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IRAN

THREE TEACHING 'SATURDAYS' AND FOUCAULT'S 'KNOWLEDGE-POWER': DISCOURSE IN THE SHADOW OF UNSETTLED SOCIAL SITUATION IN IRAN

AUTHOR

Hamid Hamidi
Tehran Art University

ABSTRACT

This article describes three Saturdays of my experience as a photography teacher at an art school in Tehran, involving two training and one exam session. This experience is informed by a critical approach to the quality of education influenced by the philosophy of Michel Foucault. Through the articulation of my experience, I intend to illustrate a small part of the education community with an approach to the cultural, artistic, and social discourses and theories of Michel Foucault. I believe that Foucault's thinking is rooted in the various events that took place in that time and place of my art school. I adopt Foucault's perspective for various reasons, including his writing style, lack of insistence on his views, and respect for the right to change in life. Reflecting on my memories, experiences and daily studies have formed my research, composed of narration, creation and artistic application.

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INTRODUCTION

At the time of writing this article, Iranian teachers are plagued by social unrest and widespread protests by teachers' over low salaries and the poor quality of Iranian education because of misguided structures, and a stressful and destructive education system. The purpose of this reflection is to describe these erroneous structures with the hope of improving the quality of teaching, and at the same time bringing enlightenment and self-cultivation to my process. I have selected my sources of information from the manuscripts and memoirs of teaching, as well as the books and articles I have read about Michel Foucault.

Encountering the 17 SDG goals, I believe that one of the most important is #4, quality of education, which is directly related to and affected by the network of power in society and its relationship to current discourses (United Nations 2022). This intersects with the current issues of social unrest that inspired my thinking with Foucault's discourse. Michel Foucault analyzed these relationships and believes in the evident and hidden cultural factors that influence how discourses unfold (Foucault & Bouchard 2021). Therefore, I consider the quality of education as a discourse in which all people talk or think, and that then influences various cultural and social factors, especially power relations, in ways that effectively define and introduce a sense of identity. In other words, SDG #4, or any other quality, has an original nature, but the networks of power within which we operate influence our knowledge of it. As Foucault stated, 'Do not ask me who I am and do not expect to remain who I am' (Foucault 2019: 98). In this article, I attempt to realize the quality of education through my daily teaching experiences, which may seem very ordinary but potentially momentous, in relation to shifting discourses in Iran.

According to Mills (2020), 'Discourse is one of the most frequent terms that Foucault employs to explain his philosophy, and at the same time, one of the most contradictory meanings. Foucault gives different definitions of this term throughout his works'(p. 90). There are discourses about our social life that affect our teaching and encourage us to strengthen ourselves, however many of these discourses seem to be ideological such as the discourse of 'being the best', the discourse of 'creativity', the discourse of 'progress', or the discourse of 'commitment'. Discourse is a set of propositions that

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intertwine with other propositions, guided by a set of statements that cause the dissemination of certain utterances and more propositions. The scope of some statements of discourses is vast while others are very limited. An example of dominant discourse is the Bible which can be found in many homes and in different versions (Mills 2020: 90).

Discourses are not only about what can be said or thought, but also about 'who can speak, when and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social communication. It shapes the mentality as well as the socio-political connections of power. For Foucault, discourses are actions that systematically shape the subjects that speak for themselves' (Azdanlu 2019: 17). Discourses may be engaging or challenging, and in this sense, we may seek to change them or surrender to them. Foucault has explained the relationship between discourse and power, and does not necessarily define power in terms of its expression. In Foucault's thinking, 'politics does not revolve around the personalities of leaders who have utopian dreams for the future and whose followers are required to adopt certain sets of beliefs. Instead, it describes a policy that considers the changing and new possibilities in the realm of the "now"' (Mills 2020: 34). The following text is a review of everyday experiences under the influence of popular and common discourses in the education environment in Iran. This is intended to serve as a study of resistance to them.

FIRST SATURDAY

Today is Saturday and I wake up hesitant to go to school. This year is my last year of work, and I have decided to retire. This sense of doubt is familiar to me, whenever I feel obligated to do something, this doubt discloses itself. I will be an invigilator for the exam today, and supervise students who are new to me and have not had classes with me before. I am not in favour of exams and grades specifically. I am embarrassed to note that some of my colleagues use it as a lever to exert pressure on the students and gain power over them. I am a teacher of workshop courses, and I never design traditional exams for my students. Thus, I am wondering why should I invigilate and watch the exams? This is an obligation that my position requires as a teacher in a high school, yet when I ask this question, the education system has no answer for it.

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I am reading Foucault's theories these days, and I came across the following passage in the book, *Discipline and Punish*: The exam combines custodial placement techniques with normative punishment techniques. The exam is a normative agreement, nursing that activates the punishment and defines the quality of classification. Exam establishes a kind of visibility in individuals through which individuals are differentiated and evaluated (Foucault 2020). In fact, I feel like a detention officer who has to watch out for students convicted of being a student and who must pay a heavy penalty by writing an exam. I have 30 years of experience being in these situations as an invigilator, which is very unpleasant. For a moment, I thought of an excuse to escape this responsibility, but as always, a familiar morality intervened, and I picked up Sarah Mills' book about Foucault and carried on.

I am in school and it is 8 a.m. They show me one of the classes where the exam is taking place. Ten students are sitting apart due to the prevalence of COVID-19, and all of them are wearing masks. I sit in my chair and say hello to the students and begin to read my book. The school loudspeaker warns students of the need for a required exam. The moderator goes to the classes one-by-one when the exam starts. In the class I am invigilating, the moderator called a student and ask him to take off his hat.

'Why didn't you cut your hair? Come out!' The moderator exclaimed.

The angry student leaves and returns a few minutes later, muttering, 'Why don't others have to cut their hair short? I will not be put under this burden of discrimination'.

I walk to his side and try to comfort him. I calmly ask what happened. He points to the person in front of him wearing a hat.

'Why doesn't he have to cut his hair? Why do they only penalize me?'

Out of curiosity, I ask the other student to take off his hat to check his hair. He takes off his hat, and I notice he has long hair but hides it. I ask him why he was not called out by the moderator.

'Sir, I have permission. I play a role in a short film, and the director has given a letter to the school'.

I am not sure what to say, and ask the rest of the students to write as their time for the exam is limited. I realize another odd disparity in the education community. Again, I begin to read my book and look again for what I read last night about an optimistic view of power: '... Foucault attempts to change our attitude by making us think about power, and how power is put into action in the concrete relations between individuals and institutions' (Mills 2020: 59).

Mills borrows from Thorne Barrow, and states that Foucault, unlike Marxist theorists, is not interested in discussing repression by powers. Instead, he is more interested in the resistances formed against power. He takes a more critical approach, arguing that although not all of Foucault's theories have transparency, 'his theories are welcomed by various social activists because he examines the relationship between states, ideologies, and smaller powers such as patriarchy' (Mills 2020: 60). After some time sitting in the exam session, I lift my head. Usually, when I am an invigilator, I try to keep myself busy so that students do not feel that I am guarding them. And I think, am I also a mediator in exercising power over students by being an invigilator? Is this an abhorrent role that I have? Or does society need such discipline and supervision?

One of the students hesitantly held up his hand, and I thought he had trouble reading the questions.

'Sir, do you agree with this behaviour and attitude at our school?'

I said no, and involuntarily and immediately asked, 'How about you? Do you agree?'

Some begin talking, arguing and objecting, while some agreed with this regulation and spoke that it is the law, and we must respect it. Another says that racism was a law in the United States, but was it respected forever?

'Sir, this is not very difficult. In other schools, they use an electric clipper in the middle of children's heads to force them to cut their hair short'.

The students began to discuss with each other and nobody cared about the exam and cheating anymore. The conversation was drawn to terms such

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as freedom, law, domination, and coercion. One of the students disagrees with the crowd and argues that absolute freedom has no meaning, and freedom is relative to its context. I try to be careful to keep the discipline of the exam session and encourage students to respect the opinions of others. As a momentive response to this situation, and with a background of calligraphy practice, I write in coloured chalk on a blackboard:
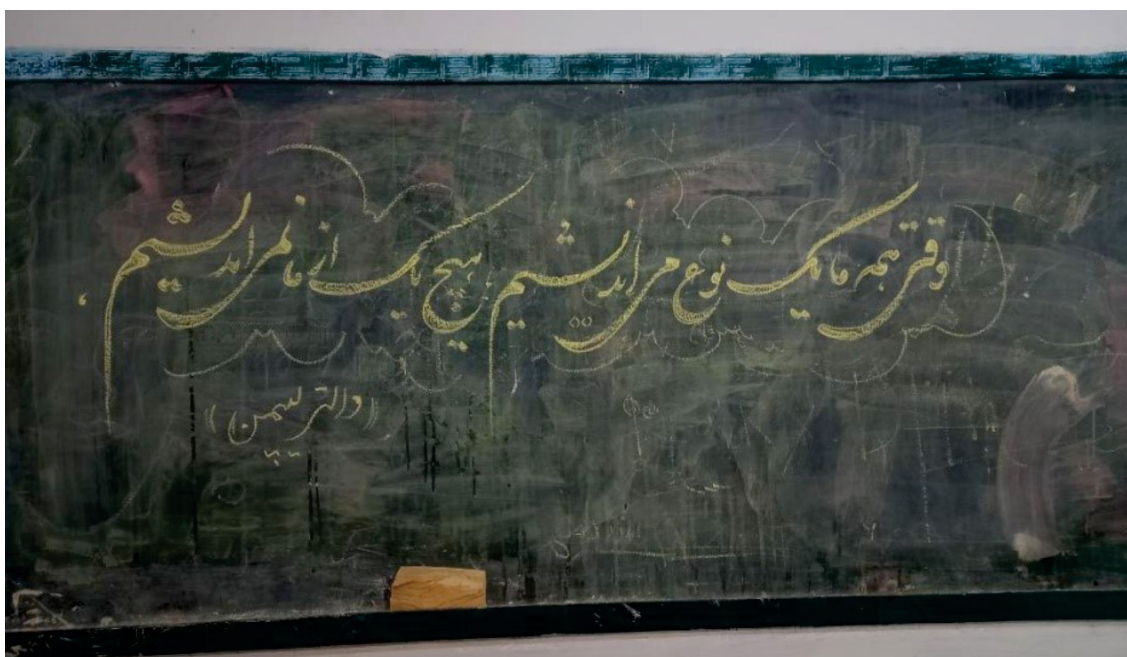
Figure 1.
Author, 2022. When we all think the same way, none of us think. (Walter Lippmann)

One of the students in the front row underlines, but does not write anything on his exam. With respect, I approach him and ask, 'Why don't you write something'?

'I hate school and studying', he says. 'I want to study in Norway.'

'So why are you coming to school?'

'Because of my mother. She insists, but I do not like the style of teaching in our school'.

Instantly I write down Foucault's definition of discourse as 'propositions that resist power'. On that note, and to ensure I did not disturb other

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students, I refused to continue the discussion and returned to my desk, searching for education in Norway. I found an article worth reading about the Norwegian educational system, prepared by the Cultural Counselor of the Islamic Republic of Iran in March 2017. Since the late 1990s, the Norwegian government has noticed the poor performance of its education system. As a result, all the country's leaders, from conservative to socialist parties, have helped to improve educational performance by finding the reason for their weakness. According to Clement Kristin, the Minister of Education of Norway, it took three years for the national dialogue to shed light on the scale of the problem and bring together people involved in the reform program, from politicians to teachers and locals. As a result of these evaluations, Norwegian education has been transformed into a flexible, knowledge-based system over the past two decades and a new curriculum has been rewritten based on the new reform. These educational changes and reforms have had a great impact on the educational performance of Norway in various fields, including science and mathematics, and this has led to its significant improvement nationwide. This new reform provides an education system based on equity as a fundamental principle in their policy. All Norwegian students regardless of area of residence or family class must receive an education of the same quality level. The competition is very low in this kind of education system because all the communities have equal access (Cultural Counseling of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Stockholm 2020).

After this search, I ponder, why did the cultural advisor of the Islamic Republic of Iran prepare and produce this report? Are political systems looking for successful models for their survival or the welfare and progress of the nation state? How compatible, or comparable is the Iranian education system with the Norwegian model? Foucault adopts the term 'biology-politic' in his theory, which explains his political rationality and the rupture of the Renaissance. As Dreyfus and Rabino (2020) note:

> Managers and government agents needed accurate knowledge of their own country and other countries. If the end of this political rationality was state power, then this power should be evaluated in terms of strength and power. Because all other governments played the same political game, their

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comparisons were fundamental. Prosperity and even survival were not the results of the virtue of the pond, the product of strength and ability. Here, too, the essential element was empirical knowledge, not moral theory. Thus, politics became a policy overlooking life. (p. 248)

I think how far Iranian education is in reality from developed countries such as Norway. And what role do we as art educators play in increasing or decreasing this gap? How can an artist, researcher and teacher like me help achieve the goal of equity in SDG #4?

The exam session is almost over and I decide to read the remainder of the report in the office. The teachers are talking about the recent strike and the teachers' union, which has been largely repressed. The livelihood of teachers is under threat due to the low quality of education, economic inflation, and the policies of governments - all the common discourse of Iranian teachers these days. According to Foucault's theories, the discourse of education, which should influence members of society and the next generation, is in a crisis. In this crisis and confusion of propositions, I reflect on the situation to self-cultivate to facilitate conversations and to push the boundaries of limitations.

TABLE 1: ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE, FIRST SATURDAY

Date of the meeting	Discourse forms
Index discourse	youth, hairstyles, watching
Dependent discourses	family, school, education, hierarchy, discipline, law, handsome, teenager, self-cultivation
Resistance to power	long hair, strikes, destruction of school property, conflict with family, ignorance, scrawl, cheat

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SECOND SATURDAY

Today is Saturday again, one week after the exam and beginning of the new semester. Inspired by the main question last week, I decided to begin the conversation for my photography class, 'Why should I cut my hair'? After teaching for many years, I learned to develop lesson plans based on the everyday events occurring in my classes. Therefore, for this class, I have thought about social structures, the relationship between the individual and society, the artist and society, my transformation as a dynamic teacher, and the impact of my students as artists of tomorrow.

The class discussion initiated by this question focused on why it is annoying for teenagers when the school insists they cut their hair short. The response from the students was excellent. The vast majority do not like having short hair, and some have suggested that artists are usually known for their long hair, and it is a very well-known and typical gesture among Iranian communities. However, it is not always possible to keep the discussion in the desired direction, and students usually like to raise their concerns under the pretext of another subject. In doing so, a student seized the opportunity and talked about gender segregation in Iranian schools.

'Sir, why should we be separated from the opposite sex in schools? What's wrong?'
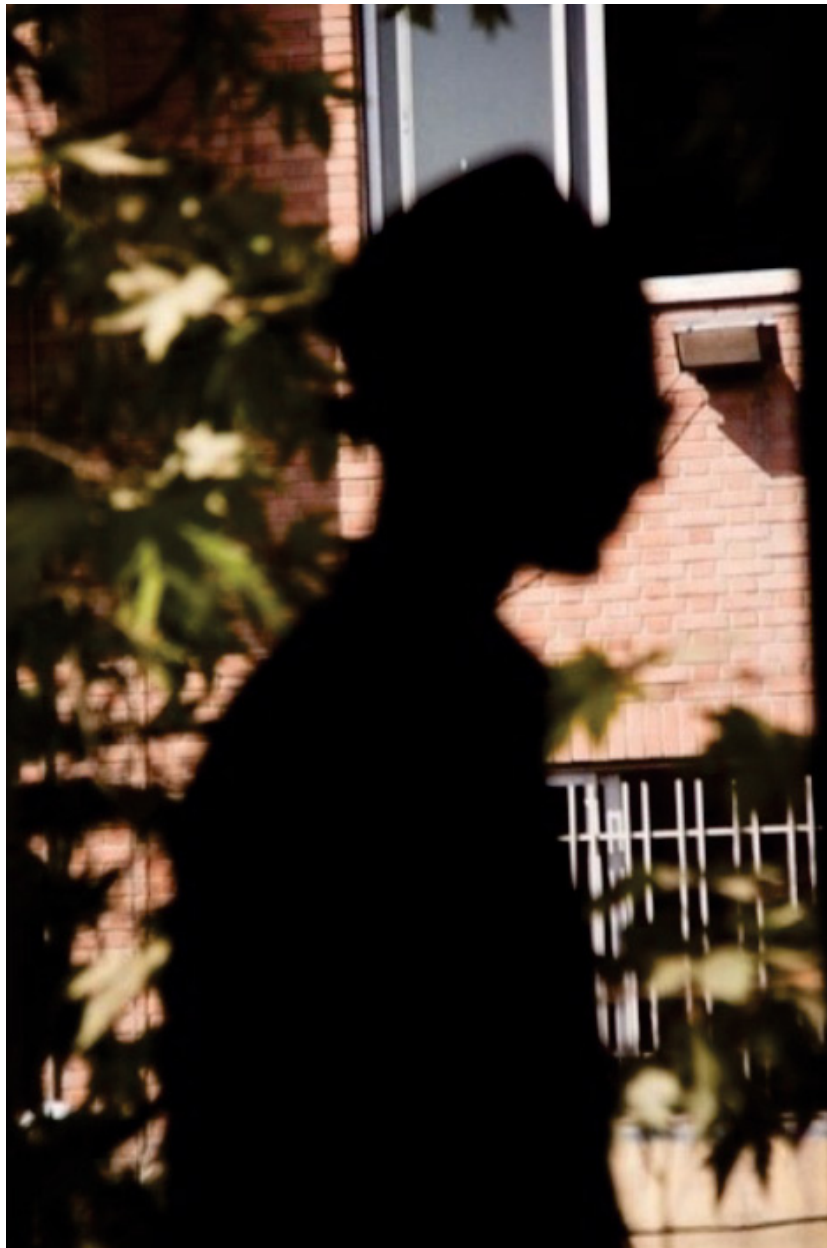
I answer, ' I don't know'.

But I am certain that the students are aware that I am not able to express my opinion in the school because as a teacher I am not free to talk about everything. They know that the power structure in Iranian society is ideological and that this is a political issue. I redirect the conversation to hairstyles and explain that I had a conversation with the principal about the strictness of students' hair last week, and he responded that boys should not attract the opposite sex due to their long hair.

The students felt very refreshed to express their feelings and talk about their concerns at the beginning of the class, however, I needed to begin teaching a photography technique. The instruction book provided by

the school refers to the subject of gesture in the photography. I move beyond the book and read some research papers and share with students some of the notes that I have in my notebook for my dissertation about structuralism and postmodernism theories. They very enthusiastically sought to hear more about these theories and I read on: 'Structuralism is a method in which each component or phenomenon is examined concerning a whole, that is, each phenomenon is part of a general structure' (Shamisa 2006: 193). I explain to students that if we pursue a comprehensive definition of structuralism, we must pursue it in a holistic way (Ritzer 2014). I extend the discussion and summarize semiotics – image semiotics is very attractive for students in art, photography, and graphics. I describe the relationship between structuralism and postmodernism, then ask students to comment on my explanations. I tell them that bypassing old structures leads to creativity in art, and I ask them to take deconstructive poses in photography. I teach silhouette light techniques in photography for our lesson. After my explanation, one of my students deconstructed my explanation. Inspired by the momentive situation, I take a photograph of a student with short hair who wears a hat to hide his full length (see Figure 2).

Yet students do not stop talking about hair and refer back to it while taking some photos. In response to the moment I write 'Freedom of Action' as a central discourse at the top of the blackboard. I recommended they cross creativity boundaries by being free with expression. Foucault concluded that instead of emphasizing his pessimistic view of any action and experience of freedom in man, he should defend the possibility of transformation to a new identity in the form of creating self-cultivation as a work of art (Saki, Karbasizadeh & Zarei 2018).

Although I do not have absolute freedom as a teacher in my class, I encourage them to develop deconstructive ideas. I explained my limitations, and how some social structures do not allow me to speak freely. Although the teacher is the authority of power in the Foucault system, I feel strangely powerless due to the methods of my teaching, which are not compatible with the defined regulations in the Iranian education system. In reality, I am the one who is under control and surveillance.

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Figure 2.
Author, 2020, untitled.

The shadow and light in gesture photography, in relation to the topic of conversation, was fascinating for the students. The connection between the concept of structures, deconstruction, and disrupting powers has led students toward arguing for, with and about the shadows and light in the lives of teenagers. In turn, I respect their free actions and leave the evaluation of their outcome to them. I classify the day's discussion from a discourse perspective (see Table 2).

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TABLE 2: ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE, SECOND SATURDAY

Date of the meeting	Forms of public discourse	Forms of specialized discourse
Index discourse	the freedom	photography book
Dependent discourses	family, creativity, education, training, structuralism, modernism, postmodernism, gender segregation in schools, self-education	a variety of genres and styles in photography in different seasons
The relationship between discourse and power	self-control, self-censorship, shame in expressing opinions, family supervision, discipline, score	history of photography
Resistance to discourse	interdisciplinarity, breaking the limitations, not caring about grades, inappropriate clothing, wearing a hat in class, long hair	decomposition in teaching and escape from repetition

THIRD SATURDAY

Today is another Saturday. The conversational method at the beginning of the class and the student's participation in choosing the subjects of their practical project is of particular interest. Providing the opportunity to comment and pay attention to each student's everyday life through conversations not only gives me a strong motivation, but also encourages students to study. In this way,

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I feel that not only do I teach art, but I also play a role in shaping their social personality. Yesterday I read Foucault's book, What is Criticism, and it occupies my mind. My phone rings.

'Hello, Mr. Hamidi'.

'Yes, please'.

'I am Colonel ---, father of your student, who you marked as 1 out of 20 in a photography lesson. He was present at all the sessions, and his self-assessment score was 18, and I am calling you to follow-up on what was the problem'.

I said I will check and let him know as soon as I go to the school. He thanks me and tells me that 'I am at your service if you need anything at the Tehran police station'.

When I arrive at the school, the principal is in the teachers' office, along with a number of my colleagues. A senior official reminds me that teachers should be more rigorous in evaluating workshop courses in the arts so that students are forced to engage in studies and attend school according to the national standards. Due to the COVID-19 epidemic and its new variants, the educational system is in a dilemma, attempting to make classes compulsory for students. I am very disappointed by what is said. Usually, people in charge of education-related programs do not have related education or any teaching experience, and I wonder if this decision may stem from this lack of experience. Administrative costs are typically based on a political approach, so in my view, they do not care about the quality of education but rather the exercise of power.

It is 8 o'clock, and I have to go to class. The classroom has always been a safer place for me than other parts of the school. It seems that the surveillance system is less effective there. As usual, after greetings for the day, I ask students to begin the class with a quote or question.

One of the students shows his transcript and says sadly, 'My grade has been recorded 16 instead of 18. Why?'

I leave the class to check the problem. It became clear that there was a mistake in entering the marks. I reach out to my colleague who was in charge of reporting the grades. It seems the Colonel's son has the same issue. I return to class and apologize to the student and try to correct this mistake. On the way, I still think obsessively about the validity of these assessments and evaluations and their relation to power. I remember that Foucault was skeptical of the norms derived from the humanities field of study, which was used as tools of illegitimate control. A simple example is to base grades upon statistical means of determining evaluation criteria (Foucault & Bouchard 2021). A notable example (not proposed by Foucault) is the common practice in American universities in which instructors are evaluated based on a survey of students, and the university rates professors based on their overall teaching performance, where the average score gives a standard for classifying professors into higher and lower than average (Gutting 2017). The whole process is mathematical, but the average of this result becomes the norm, setting the standard for good versus bad teaching. In this way, university administrators have an effective structure to control their academic staff. Accordingly, about half of the professors are always below average and subject to fines (lower salaries or non-promotion) and will be considered in need of additional training programs. Such abuses of norms are common in many schools and workplaces (Gutting 2017).

In the classroom, the discussion of social structures becomes a spotlight. One student comments that when he asked the school principal why he should wear simpler clothes, the principal replied, in a mocking tone, 'Why not'? To the students, this translates to mean they have no right to ask questions. Most students are aware of socially disruptive structures like questions, however, the term deconstruction is not easily accepted and needs further discussion. One refers to the unbearable structure of their family. Some students need more time to express their thoughts, so they usually discuss last week's topics that they have been thinking about.

I ask, 'Why are you saying that'?

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The answer is simple: they are strict, and they ask for high scores, which put the students under a lot of pressure. I tell him, have you ever criticized your family? The student answers no. Inspired by this conversation, I determine the subject of photography critique in consultation with critical students. I have deliberately pushed the issue in this direction to introduce students to Michel Foucault's *What is a book of critique?* I asked students to create a photo letter with a critical genre in response (see Table 3).

For context, I share that in this book, Foucault puts forward an innovative theory. The 'governance' that characterizes western and modern societies is indistinguishable from the question of, how can we not be governed under the regulation and in the name of the principles with such procedures? It defines the 'moral and political' approach and a way of thinking, both a partner and a competitor to the 'arts of governance'. This 'critical approach is the art of not being ruled' (Foucault 2018: 22). Inspired by the momentive situation in class, I also created a critical photo letter as a practice (see Figures 4 and 5). I extract and categorize the photographs of the students into different cultural discourses surrounding the critical discourse we proposed that Saturday, and try to find their relation to the power structure (see Table 4).

TABLE 3: SAMPLE OF A PHOTO LETTER

Photo	Number...
Genre	Critical
Subject	Citizenship rights
The elements of image	The human hand and the question mark
Technique	Directed
Explanation	Demanding hands on which the question mark is magically written
Frame	Horizontal

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Figure 1.
Water (video)

Figure 2.
Response to water (video)

TABLE 4: ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE, THIRD SATURDAY

Date of the meeting	Forms of public discourse	Forms of specialized discourse
Index discourse	critique	photography
Dependent discourses	political criticism, social criticism, Why? as educational criticism, the art of criticism, criticism of the self	photography genres, photography techniques
The relationship between discourse and power	social status, family pursuit, culture of apology, strictness	scientific photography
Resistance to discourse	disappointed, why? critical photography	creativity and deconstruction in photography

CONCLUSION

I consider discourse to be the most important influential factor in art and education. It may seem a bit complicated because what we commonly identify as discourse may seem to be information or ideology and belief. Still, the discourse approach, especially Foucault's discourse on these categories, forces us to know or to understand how much we can cope with and respond to these challenges. And how can we change or modify them becomes an urgent question. Educational discourses include artistic, cultural, and social discourses that are entangled with power and are associated with power, which means that all concepts, without exception, are imposed upon us. We cannot deal with them unless we understand their aim and responsibility. In this process, I try to help myself and those around me to grow by reflecting on the hope of freeing and fruitfully changing the limitations that bring inequality. The quality of education as outlined in SDG #4 is a discourse that feeds on the capillaries of power to be known. In my opinion, in no way but through familiarity with inappropriate intervention can the quality of education be strengthened with the needed self-confidence and self-awareness, and enlightenment of teachers in society.

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