

Paulo Freire and the education of the “oppressed” people in Brazil¹

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Abstract: This paper aims to outline some notes on Freirean Pedagogy and Philosophy in the context of Brazilian public education. Paulo Freire (Paulo Reglus Neves Freire, 1921-1997) was one of the great educators in world Education, devising methodologies that could make the vulnerable population literate and critically literate. His Liberating Pedagogy was not only a way of teaching literacy to the oppressed, but also a philosophical exercise of revealing the reasons for the social situations that these oppressed people went through. This research is based on a bibliographic contributions and is of a qualitative nature, with some selected authors: Bessa (2008); Foucault (1981/2018); Freire (1997a, 1997b, 2013, 2015); Rodrigues (2017, 2019, 2018, 2022, 2024), among others. Our research into Freire's works reveals the unique relevance and current importance of Paulo Freire's thoughts for Brazil and the entire developed and developing world, leading to the finding of “simple” solutions to persistent structural educational problems in the most vulnerable societies.

Keywords: Pedagogy; Philosophy of Education; Liberating Education.

Resumo: Este artigo tem como objetivo traçar alguns apontamentos sobre a Pedagogia e Filosofia freireanas no contexto da educação pública brasileira. Paulo Freire (Paulo Reglus Neves Freire, 1921-1997) foi um dos grandes nomes da Educação mundial, pensando metodologias que pudessem fazer com que a população vulnerável fosse alfabetizada e letrada criticamente. Sua Pedagogia Libertadora não era somente uma forma de letrar os oprimidos, mas também um exercício filosófico de deixar ver os porquês das situações sociais pelas quais passavam tais oprimidos. Esta pesquisa tem como base um aporte bibliográfico e é

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de natureza qualitativa, tendo como alguns autores selecionados: Bessa (2008); Foucault (1981/2018); Freire (1997a, 1997b, 2013, 2015); Rodrigues (2017, 2019, 2018, 2022, 2024), entre outros. Nossas pesquisas sobre os trabalhos freireanos revelam a relevância ímpar e a atualidade dos pensamentos de Paulo Freire para o Brasil e todo o mundo desenvolvido e em desenvolvimento, levando a encontrar soluções “simples” para problemas educacionais estruturais persistentes nas sociedades mais vulneráveis.

Palavras-chaves: Pedagogia; Filosofia da Educação; Educação Libertadora.

*“If education alone does not transform society,
without it, society cannot change either.”*

(Paulo Freire, 2000, p. 67)

Introdução

In this paper, we demonstrate Paulo Freire's importance for global education, as the world still faces many of the problems Freire described, and developing countries need simple, affordable, and effective solutions to improve the education of their populations and eliminate a wide range of vulnerabilities, all based on quality education.

Freire was an educator who eventually became a philosopher of Brazilian education, believing that, through his Liberating Pedagogy, oppressed students could develop a critical thinking style that would free them from various situations of vulnerability. Asking the reasons for oppressive situations was, indeed, a philosophical act in relation to the suffering of real, everyday life.

This text thus seeks to explore some conceptual elements that we consider relevant to understanding Freirean pedagogical theories. We draw on qualitative bibliographical research, drawing on authors we consider relevant to reflecting on Freirean educational philosophy. Some authors used in this work include: Bessa (2008); Foucault (1981/2018); Freire (1997a, 1997b, 2013, 2015); Rodrigues (2017, 2019, 2018, 2022, 2024), among others.

Paulo Freire's educational philosophy via some “conceptual elements”

The renowned Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (full name Paulo Reglus Neves Freire, 1921–1997), born in Recife, northeastern Brazil, graduated in Law from the Recife Law School (FDR) and sought pedagogical and philosophical paths to educate the "oppressed" (those poorest and most socially vulnerable), especially those in the interior of the Brazilian Northeast.

We explain in more detail what we call "oppressed" here: they are people who suffer in conditions and circumstances of vulnerability that can be reversed: with precarious material and symbolic resources, opportunities, etc., which makes their lives precarious in their basic daily social dimensions, such as daily food, access to health services, education, basic sanitation, etc.

Thus, when Freire develops his Liberating Pedagogy, he is opposing the ultimate goal of capitalism, which is to depersonalize human beings and transform them into mere uncritical consumers. One path against the extreme individualization of human beings (self-made man and uberization) is the revival of bonds that oppose the dilution of organized groups and alternative communities, where individuals can fight together (in an organized and critical manner) for better living conditions. This strengthens identity-based belonging, creating social safety nets in the cracks of the capitalist system. In this case, high-quality, critical, and liberating popular education, as envisioned by Freire, can be one of these cracks.

Freire desired that the power of writing and reading be basic access for all people in Brazil, as socially imposed power relations could be modified in various ways in favor of the most "oppressed." In this journey towards understanding what we call "power," the philosopher Michel Foucault shows us that "power" is in relationships:

Power is not a thing. Power is relationships. Power is relationships between individuals, a relationship that allows one to direct the conduct of another, to determine the conduct of another. And it is determined voluntarily based on a series of objectives that are theirs. In other words, when we look at what power is, power is an exercise of government, in the broad sense of the term. One can govern a society, one can govern a group, a community, a family, and one can govern someone. When I say govern someone, it is simply in the sense that one can determine their conduct based on strategies, using certain tactics. (Foucault, 1981, n.p.)

And this personal "power," wielded by those who master reading and writing (and "self-govern"), can ultimately bring a critical view of the world, of situations of oppression, and of the search for freedom. It is worth noting that, in Brazil, for a long time, illiterate people could not vote. In other words, their voices could not be heard politically.

Freirean educational theories began to be put into practice in the Brazilian Northeast region, in places where many people were formerly illiterate. Valéria da Hora Bessa tells us how Freire's educational journey began in the 1960s:

[...] the experience of the city of Natal in 1961 stands out, with the campaign "Standing on the ground also teaches you to read," integrating popular education and school education, with Paulo Freire leading the actions that gave rise to Liberating Pedagogy. This pedagogy's main banner was that every educational act is, in itself, a political act. [...] Still in the 1960s, Paulo Freire's ideas were distorted, and his pedagogy was associated with Marxist and socialist movements. [...] The Popular Education project promoted by Paulo Freire was definitively paralyzed by the Military Coup of March 31, 1964. (Bessa, 2008, p. 21)

It's worth noting that Freire's ideas were never complex or overly epistemological at the level of academic knowledge. He started from the principle of dialogue with people and their personal and local realities to teach reading and writing. Hence, his approach focused on developing subjects (people who acted) who were critical and aware of their personal abilities. This, in itself, enabled people to see themselves as political citizens, capable of voting and being voted for in the Brazilian political system of representation. Freire tells us:

Because he admires the world and, therefore, objectifies it; because he captures and understands reality and transforms it with his action-reflection, man is a being of praxis. Furthermore, man is praxis and, because he is so, he cannot be reduced to a mere spectator of reality, nor to a mere incidence of the guiding action of other men who will transform him into a "thing." His ontological vocation, which he must bring into existence, is that of the subject who operates and transforms the world. Subjected to concrete conditions that transform him into an object, man will be sacrificed in his fundamental vocation. But, as everything has its opposite, the concrete situation in which men-objects are born also generates men-subjects. The question we now face is to know, in the concrete situation in which thousands of men are in the condition of objects, whether those who thus transform them are truly subjects. To the extent that those who are prohibited from being are "beings for others," those who prohibit it are false "beings for themselves." Therefore, they cannot be authentic subjects. No one is, if one prohibits others from being. (Freire, 1997b, p. 7)

It is worth noting that Paulo Freire wrote many literary works of great impact on the field of education, including: "Pedagogy of the Oppressed"; "Pedagogy of Autonomy"; "Education as a Practice of Freedom"; "The Importance of Reading"; "Teacher Yes, Aunt No: Letters to Those Who Dares to Teach," among many others.

His vast literary work summarizes a collection of elements that we wish to cover here in a systematic yet concise manner. Freire's first conceptual element is that education occurs through dialogue between teacher and student, strengthening a bond of educational and communicational complicity. Learning cannot be an imposition by the teacher, but a process of communication that enables the student to understand the relevance of what they learn for their lives. Freire tells us that:

[...] the recently criticized (banking) conception, from some of its angles, cannot overcome the educator-student contradiction; the humanist conception starts from the need to do so. And this need is imposed upon it to the very extent that it views man as a being of choices. A being whose decision-making point is or should be within him, in his relationships with the world and with others. To achieve this overcoming, this existence that is the phenomenal essence of education, which is its dialogicity, education then becomes dialogue, communication. And, if it is dialogue, the relationships between its poles can no longer be those of antagonistic opposites, but of poles that reconcile. (Freire, 1997b, p. 14)

The second conceptual element in Freire's educational philosophy is that education must be informed by the local realities of students. In other words, what is taught must be rooted in people's daily lives, their experiences (knowledge and skills). This is also true in Freire's theories, as in his time, reading was taught through primers. This pedagogical material, produced in the Southeast and South regions of Brazil, was not appropriate for the realities of Northeasterners. Hence the need for educators to develop reading skills based on "generative words" from the students' concrete reality.

According to Valéria da Hora Bessa, quoting Jean Piaget, our connection to reality makes us more interested in learning:

According to Piaget, what motivates us to learn are everyday problems, challenging factors, intellectual conflicts—that is, the constant imbalances that occur between what we know and what remains to be known. Thus, we are

out of balance in the learning process when the knowledge we have about something is less than the knowledge contained in the object to be known. (Bessa, 2008, p. 45)

Another important point to emphasize is that words outside of the students' real context are more difficult to understand, as they are not part of their realities, and the words these vulnerable students used every day brought a practical dimension to their lives.

The third relevant conceptual element to emphasize is that education must focus on the formation of critical subjects, people who understand their realities and who can, through critical reading and writing, act on them. Such a liberating education (as he called his pedagogy) would therefore serve to form subjects who act directly within their realities, from oppressed to liberator:

The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and liberating pedagogy, will have two distinct moments. The first, in which the oppressed gradually unveil the world of oppression and commit themselves, in practice, to its transformation; the second, in which, once the oppressive reality has been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to be that of the oppressed and becomes the pedagogy of men in a process of permanent liberation. (Freire, 2013, p. 57)

Rodrigues, seeking facts about the vulnerable reality of students in public schools in Brazil, informs us that:

[...] through the results of the fifty schools with the highest approval rates in the 2018 ENEM³, we found that none of them are public state schools, clearly demonstrating the lack of preparation of students at these latter schools to compete on equal terms with students at private schools. We believe this will be reflected in the future in greater social inequality among these students, resulting in those with greater financial resources always being better placed in the job market and earning higher salaries. (Rodrigues, 2019, p. 90)

Furthermore, according to Rodrigues:

[...] education plays a potentially important role in reducing social vulnerability, as it creates ways to improve the quality of life for those who study. We also believe that an appropriate educational environment can help students face their problems more objectively, aiding in the search for solutions and

³ ENEM is the National High School Exam, an exam that gives access to Higher Education in Brazil.

developing the resilience to face them, transforming reality. (Rodrigues, 2017, p. 99)

The fourth conceptual element is that education must oppose the oppression and banking of human beings. The formation of individuals (who can act critically in their lives) involves the pursuit of freedom from all forms of oppression. Furthermore, education must be guided by dialogue and freedom of thought, avoiding what he called "banking education," which objectifies people and destroys their hopes for a better future.

Regarding "banking education," which seeks to "objectify" people, he tells us that:

[...] by failing to overcome the educator-student contradiction, but, on the contrary, by emphasizing it, it can only serve to "domesticate" humankind. From the failure to overcome this contradiction, it follows: a) that the educator is always the one who educates; the student, the one who is educated; b) that the educator is the one who disciplines; the student, the one disciplined; c) that the educator is the one who speaks; the student, the one who listens; d) that the educator prescribes; the student follows the prescription; e) that the educator chooses the content of the programs; the student receives it as a "deposit"; f) that the educator is always the one who knows; the student, the one who does not know; g) that the educator is the subject of the process; the student, its object. According to this conception, the student is like a "box" into which the "educator" makes his "deposits." A "box" that gradually fills with "knowledge," as if knowledge were the result of a passive act of receiving gifts or impositions from others. This false conception of education, which makes the student passive and adapts them, rests on an equally false conception of humankind—a distorted conception of their consciousness. For the "banking" conception, human consciousness is something spatialized, empty, gradually filled with fragments of the world that gradually transform into the contents of consciousness. This mechanistic conception of consciousness necessarily implies that it is constantly receiving fragments of reality that penetrate it. It therefore fails to distinguish between entry into consciousness and becoming present to consciousness. Consciousness is only empty, Sartre warns us, to the extent that it is not filled with the world. (Freire, 1997b, p. 12)

The fifth conceptual element is that education should serve as a means of political thinking and collective action for freedom, unity, and against oppression. If the acts of reading and writing can help us make informed decisions and vote, critical thinking is an important aspect of Freirean pedagogy. Freire reveals:

[...] we must take as the object of our reflection our own experiences or those of other subjects in the domain we wish to better understand. Thus, it will be possible for us—at different times and not necessarily to the same extent—to begin to understand the real significance of the linguistic context when I say:

the process of political literacy. In this phrase—process of political literacy—the word "literacy" is used metaphorically. Considering the presence of this metaphor, it seems to me that the best way to begin our analysis is to study the concrete phenomenon that makes the authentic use of such a metaphor possible; that is, to discuss, however briefly, the process of adult literacy from a linguistic point of view, the one upon which the metaphor is based. This will imply, from a methodological point of view, some preliminary considerations about the different ways of doing things, given that, in the domain of adult literacy, there are ways that, in turn, condition the different ways of understanding illiterates. Ultimately, there are only two different educational methods, revealing specific attitudes toward the illiterate: the first, that of education aimed at the domestication of man; the second, that of education aimed at the liberation of man (not that education alone can liberate man, but it contributes to this liberation by leading men to adopt a critical attitude toward their environment). (Freire, 1997b, p. 21)

The sixth and final element we wish to highlight in this paper is that education must be conducted in an affectionate, welcoming, and understanding manner, reinforcing the complicity between teacher and student in the act of learning through dialogue. For Freire, both teacher and student are constantly learning when they teach and when they learn. There is an understanding of humankind as a being who is always learning, always being, always acting upon the world. Freire (1997a, p. 161) tells us that: "Educational practice is all of this: affection, joy, scientific capacity, theoretical mastery in the service of change."

We can also understand this Freirean humanism as ethical actions based on the realities imposed on us:

There would be no human action if there were no objective reality, a world as man's "not-self," capable of challenging him; just as there would be no human action if man were not a "project," a beyond-self, capable of capturing his reality, knowing it, and transforming it. In dialectical thinking, action and world, world and action, are intimately connected. But action is only human when, more than a mere doing, that is, when it is also not dichotomized from reflection. (Freire, 2013, p. 55)

Furthermore, Paulo Freire's unusual choice of words and the neologisms he coined lead to a philosophical understanding of the education of the most vulnerable. Freire coined, for example, the verb "to hope," meaning to learn to always hope for improved living conditions and the ethical growth of human beings.

He also says that it is we who, when we read a text, create the "intelligence" of that text, as we give it our personal and temporal interpretation through critical literacy. Freire tells us about this personal understanding we give to the texts we encounter:

Let us return briefly to this aspect of critical reading, according to which the reader becomes, or gradually becomes, a producer of the text's understanding. The reader will be all the more a producer of the text's understanding the more he or she truly grasps the author's understanding. He or she produces the text's understanding to the extent that it becomes knowledge that the reader has created and not knowledge juxtaposed to it by reading the book. When I grasp the understanding of the object rather than memorizing the object's conceptual profile, I know the object, I produce knowledge of the object. (Freire, 2015, p. 53)

In the same vein as Freire regarding the meanings given by the reader to texts, Michèle Petit reveals to us that mastering critical reading is a powerful tool for finding ourselves, for understanding the world around us, placing ourselves as subjects (agents) in the world:

What is at stake through reading is the conquest or reconquest of an individual position. For readers are active, they engage with what they read, they give new meaning to the texts they read, they slip their desires, fantasies, and anxieties between the lines, developing a complete mental activity. There is more to reading than pleasure; it is a psychic work, in the same sense as when we speak of mourning work, dream work, or writing work. A psychic work that allows us to find a connection with what constitutes us, what gives us life. (Petit, 2013, p. 68)

Along the same lines, Professor Antonio Candido reveals that the act of reading humanizes us, as humanization stems from knowledge and reflection, along the same lines as Freirean theories:

I understand humanization here (since I have spoken so much about it) as the process that confirms in humankind those traits we consider essential, such as the exercise of reflection, the acquisition of knowledge, a good disposition toward others, the fine-tuning of emotions, the ability to delve into life's problems, a sense of beauty, the perception of the complexity of the world and its beings, and the cultivation of humor. Literature develops a measure of humanity within us as it makes us more understanding and open to nature, society, and our fellow human beings. (Candido, 2004, p. 180)

Freire also understands man within his personal history and his time, his *zeitgeist*, a man who critically embodies the spirit of his time. Hence the need to read and write competently to actively participate in his society and his time.

was a philosopher of education of his time and engaged in conceptual dialogue with thinkers such as Henri Wallon (1879-1962), Jean Piaget (1896-1980), Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), John Dewey (1859-1952), among other scholars in the field of education.

Paulo Freire also shows us that to be a good teacher, one must:

[...] methodical rigor, research, respect for the knowledge of students, critical thinking, aesthetics, and ethics, the embodiment of words as examples, risk-taking, acceptance of the new and rejection of any form of discrimination, critical reflection on practice, recognition and acceptance of cultural identity, awareness of the unfinished, recognition of being conditioned, respect for the autonomy of the student's being, common sense, humility, tolerance, and the struggle to defend the rights of educators, apprehension of reality, joy and hope, the conviction that change is possible, curiosity, confidence, professional competence and generosity, commitment, understanding that education is a form of intervention in the world, freedom and authority, conscious decision-making, knowing how to listen, recognizing that education is ideological, willingness to engage in dialogue, and caring for the well-being of students. (Freire, 1997a, p. 7-9)

Thus, changing the reality of oppression means hoping for a liberation from bonds that effectively occurs through confronting such oppressions and oppressors:

The radical, committed to the liberation of humanity, does not allow himself to be trapped in 'circles of safety,' nor does reality imprison us. The more radical he becomes, the more he inscribes himself in this reality so that, by knowing it better, he can better transform it. He is not afraid to confront, not afraid to listen, not afraid of the world's revelation. He is not afraid of encountering the people. He is not afraid of dialogue with them, which results in the growing knowledge of both. He does not feel like the master of time, nor the master of humanity, nor the liberator of the oppressed. He commits himself to them, within time, to fight with them. If sectarianism, as we have stated, is characteristic of the reactionary, radicalization is characteristic of the revolutionary. (Freire, 2013, p. 37)

In other words, teachers must also incorporate a critical humanistic dimension regarding their world, the realities of students, and their professional conditions, among many other important aspects of educational practice.

According to Rodrigues, the social and cultural realities of students should guide the understanding that the pedagogy used must be one that stems from the students' lives, as Freire so aptly teaches us:

[...] school educational practices should reflect the concrete situations experienced by students. These situations serve as a starting point for the

content to be taught and as examples of that content. Such content, explained based on students' experiences, should lead them to become truly thoughtful, inquiring, and critical beings. In this sense, we believe that critical thinking is not something negative, as we were taught throughout the military dictatorship in Brazil, but rather that it should lead us to think more deeply and seek positive changes in our environment. (Rodrigues, 2018, p. 36)

Rodrigues (2022, 2024), using Paulo Freire's pedagogy as the basis for his analyses of Brazilian public education, attempts to understand how Freirean pedagogical theories can be applied in contexts of resistance and struggle against colonialism in Brazil and other forms of oppression of vulnerable people ("the oppressed"). Rodrigues also explores the political and ethical dimensions of Freirean education, arguing that it can be a countercolonial and liberating tool, leading to a break with historical chains of social vulnerability.

As we can see, the conceptual elements of Paulo Freire's philosophy of Liberating Education strengthen not only a powerful theory of educational practice, but also an understanding of a world where no one is better than another, where no one can be measured by their social importance to the detriment of another, leading to a humanized understanding of each person's personal wealth and the importance of their agency over the realities in which they live.

Some Final Considerations

In this paper, we seek to demonstrate the relevance of Freirean theoretical discussions, such as Pedagogy and Philosophy of Education, to us Brazilians, in a country with a large number of illiterate people today; to other developing countries; and to countries that need to address the critical literacy needs of a population that is vulnerable in various aspects.

Our interest in education as an instrument of social transformation follows Freire's line: the importance of critical thinking and dialogue as teaching and learning methods. An education based on dialogicity and the formation of critical thinkers transforms

people into individuals capable of organizing their lives toward personal and social growth.

This increase in the number of people living in situations of illiteracy and/or oppression requires overcoming vulnerabilities, necessitating the development of tools and actions to create rights, laws, and spaces that welcome and treat them as citizens.

Finally, we can understand the greatness of Paulo Freire's thoughts through the humanistic vision he offers to all people (not just those in education), even those who require more attention to overcome the barriers of the world of letters and the socioeconomic world, hoping to see individuals at their full potential of creativity, affection, joy, and life.

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