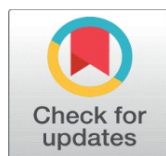


# STUDENT AGENCY IN CLASSROOM: AN OVERVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

In majority of schools, we see learners who are usually marked as errant, non-conforming and rule breaking. We try to understand them from the viewpoint of school, which may be termed as an 'outsider view' because, in such areas we never give space to the voices of learners. But there is need to explore this from an 'insider view', i.e. understanding, their behaviour from their own viewpoint. This is termed as 'student agency' in academic literature. In this research paper, the researcher has tried to interpret and understand student's agency in two different ways. One genera try to explain about the reasons and features of student agency and see it in the form of subcultural groupings and other genera move a step forward from causes and features of student agency and try to find other nuances of this and see it as a resource for creating democratic teaching learning environment.

**Keywords:** Student Agency, Learners, Viewpoint

## 1. INTRODUCTION

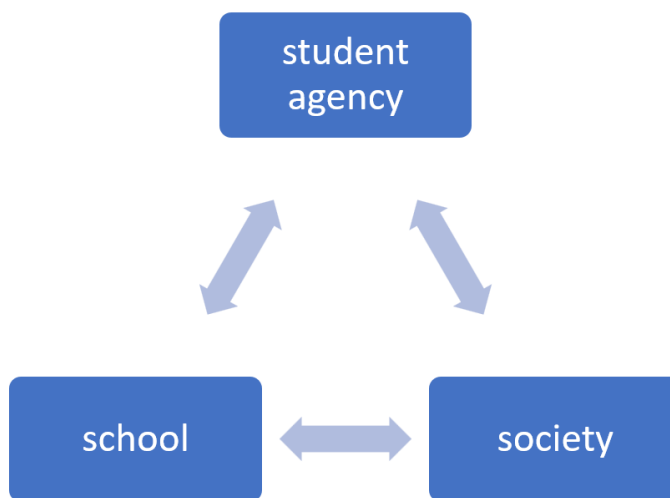
"Student agency refers to the quality of students' self-reflective and intentional action and interaction with their environment. It encompasses variable notions of agentic possibility ("power") and agentic orientation ("will"). The notions of agentic possibility and orientation are temporally embedded, implying that they are shaped through considerations of past habits of mind and action, present judgments of alternatives for action and projections of the future. They are also intrinsically relational and social, and situated in structural, cultural and socio-economic-political contexts of action." (Klemenčič, 2015)

In other words, we may say that student agency is influenced by the socio-political, cultural and economic ethos of the school or of the particular society.

Student agency is something which can be developed by individual students or a group of students. By exerting agency students do not just influence their own educational trajectories but also their future lives and immediate social surroundings. In other words, all the activities which are done by students are in some way or the other are geared towards changing themselves and their conditions and subsequently social and economic milieus of the society.

So we may say that it's a two way process, on the one hand school and society influence the forms and features of agency shown by the students and on the other hand student agency may also affect the ethos of school and society.

We may also create a multidimensional linkage among student agency, school and wider society, which may be tracked down in following chart:



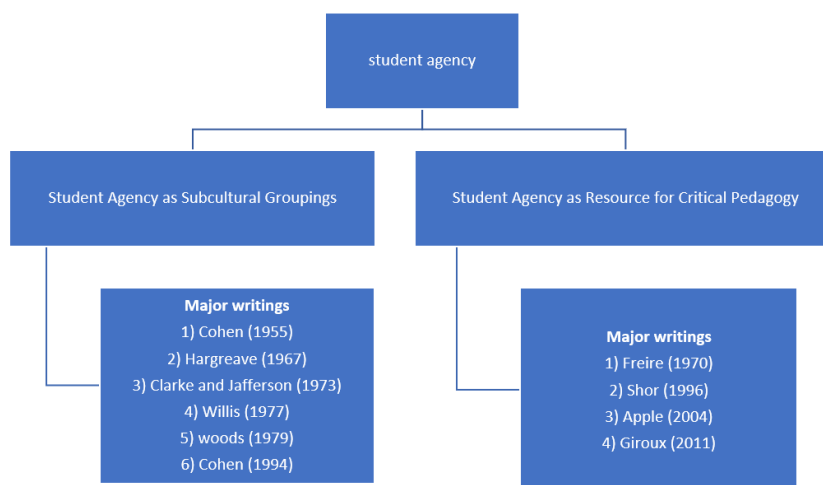
In this way it become quite relevant to understand the nuances of student agency as it play a crucial role in shaping up the wider scholastic and social ethos and vice versa.

## 2. TRACING THE IDEA OF STUDENT AGENCY

During my search for relevant literatures on the issue of student agency, I encountered many writings which were written in different space and time and all the readings had different explanations and views about student agency. It was a tough task to synthesize all the readings in one single paradigm. So I tried to divide them in two categories for convenience. These categories are not rigid and fixed. There might be some overlap between them and some other categories may also be included if necessary in further course of study.

But at present, two categories which I tried to formulate to systemize the idea of student agency which is provided by different intellectuals and writers are as follows:

- 1) Student agency as subcultural groupings;
- 2) Student agency as resource for critical pedagogy



### 3. STUDENT AGENCY AS SUBCULTURAL GROUPINGS

First group basically, focus on finding out the reasons and features of student agency. They usually limit the definition of agency of student in the boundaries of activities done by a group of student and reject the agency of singular students. Most of the writers of this genera see student subculture as the form of student agency. In this form of presentation of agency, students formulate groups within schools which have their own rules and regulations. It's a way used by these students to adjust themselves or to open up a dialogue with the school system. It could be a reaction to school ethos or could be independent of it. Many writers of this genre have discussed about different forms of subcultures which are formulated by students in order to show their agency.

For example- Cohen (1955) and Hargreave (1967) explained in the context of America and Britain respectively that delinquent subculture formulation is a way used by working class students or students belonging to lower class to gain self-worth in the school. Delinquent subculture is a group or gang of students who use 'illegitimate' means to attain success. Cohen (1955) explained that these students feel isolated in the school and teachers also look down upon them due to their lower socio-economic status. Due to this, they feel alienated from the school system and indulge in delinquent activities in order to gain self-worth. In his another work Cohen (1994) tried to jot down the features of delinquent subculture, some of them are as follows.

- 1) These gangs are autonomous in nature and there is solidarity among the members of these groups;
- 2) These people show hostility towards members of other groups and the adults;
- 3) These groups are short lived and hedonistic i.e. these groups do not have ambitions for being long term delinquent or criminals;

Delinquent subculture is quite versatile and different forms of activities are conducted by these people.

Most of the writings explain that student who belong to lower working class group are the ones who create delinquent subculture, this explanation may be true. But I feel that this explanation is one sided and written in a particular time frame and space. As the time period in which these writings were done was the period of industrial development in the West. During that time, there was huge gap between the working class group and bourgeoisie and they were seeing working class group with suspicion. But the situation have changed a lot in present times. Industrialization have surpassed and now this is the era of globalization. In this age, it would not be apt to proclaim that, the delinquency is only limited to working class group or lower socio-economic group. There are ample examples where the students who belong to upper class are also indulging in delinquent activities. For example- FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) published a report in the year 2007, in which it presented that 71.1% of crimes done by students in USA are done by white students and handguns amount for 58% of weapons used for crimes. Although, this report doesn't say it explicitly but it can be understood from this report that most of the offenders either belong to middle class or upper class and percentage of working class students is less as getting hold on handguns is not an easy task for a working class student.

As a result of change in scenario, this idea of equating student agency with delinquent subculture diminished and it was replaced by the popularization of the idea of seeing youth culture<sup>1</sup> as a form of student agency. This idea was mostly circulated by CCCS (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies). It was a research center at the University of Birmingham and was established in the year 1964. This center did many pioneer works in the field of identifying and studying the youth culture and popular culture. This center never saw youth culture as a monolithic identity rather it tried to find out the socio-political and economic reasons behind the formulation of different forms of youth culture.

This center published many working papers on the impact of industrialization on the development of youth culture. Most popular among them was Clarke and Jefferson's paper on Mods and Skinheads subculture which was published in the year 1973. In this paper, Clarke and Jefferson (1973) explained about reasons of development of youth cultures. According to them, many social changes came into being after American civil war and industrialization which created

<sup>1</sup> Youth culture has been defined as the culture shown by youth which have distinct styles, behaviors and interests. Some youth cultures are hostile towards dominant cultures so they are sometime termed as counter culture also. There are different forms of youth culture which are based on the socio-economic and cultural situation and ideology of its members. For example- Mods youth culture is based on middle class consumerist ideology (this ideology is based on idea of acquiring good and services in high amount irrespective of dearth of resources to pay for those goods and services) and skinheads culture is based on working class ideology (this ideology is against the idea of consumerism and capitalism).

firm ground for the development of these subcultures. Some of the social changes which were explained by them are as follows:

- 1) Migration of people from rural areas to urban areas;
- 2) Change in the idea and content of leisure, for example- local bars were replaced by pubs as the area of partying;
- 3) Increase in the number of nuclear families and loosening of ties with extended families;
- 4) Development of welfare state to bring about consensus politics and to facilitate the consumption of surplus good produced by the capitalists.

All these socio-political changes also influenced the education system which got reflected in 1944's Education Act of America. It created an aura of providing equal opportunity of education for all students and projected education as an open and achievement oriented process. Due to this, onus of success and failure of any child was attributed to that student's capabilities rather than the class and socio economic milieus. Due to all these changes, education and especially school remained an alien things for working class students and they were not feeling connected with the curriculum of the school. This kind of aura has also been created in context of India by introduction of RTE (Right to Education) 2009. This act came into being with a spirit of providing access of education to all the students irrespective of their caste, gender and religion. This spirit was also visible in the proclamation made in this Act according to which there is a provision to reserve 25% seats of Private schools for the students of EWS Category (Economically Weaker Section). On the one hand, this act paved way for further increase in the shades of heterogeneity in the classrooms and on the other hand, schools are struggling hard to handle this huge arena of socio-economic and cultural disparities. It will be interesting to see how agency of students unfolds in this scenario?

Although, it would be too soon to proclaim about the results of this kind of intervention, but to get some ideas about how interventions of this sort had previously influenced other nations then we find that it has paved way for creation of various youth cultures among the students and most popular among them were- Mods Youth Culture and Skinheads Youth culture in the context of West. These youth cultures have been explained in writings of CCCS in great detail. Those writings explain that, both these cultures were quite varied from each other in terms of their reason of origin and composition. On the one hand, Mods Youth Subculture was influenced by consumerist ideology and on the other hand, Skinheads culture was against consumerist ideas and was a follower of working class ideas. The features of both culture were also different, for example- customized dresses, music and use of neurosis pills was part of Mods Youth culture and members of skinhead Youth Culture believed in loyalty towards football and its members, violence and queer bashing. In this way, writings published by CCCS have also saw these groups as isolated from the other students and explained the features and reason of formulation of student agency which is shown in the form of Youth culture. In other words, we may also say that researchers of this organization have also defined student agency in form of subcultural groupings only.

On similar lines, Willis (1973) explained that students create counter school cultures in the school in order to show their agency. He elaborated that working class students do not feel connected with the meritocratic arrangement of school and try to project their agency by breaking the rules of school and by indulging in activities like smoking, drinking etc. He also followed the path of his predecessors and only tried to explain the features of these subcultural groups and didn't try to explore the potential of agency of this group in creation of better teaching learning environment. Other thing which is also necessary is that we also need to examine the fact whether similar situation can be seen in other society as well. For example- Kipnis (2001) tried to explain that this idea of counter school culture may not be replicated in the case of China, because education system of China is quite different from the education system of Europe and America and students have less space to formulate groups and to show their agency. But still students show their agency in the form of resistance by doing activities like cheating during exams and by disrespecting teachers.

In this way, we may conclude that this genera of educationists see subcultural groupings as the sole expression of student agency. They have an idea that these students are not satisfied with the things, ideas and attitudes offered by the schools so they indulge in these anti-school activities in order to show their agency. But it would be interesting to see whether such kind of subcultural grouping are present in Indian classrooms or not? Other than this, one question also remain salient whether the activities like running out of school, scribbling in textbooks while teacher is teaching and deliberately not giving answers to teachers may also be understood in same line or we need some other theoretical lens in order to project light on these issues?

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In the next section, I tried to see the other side of the coin, i.e. seeing student agency as resource for critical pedagogy.

#### 4. STUDENT AGENCY AS RESOURCE FOR CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

In most of the literatures discussed above, student's agency in the form of subcultural grouping has been explained as a way used by these students to oppose the dominant school ethos. Most of these readings explain them as a problem for functioning of school and see them as anomaly. These readings do not try to discuss about the ideas of creation of dialogue with this group in order to create better teaching learning environment.

This type of work is done by another genera of educational thinkers and Researchers whom may be placed under the domain of Critical Pedagogues. These are the pedagogues who follow the ideas of Critical Pedagogy which is influenced by the ideas of Critical Theory, which develops from a history of intellectual writings and activism and most of them are generally associated with politically left ideology. These writings and activism are not unitary rather they offer a variety of theoretical perspectives, which provide a multi- facet image to critical theory. Some of the traditions which contributed to the contemporary critical theory are Marxism and neo- Marxism theories influenced by Frankfurt School and London Institute of Education. Other than this, trends like new sociology of school knowledge which deal with concepts of power structures of school, hidden curriculum and relative autonomy also provide theoretical underpinnings to critical theory. Subcultural theory which try to explain gender and race issues in context of education is also one of the aspect which is dealt under critical theory. Due to the influence of these varied perspectives and associated traditions critical theory is unified around a set of assumptions and values rather than a single unified theory.

From this brief introduction of critical theory and critical pedagogy, we may conclude that this is a unique blend of different ideas and philosophies and have varied views about each and every topic which is related to education. This multidimensionality is also visible in the issue of how student agency is understood in this paradigm. They see student agency not only in the limited purview of subculture rather see it as a source for knowledge creation. One of the most popular writing which may be placed in this genera is of Freire (1970). He saw education as the only source for attainment of emancipation. He was one of the first person who tried to bring oppressed class in the focus of school education and provided the idea of 'Problem Posing Pedagogy' based on the concept of 'dialogical education' to bring 'conscientization' among the 'oppressed'. Although, he explicitly didn't used the term 'Student's Agency' still, his work is a pioneer in understanding this idea. The stress on agency of learner is visible in various instances in his writing. Most important among them is allowing students to create their own curriculum on the basis of generative themes i.e. the themes which develops gradually during the course of dialogue with the students and become a basis for development of curriculum. These ideas and techniques were followed by one of his follower, i.e. Shor (1996). He used this technique in his classroom in order to amalgamate those students who were suffering from Siberian syndrome. Shor explained this syndrome in following words:

"This Siberian syndrome is one form of agency in the contact zone of mass education. It is a defensive reaction to the unequal power relations to schooling, which include unilateral authority to teacher and a curriculum evading critical thoughts about history, language and culture of students. Facing unilateral authority that disempowers them politically and disables them intellectually, most students in my classes position themselves in the Siberian Corners where they can carry out a variety of Gorilla resistances" (Shor, 1996, 13).

He provided space to student's agency in order to decide the curriculum, time table and assessment techniques of the course which lead to the development of an interactive class and students were not feeling alienated. In addition to this, he also tried to understand the relation between teacher, taught and content in order to facilitate the learning of the students. In his writing, we find that role of teacher is most important in channelizing the energy of student agency for creation of better teaching learning environment. Giroux (2011) have also emphasized this argument by expounding the idea that pedagogy is a moral and performative practice and educators have pivotal role to play in this situation.

Apple (2004) moved a step forward and tried to create a web among ideas of power, economy and education. He explained that economy and power try to hegemonies education system and leave less space for students to put forward their experiences in the classroom. In his writings, he also emphasized on the point that, even in this hegemonic system there are still some spaces left for students to record their resistance and these spaces may be utilized by student to show their agency. Giroux (2011) also talked about agency of students while trying to provide a suggestive account of how changes can be brought up 'in the school system' and 'through the school system'. He explained that teachers have



a very crucial role to play in channelizing the agency of the students and propagated the ideas of Public and Radical pedagogy. His ideas can be summarized in his quote- *Teacher as Intellectual*.

The idea of devising radical pedagogy have also been used in India in the project namely – Hoshangabad Science Teaching Project (HSTP). This project started in 1972 and basically focused on development of innovative curriculum based on ideas of ‘discovery’ learning for Science subject. The curriculum designers provided ample space to students to share their experiences in the classroom and most of the content taught in the classroom was tied to immediate environment of the students. This project paved way to bring ‘student agency’ in the classroom. Some of the members of Hoshangabad Science Teaching Project including Prof. Anita Rampal who was the chairperson of the Advisory Committee for Textbooks at the Primary level played a key role in development of textbooks of class I-V (EVS) which were based on NCF (2005) ideas of creating child-centered education. Other than advocating child centered education NCF 2005 also talks about creation of a class in which teacher and taught should work together in the process of knowledge creation. In this way, we can say that NCF 2005, position papers and the textbooks based on it also somehow give space to student agency and see it as a way to create a dialogical class.

In this way we may conclude that, there are two genera of writings who tried to interpret and understand student’s agency in two different ways. One genera try to explain about the reasons and features of student agency and see it in the form of subcultural groupings and other genera move a step forward from causes and features of student agency and try to find other nuances of this and see it as a resource for creating democratic teaching learning environment.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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