They claim that poor lack sufficient motivation to work hard to liberate themselves from poverty. This is purely a conservative approach to poverty.

2. Theory of the Culture of Poverty:

One of the important functions of any culture is to transmit beliefs, attitudes, values, morals and skills that are socially generated but individually held. Many times such historically transmitted cultural values push individuals and communities into poverty and make them dysfunctional. Ruby Payne's framework for understanding poverty is basically derived from the theory of culture of poverty. For her, poor children carry distinct values, attitudes, interests, and mindsets in to classrooms and these cultural values are governed by the hidden rules of the poor communities. Bradshaw (2006) says, "the culture of poverty is a subculture of poor people in ghettos, poor regions, or social contexts where they develop a shared set of beliefs, values and norms for behavior that are separate from but embedded in the culture of the main society." In other words, the 'culture of poverty' is a set of beliefs and values transmitted from generation to generation and reinforced in subcultures of disadvantaged communities (Oscar Lewis, 1998).

According to Thalia M. Mulvihill and Raji Swaminathan (2006), "Cultural theories of poverty support the stance that poverty is the result of poor life choices and an inability to be responsible. The cause of poverty is, therefore, lack of moral character, and the way out of poverty would be education that is aimed at improving moral character". This theory of poverty is basically a cultural liberal approach to poverty.

3. Theory of Structural Inequalities (Economic, Political and Social Distortions or Discrimination):

According to this perspective neither an individual nor a sub-culture is a source of poverty. What causes people to become poor is the economic, political, and social systems. These systems and their structures provide limited resources and opportunities to overcome poverty. In other words, systems are so designed that they do not allow poor people to move forward towards creating assets for constructing better life.

4. Theory of Geographical Disparities:

According to Bradshaw (2006), “. . .this theory calls attention to the fact that people, institutions and cultures in certain areas lack the objective resources needed to generate well being and income, and that they lack the power to claim redistribution.” Recent explanations of this theory of poverty redefined ‘space’ and ‘spatial expression’. Advocates of this theory search for causes behind geographical disparities in the politics of development and political economy of the state and communities.

5. Theory of Cumulative and Cyclical Interdependencies:

Poverty is caused not due to a single cause, but multiple causes which are cumulative and interdependent. According Bradshaw (2000; 2006) this theory is “the most complex and to some degree builds on components of each of the other theories in that it looks at the individual and their community as caught in a spiral of opportunity and problems, and that make any effective response nearly impossible”. For this theory individual situations and community resources are mutually dependent. This theory has its origin in the contributions of Gunnar Myrdal (1957) who has explained the nature and politics of economic development and underdevelopment.

Poverty, Caste and Education:

What is important to note in this context is that all the above mentioned theories look at reality from different perspectives. Teacher educators need to understand the implications of these theories to the field of education and particularly to pedagogy and other curricular practices. They need to learn how to read poverty from multiple perspectives. Critical readings of poverty from different standpoints challenge the dominant social constructions of poverty that always perpetuate inequalities in society and weaken possibilities of democracy.

Education is considered as one of the most important factors in improving the quality of life of the people. Quality schooling and good education help people to access economic, social and

political resources and opportunities available in the society. Hence, it is necessary to search for answers to the following questions:

How are poverty, caste and education related ?

Why do children from Dalit communities not attend school regularly ?

How does poverty affect children and their education ?

What does poverty and caste mean for children ?

How does the relative lack of income influence children's day-to-day lives ?

How does family income influence child and adolescent well-being ?

How do the following experiences influence children and children's education ?

- a) Inadequate nutrition; b) Fewer and poor learning experiences;
- c) Instability of Residence; d) Lower quality of Schools; e) Low literacy
- f) Exposure to environmental hazards/Vulnerability to natural disasters;
- g) Family and societal violence; h) Human trafficking and High Crime rate
- i) Homelessness; j) Insecurity and ill health; k) Hunger ,starvation and suicides
- l) Less access to services, resources and opportunities
- m) Caste exploitation and Caste discrimination and Social exclusion

Hence, understanding how income poverty and caste poverty operate across the above mentioned experiences of children and in turn influence on children emotions, abilities, learning and education is the most important challenge before teacher educators today. According to Thalia M. Mulvihill and Raji Swaminathan (2006), "to adequately deal with issues of poverty in their classrooms, teacher education students need to be conversant with the multiple discourses of poverty and require opportunities to develop empathetic responses to poverty and learn to think about poverty from multiple points of view. Additionally, teachers need to learn a range of strategies that will shatter their assumptions about poverty and in turn prepare them to respond in a variety of ways".

Contemporary research in neurobiology and early brain development studies have highlighted the importance of understanding the early years of childhood and early childhood education.

We need to work out the implications of this research to the field of early childhood teacher preparation. In the Indian context, historically poverty and caste are intertwined and one cannot see them as separate entities and realities of life. Children coming from poor poverty and Dalit background need to be handled carefully and at the same time they need to be empowered with critical literacy skills and cognitive abilities.

In the context of education it is crucial to understand poverty as a risk factor. Children who are at risk are likely to fail in school or in life because of their life's social circumstances. "It does not appear that any one single factor places a child at-risk. Rather, when more than one factor is present, there is a compounding effect and the likelihood for failure increases significantly. Poverty is considered a major at-risk factor (Leroy & Symes, 2001). Some of the factors related to poverty that may place a child at-risk for academic failure are: very young, single or low educational level parents; unemployment; abuse and neglect; substance abuse; dangerous neighborhoods; homelessness; mobility; and exposure to inadequate or inappropriate educational experiences". (Technology-Online Resource for Teachers)

What is important is that understanding the effects of poverty and caste on children and how education influences their thinking and life. Since the experiences of children in poverty and caste are highly complex, we need to work out creative pedagogic solutions and methodological approaches. How do we expand and restructure the knowledge domain of the teachers with regard to understanding the complex experiences of children is a very big challenge. It is imperative that teachers and teacher educators become more aware and knowledgeable about the complex relationships between poverty, caste and education. This would enable them to serve children in their institutions of learning.

Teacher educators should work on developing pedagogical interventions and designing learning spaces for the purpose of understanding the cultural backgrounds of poor and dalit students. This would help teachers and teacher educators to work more successfully in their classrooms and transform themselves as professional leaders in their field of work. The teacher educators should focus on research that engages directly with children and parents to gain a grounded and informed insight into their lives, experiences and concerns. Some of the themes and issues to be addressed are :

1. Understand the complex relationships between poverty, caste and education
2. Explore which school inputs are most effective, and at what levels of education.
3. Critically reflect and analyze child and family poverty and caste background and identify gaps in our knowledge about the lives and experiences of children and families
4. Explore childhood poverty and caste backdrop from children's perspectives and their accounts of their lives and their experiences of living in poverty

5. Examine and understand family poverty and caste experiences by undertaking qualitative research with parents in disadvantage, and explore the challenges faced by families experiencing poverty in their everyday lives.
6. Understand how do teachers build their theories about poverty and caste and what discourses influence their understanding. Also examine the influence of teachers' understanding on their classroom and professional practice.

Qualitative research studies in the light of the above, would provide vital social and relational dimension to understand the impact and effects of poverty and caste on children's education. Further, such studies will have considerable potential to inform policy making in the provision of welfare and services, social, economic and educational support and the alleviation of poverty. (Tess Ridge: 2009).

CONCLUSION

Teacher educators need to understand the complex relationships between caste, poverty, social exclusion and education. And construe poverty as a multi-dimensional reality and it must be seen as more than lack of income. They must recognize it as a lack of access to opportunities for a sustainable livelihood (income, assets, skills, knowledge, self-confidence and access to decision making). Teacher educators ought to understand the principles and philosophy of the Constitution and must emerge as leaders in evaluating the public policies and state interventions and developmental programmes. Such critical engagement and creative participation in civic education would transform teacher education departments and make them relevant to people and society.

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