



Paulo Freire

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Abstract

Paulo Freire (1921–1997) was one of the most important educators of the twentieth century. Indeed, Freire and his work have been studied and scrutinized by thousands of scholars around the globe, and what may be described as his most significant and popular book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, has been cited more than 72,000 times—the most in the world in the education discipline. His primary works have been translated into more than 20 languages. Educators, philosophers, and anyone interested in schooling practices as they relate to social architecture, social justice, and social change look to Paulo Freire to provide insight into how and why education systems may determine life experiences at every level of humanity. This chapter provides a brief overview of Paulo Freire’s life and includes a discussion on his philosophical and pedagogical development,

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his most influential writings, and how scholars like Gloria Ladson-Billings and bell hooks have relied on his pedagogy in their own work. This chapter also examines how his philosophy continues to shape conversations in education today.

Keywords

Paulo Freire · Social justice · Pedagogy of the oppressed · Critical pedagogy · Teacher development · Democratic schools · Systemic racism · Literacy

Introduction

Henry Giroux, Paulo Freire’s longtime colleague and dear friend, described Freire as, “one of the most important educators of the twentieth century” (in Darder, 2017, p. xi). Indeed, Freire and his work have been studied and scrutinized by thousands of scholars around the globe, and what may be described as his most significant and popular book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, has been cited more than 72,000 times—the most in the world in the education discipline. His primary works have been translated into more than 20 languages (Kohan, 2021, p. 2). Educators, philosophers, and anyone interested in schooling practices as they relate to social architecture, social justice, and social change look to Paulo Freire to provide insight into how and why education systems may determine life experiences at every level of humanity. Giroux states:

[Freire] occupies a hallowed position among the founders of “critical pedagogy”—the educational movement guided by both passion and principle to help students develop a consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, empower the imagination, connect knowledge and truth to power, and learn to read both the word and the world as part of a broader struggle for agency, justice, and democracy. (in Darder, 2017, p. xi)

And it is through an examination of Freire’s vast inventory of scholarly writings that readers may understand just how profound his impact has been on countless educators and others who have relied on him to deconstruct complex issues that continue to plague schools and societies. Indeed, Freire explored every aspect of the human condition and experience through the lens of a critical pedagogue. In his nearly two dozen books, he uncovered, dissected, and deconstructed the individual emotions and behaviors that ultimately drive societies to become either places where all human beings can thrive or systems that keep certain classes of individuals from ever achieving true freedom.

Influences and Motivations

Early Life

Paulo Reglus Neves Freire, born in 1921 in Recife, the capital of the northeastern Brazilian state of Pernambuco, came to believe in the power of education to bring about social change as a result of his own exposure to injustice and the realization that educational experiences could either perpetuate or dismantle inequitable systems.

In *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation* (1985), he stated:

From a very young age I felt extremely attached to educational practice. . . [and] I began to develop certain pedagogical ideas along with historical, cultural, and philosophical reflections. As I was developing these ideas, however, I had to confront the very dramatic and challenging social realities of my childhood home, the Brazilian northeast. I had had an extremely difficult upbringing because of the economic situation of my family. Now, as a young man, working with laborers, peasants, and fishermen, I once more became aware of the differences among social classes. . . More than any book, [this] led me to understanding my own personal need to delve more deeply into pedagogical research. (Freire, 1985, pp. 175–176)

He further stated that “literacy was the most important issue” (Freire, 1985, p. 176) and that he believed it was profoundly unjust that there were people in his world that could not read or write:

The injustice that illiteracy in itself implies involves more serious implications, such as the castration of illiterates in their ability to make decisions for themselves, to vote, and to participate in the political process. This seemed absurd to me. Being illiterate does not preclude the common sense to choose what is best for oneself, and to choose the best (or the least evil) leaders. (Freire, 1985, p. 176)

To be sure, it was this early exposure to injustice that propelled Freire, and indeed his earliest influences brought about a deep devotion to confronting and correcting social injustice. Antonia Darder, a leading Freire scholar, states that Freire’s early life was defined in part by the “political anxieties” his family experienced as a result of a volatile economy and various military revolts leading to dictatorship within the Brazilian government (Darder, 2018, p. 5). However, his parents instilled in him both the values of empathy and generosity and a belief in the power of knowledge acquisition, and while his childhood was one of extreme poverty as a result of his father’s death, these early experiences shaped his worldview and contributed greatly to his understanding of how education could dismantle the very systems that he endured. Darder (2018) asserts:

Freire credited his early experiences of living among the very poor and attending disadvantaged rural schools with instilling in him a profound sense of love, empathy, and compassion, as well as an understanding for how disabling conditions of poverty, reinforced by a colonizing system of education, subject subaltern students to debilitating conditions of

disempowerment, domestication, and alienation. From this grounded sensibility, Freire was to construct an educational philosophy that fundamentally challenged oppression rooted in a colonizing model of schooling and class inequalities. Moreover, it was this sensibility that fueled Freire's ongoing commitment to struggle at the side of the oppressed, in order to transform the recalcitrant conditions of economic, pedagogical, and cultural injustice. (Darder, 2018, p. 7)

Ana Maria Araújo Freire, his second wife, noted:

There is a great difference between Paulo and other educators/thinkers. Paulo was a Brazilian, a northeastern man from Recife. He used to witness social injustice, the abuse against the Black population and contempt for the poor since he was a child. He used to ask himself how that could have happened if we were supposed to be all equal. Are they different? Why do some people have possessions and others don't? That was what Paulo was worried about since he was a child! (Freire and Vittoria, 2007, pp. 101–102).

With this background and these sensibilities in mind, he spent a short time working as an attorney and then moved into teaching—first Portuguese to secondary school students and then to adult learners and workers (Gadotti and Torres, 1997).

Paulo quickly gained international recognition for his experiences in literacy training in the Brazilian northeast, particularly the literacy training in Angicos, Rio Grande do Norte, that led the populist government of João Goulart to appoint him in 1963 as President of the National Commission on Popular Culture. After a military coup d'état in 1964, he was considered a dangerous political pedagogue, was put in jail for [over] seventy days and later forced into a fifteen-year exile. (Gadotti and Torres, 1997)

In a conversation with Donaldo Macedo, translator of many of his works, Freire (1985) said about his time in prison:

This was an interesting experience for me, even though I am not a masochist. I don't like to suffer and I certainly would not enjoy experiencing this again. But I took advantage of the time in jail by thinking things over. Those days were a learning experience. Of course, I was jailed precisely because of the political nature of education. Now you might say, "Paulo, there were other people involved in adult literacy and they were not jailed." My response could be that they were not political. I could also say that they were political. The only difference is that their politics furthered the interest of the dominant class. This is the real difference. There are no neutral educators. What we educators need to know is the type of political philosophy we subscribe to and for whose interests we work. My political ideas, fortunately, did not benefit and continue not to benefit the interests of the dominant class. (Freire, 1985, p. 180)

About his exile, Freire continued:

No one goes into exile peacefully. In the first place, nobody goes into exile by choice. Second, no one goes through a period of exile without being strongly marked by it. Exile touches you existentially. It envelops you as a being. It shakes you up mentally and physically. Exile magnifies your virtues and faults. And this is what exile did to me. . . . What I learned in exile is what I would recommend to all readers of this book: each day be open to the world, be ready to think; each day be ready not to accept what is said just because

it is said; be predisposed to reread what is read; each day investigate, question, and doubt. I think it is most necessary to doubt. I feel it is always necessary not to be sure, that is, to be overly sure of “certainties.” My exile was a long time of continuous learning. (Freire, 1985, p. 181)

Freire ultimately returned to Brazil after being offered amnesty in 1980 and “played a significant role in shaping the country’s educational policies until his untimely death in 1997” (Giroux, in Darder, 2017, p. xi).

Philosophical and Pedagogical Development

With regard to Freire’s philosophical and pedagogical development, Kohan (2021) asserts that Freire’s point of view can best be explained as complex. He is “generally thought to be influenced by the most venerated thinkers and traditions of what is often called Western philosophy” (Kohan, 2021, p. 18), but he draws from a wide variety of intellectual spaces and minds, and his perspective could change when confronting new experiences. He states that “Freire was influenced by existentialism, Marxism, political and educational progressivism (liberalism), phenomenology, and Catholic theology” (Kohan, 2021, p. 19) but that he was extremely well-read and studied a vast collection of theorists. These included everyone from John Dewey to Che Guevara:

Without a doubt, Freire was an obstinate and dedicated reader interested in, and open to, distinct traditions of thought which helped him think through the problems of his time. It is also important to remember his steadfast confessional Christian faith, which he never abandoned and which he reconciled with various philosophical currents, although some of them, like Marxism, were in tension with it. In the end, the winding road of his library and of the philosophical influences he received on this road were arduous, long, and complex. (Kohan, 2021, p. 21)

Darder (2018) states that Freire “drew on the ideas of intellectuals from a variety of traditions and diverse perspectives in constructing a philosophy of education that could speak to the massive inequalities he perceived, experienced, and confronted during his lifetime” (Darder, 2018, p. 23). But she also warns that any exploration of an educational thinker like Paulo Freire must acknowledge the subjectivity of the process—one can only make a determination about how a scholar’s ideas took shape through direct corroboration with that scholar or by those closest to him/her/them (Darder, 2018, p. 24). With this caveat in mind, Darder asserts that Freire was motivated by his Catholic childhood and he studied radical Catholic philosophers as a university student:

Although Freire never formally linked his pedagogy to liberation theology or spiritual matters, the influence of his Latin American Catholic upbringing, his labor within the variety of radical Christian contexts, and his strong affiliation and affinity with revolutionary theologians, nevertheless, influenced and reinforced his views. More specifically, these included his perspective of humanity, transformation, the pedagogical indispensability of

love, faith, and hope, our capacity to denounce oppression and announce social justice, and his utopian belief in the need to strive for a world where human indignities would cease. (Darder, 2018, pp. 28–29)

His exposure to and embrace of Catholic teachings, however, is but one aspect of his overall philosophical and pedagogical development. He voraciously studied all forms of philosophical thought, including Lutheran theology, Latin American philosophy, existentialism, phenomenology, and Marxism (Darder, 2018). He was constantly evaluating and reevaluating his ideas, and he welcomed opportunities to challenge his own thinking. Schugurensky (1998) states:

As a good intellectual, Freire was always open to challenging, new ideas, to self-criticism, and to reconsideration of his assumptions, his arguments, and his language. His original approach, rooted in the tenets of progressive education, Marxism, and liberation theology, was later enriched by the contributions of post-colonial theory, feminism, critical race theory and post-modernism. His production, then, was dynamic. It has a general coherence but, as it reflects Freire's own evolution, it...changed substantially during his lifetime. (Schugurensky, 1998, p. 2)

Ultimately, the people who knew Paulo Freire intimately or who have studied his works extensively concur that he was a consummate scholar, willing and eager to explore the ideas of others as he developed his own critical philosophy. He was open to examination and encouraged dialogue. Ever both the teacher and learner, Freire believed in the power of reciprocity in education, where everyone engaged in the activity takes part in the shared experience of intellectual, social, and even moral growth.

Key Contributions

It is quite challenging to discuss in any great detail all of the theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions of Paulo Freire to the field of education. Just the mere vastness and scope of his work preclude a comprehensive conversation in the space of a book chapter. However, this chapter does outline what many view as his most significant contributions and how they moved discussions around social justice, power, and education forward. And in doing so, it may provide a roadmap for those interested in learning even more about this prolific scholar.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Donaldo Macedo said of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire's most cited work, that it "would not have been written had Freire not experienced the dehumanizing and humiliating experiences of hunger [as a child]" (Darder, 2018, p. xvii). The book, first published in 1970, is an urgent call to action, and indeed Freire challenges

readers to confront the dehumanizing, violent effects of an unjust society through the raising of the voices of the oppressed:

Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressed society? Who suffer the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation? They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. And this fight, because of the purpose given it by the oppressed, will actually constitute an act of love opposing the lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressors' violence, lovelessness even when clothed in false generosity. (Freire, 1970, p. 19)

This confrontation with inequity, for Freire, begins with educational experiences that value the individual. Any liberation from oppression must include opportunities for intellectual freedom to flourish.

The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of the oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation. (Freire, 1970, p. 28)

Darder (2018) summarizes Freire's opening chapter this way:

Freire makes it clear that liberation is neither a gift than can be bestowed upon others nor is it solely an individual pursuit. Rather, he argues, liberation is the outcome of collective social struggle, which must be carried out through a coherent commitment to a political project, in the interest of our humanity and the authentic democratization of society. (Darder, 2018, p. 94)

Indeed, Freire's seminal work uncovers the tensions that arise when a struggle for political and social dominance is enacted. He asks us to consider what it means to be human, and, in particular, he asserts that both the oppressed and the oppressors suffer from dehumanization. The oppressed internalize a flawed and inaccurate sense of being that denies humanity, while the oppressors also exist in a dehumanized state:

Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognize others as persons—not by those who are oppressed, exploited, unrecognized. . . It is not the helpless, subject to terror, who initiate terror, but the violent, who with their power create a concrete situation which begets the 'rejects of life.' It is not the tyrannized who initiate despotism, but the tyrants. . . It is not those whose humanity is denied them who negate humankind, but those who denied that humanity (thus negating their own as well). (Freire, 1970, p. 29)

He further contends that the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressors, or more specifically the act of rebellion on the part of the oppressed, can initiate and result in love. Indeed, the oppressed, by seeking to overcome their oppression through rebellion, actually restores humanity to the oppressors. So, ultimately, rebellion and revolution are necessary to save the humanity of all involved, and

this rebellion may begin with education that provides the individual with the means and opportunity to question, evaluate, and even reject what is taught. He proposes a pedagogy that moves beyond the “narrative character” of the learning experience, where the teacher narrates and the student merely listens:

Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher. . . . Education becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teachers the depositors. . . . This is the ‘banking’ concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (Freire, 1970, p. 45)

This banking system works primarily to serve the interests of the oppressors, and Freire contends that a “problem posing” education would allow both teachers and students the power to explore and indeed challenge the problems in the world (Freire, 1970, p. 52). The teacher is no longer a depositor. She/he/they are also learners of their students in a cyclical process. The student is no longer a repository but also a teacher: “People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are ‘owned’ by the teacher” (Freire, 1970, p. 53).

Gibson (1999) states:

Freire proposed that the use of his “see-judge-act” student-centered methods could lead to critical consciousness, that is, an awareness of the necessity to constantly unveil appearances designed to protect injustice which serves as a foundation for action toward equality and democracy. For Freire, no form of education could be neutral. All pedagogy is a call to action. In a society animated by inequality and authoritarianism, he sided with the many, and exposed the partisanship of those who claimed to stand above it all. (Gibson, 1999, p. 129)

Maxine Greene (1998) echoes these ideas, stating:

Teaching for social justice, we must remember, is teaching what we believe ought to be. . . moreover, teaching for social justice is teaching for sake of arousing the kinds of vivid, reflective, experiential responses that might move students to come together to understand what social justice actually means and what it might demand. That means teaching to the end of arousing a consciousness of membership, active and participant membership in a society of unfulfilled promises—teaching for what Paulo Freire used to call, “conscientization,”—heightened social consciousness, a wide-awakeness that might make injustice unendurable. (Greene, 1998, pp. xxix–xxx)

Education, for Freire, was the process by which *conscientization* was realized and where individuals became free to take on the action—whatever that looked like—of removing from the system any barriers to experiencing that freedom. Hierarchical structures where teachers and those in power went unchecked needed to be abolished. He rejected the notion that human experiences were predetermined and/or without input from the individual. The future could be limitless with an educated society where everyone engaged in mutual and respectful dialogue that

could bring about change. Ultimately, Freire sought to create educational systems where critical thinking, action, and reflection—leading to intellectual and social freedom—were the norm and where the revolutionary process of challenging authority was commonplace and welcomed.

Other Significant Works

In *Cultural Action for Freedom* (1970), published the same year as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as articles in the *Harvard Educational Review*, Freire addresses the oppression and illiteracy suffered by those he taught (Soler-Gallart and Brizuela, in Freire, 2000). Further,

Freire speaks about the importance of *denunciation* and *annunciation*: both are part of a utopian pedagogy in which denouncing dehumanizing structures and practices must be linked to announcing ways to transform them. (Soler-Gallart & Brizuela, 2000, p. 2)

These overall themes of intellection and social freedom, love for the individual, and the protection of human rights can be seen in later works, including *Education for Critical Consciousness*, published in 1974. The first of two essays in this volume, “Education as the Practice of Freedom,” “. . .grows out of Paulo Freire’s creative efforts in adult literacy throughout Brazil prior to the military coup of April 1, 1964, which eventually resulted in his exile” (Goulet, in Freire, 1974, p. xii). The second essay, “Extension or Communication,” challenges ideas around what it means to be an expert in the pseudo-role of aiding or helping learners. He believes there must be reciprocity in the educational process, where paternalistic structures ceased to exist. He asserts that in an ideal educational setting, “. . .the class is not a class in the traditional sense, but a meeting place where knowledge is sought and not where it is transmitted” (Freire et al., 2021, p. 132). Educators must seek to provide systems where creativity flourishes through problem-posing, rich dialogue, and mutual respect among all participants. *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation* (1985) again asserts that teachers must “problematize” situations and “present the challenge of reality that learners confront every day” (Freire, 1985, p. 22). Giroux (in Freire, 1985) states:

Utilizing the language of critique, Freire has fashioned a theory of education that takes seriously the relationship between the radical critical theory and the imperatives of radical commitment and struggle. By drawing upon his experiences in Latin America, Africa, and North America, he has generated a discourse that deepens our understanding of the dynamics and complexity of domination. (Giroux, in Freire, 1985, p. xii)

This work explores the themes of cultural power and how theory and practice can be integrated to bring about political change. In *Pedagogy of Hope* (1992), Freire revisits the themes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and asserts that hope exists amidst struggle, and, indeed, real change can only begin with a realization that hope for hope’s sake is a naïve concept:

Hope, as an ontological need, demands strong anchoring in practice. As an ontological need, hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness. That is why there is no hope in sheer hopefulness. The hoped-for is not attained by dint of raw hoping. Just to hope is to hope in vain. (Freire et al., 1992, pp. 2–3)

For Freire, hope was not a static state of being but the underlying emotion that could lead to action and change—and not necessarily without struggle. Ultimately, he believed the need for an education in hope as a means to transform reality. In *Teachers as Cultural Workers*, first published in 1997, Freire again reminds readers that teachers engaged in their work must realize their position as potential agents of change. They have a vital role to play in the liberation of those they teach. This liberation involves a recognition on the part of teachers that they are, by virtue of their position, politicians in a political world. McLaren (2005) states:

Political choices and ideological paths chosen by teachers are the fundamentals of Freirean pedagogy. Freire goes so far as to say that educators are ‘politicians’ and that ‘we engage in politics’ when we educate. And if it is the case that we must choose a political path, then let us, in Freire’s words, ‘dream about democracy’ while fighting ‘day and night for a school in which we talk to and with the learners so that, hearing them, we can be heard by them as well.’” (McLaren, 2005, p. xxxviii)

With this in mind, Freire’s *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998) challenged educators to move beyond the comfort of technical teaching and examine the overall systems in which they teach. Macedo (1998) notes:

This means, for example, that reading specialists in the United States, who have contributed to a technical advancement of the field of reading, should have the ability to understand and appreciate why millions of children who by virtue of their race, ethnicity, gender, and class have not benefitted from these technical advances and remain illiterate or semiliterate. (Macedo, 1998, p. xiii)

He calls on teachers to denounce any notions of their neutrality and argues for their academic freedom—a freedom that would allow them to deal openly with opposing views in the classroom. Further, Aronowitz (1998) states:

Freire holds that a humanized society requires cultural freedom, the ability of the individual to choose values and rules of conduct that violate conventional social norms, and, in political and civil society, requires the full participation of all of its inhabitants in every aspect of public life. (Aronowitz, 1998, p. 19)

This notion that education should empower, liberate, and provide experiences that result in freedom for all involved is one that Freire forwarded throughout his career.

New Insights

There can be no question that education and education systems, particularly in the United States, have experienced increasingly intense scrutiny about what and how students should be taught, what truths should be told, and who gets to decide all of it. Indeed, says Giroux:

At a time when memory is erased and the political relevance of education is dismissed in the embrace of the language of measurement and quantification, it is all the more important to remember the legacy and work of Paulo Freire. (in Darder, 2017, p. xi)

Books such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* have been banned from high school reading lists because they may trigger uncomfortable emotions in students. Book bans are nothing new, but today's controversy is centered squarely on white students' discomfort with this country's racist beginnings and protecting them from any feelings of guilt or shame they may experience in learning that the United States was built in large part because of a system of racial violence against Black people. In fact, in the state of Virginia, the governor set up a tip line for parents to call if they believe there is content being taught that may be unpleasant for their children, stating, "Getting rid of divisive concepts in schools is really important" (Graff, 2022, p. 1). Rather than examine complex, difficult concepts, too many are ever more focused, as Giroux (2017) asserts, on the quantification of learning—measuring information retention rather than ability or potential or creativity and removing from lessons any emphasis on the learner's questioning of the content or his/her/their place in the scheme of things. Too often, some have adopted the premise that learning can not only be mechanized but that it need not provide opportunities for students to examine deeply any themes or ideas that interrogate injustices they may see in their worlds. Education need not be the avenue by which inequitable systems are disrupted; it simply needs to move students along as they learn prescribed—safe—"facts" that leave everything just as it is and with power dynamics unquestioned.

Further, in conversations about what gets taught in school, there can also be no question that issues of race and class are often at the center of the debate. At this moment in history, individuals openly dispute previously accepted truths about how the United States got to be a country at all. Democracy and democratic practices are under siege as a result of the politicization of institutions once held as sacred—or at the very least, *advertised and perceived* by many as neutral—and there are ever-widening systems of inequity and inequality, where access to power and control over these very systems is limited to the extremely privileged.

And so an examination of Paulo Freire is essential to understanding systemic injustice and how education and educators can dismantle injustice through critical, thoughtful, caring, and loving pedagogy that puts the learner at the center of all that happens in the school. Indeed, for Freire, there can be no freedom without democracy. There can be no freedom without justice. There can be no freedom without the opportunity to determine one's own learning. Giroux (2017) asserts:

Freire believed that education, in the broadest sense, was eminently political because it offered students the conditions for self-reflection, a self-managed life, and critical agency. For Freire, pedagogy was central to a formative culture that makes both critical consciousness and social action possible. Pedagogy in this sense connected learning to social change; it was a project and provocation that challenged students to critically engage with the world so they could act on it. (in Darder, 2017, p. xii)

Ultimately, Paulo Freire believed in the power of education to bring about social change through action. His work has been studied for decades by scholars around the world because he encourages—demands—all of us to confront the most difficult aspects of the human experience while also inspiring us to embrace what it is to feel and grow and become our best selves as learning beings in a socially just world.

Legacies and Unfinished Business

In Brazil, Freire's legacy is currently under attack by conservative president Jair Bolsonaro who wants to eradicate all of Freire's ideas from the country's education system. Lima (2021) states:

One of the aspects of Freire's thought that seems to enrage many conservatives is his emphasis on critical thinking, a methodology that encourages students to question what is superficially perceived as natural, true, and unchangeable. In his problem-posing pedagogical approach. . . learners explore and problematize existential happenings and reach through dialogue critical awareness regarding the political nature of education and its intersection with the cultural, social, and religious milieu. (Lima, 2021, p. 1)

These sentiments have been echoed by conservatives in the United States who are concerned with pedagogy and practice that requires an interrogation of systems that may be inequitable or unjust. As stated earlier, Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has been cited thousands of times by scholars all over the globe, and its essential tenets of providing agency and voice to learners so that they may determine their own destinies can be seen in current theory around creating socially just schools and classrooms. In the last three or four decades, these ideas have been the foundation of transformative work from prominent educators like Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995, 1998) and bell hooks (1994) and other critical theorists. Their research and work expands on the ideas of Freire while providing new avenues for implementing them.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Freire provides a flexible template for educators to explore his philosophy and incorporate it into their own practice. Indeed, Freire's openness to the questioning of all that is presented to learners must by necessity include a questioning of his own philosophy. This has allowed scholars to embrace the tenets of his pedagogy while expanding it or even critiquing it. For example, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), in

her definition of *culturally relevant pedagogy*, specifically suggests a reliance on critical pedagogy, and ultimately Freire:

I have defined culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogy of opposition. . .not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160)

She argues for instruction that puts students first, gives them a voice in their learning, allows them to maintain cultural competence, and empowers them to challenge the status quo. She also says that “this approach is similar to that advocated by noted critical pedagogue Paulo Freire” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). The movement around culturally relevant pedagogy has exploded in school systems nationwide, with some experiencing more success than others with regard to its effects on student achievement. However, the idea that what happens in the classroom should connect to what a student already knows and should allow her/him/them to question their environments is entirely Freirean.

bell hooks (1994) describes not only her appreciation of Freire’s work but her questioning of some of his language and how she reconciled it with her own thinking. She shares her early admiration of his practice and how she wanted to create opportunities for “conscientization” in the classroom (hooks, 1994, p. 14). But she also deals squarely with critiques of Freire’s sexist language:

There has never been a moment when reading Freire that I have not remained aware of not only the sexism of the language but the way he. . .constructs a phallogocentric paradigm of liberation—wherein freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are always linked as though they are one and the same. . .It is feminist thinking that empowers me to engage in a constructive critique of Freire’s work. . .and yet there are many other standpoints from which I approach his work that enable me to experience its value, that make it possible for that work to touch me at the very core of my being. . . There is no need to apologize for the sexism. Freire’s own model of critical pedagogy invites a critical interrogation of this flaw in the work. But critical interrogation is not the same as dismissal. (hooks, 1994, p. 49)

And so hooks saw value in Freire’s giving voice to the oppressed but also believed that Freire’s very definition of critical pedagogy demanded a questioning of it. However, more recent questions around teaching practice are less interested in the *inclusion* of more and varied voices, as hooks encourages, and more interested in silencing educators and eliminating situations, experiences, or content deemed to be problematic (i.e., content which interrogates power structures and examines inequitable systems).

Critical Race Theory

As stated earlier, multiple legislatures across the United States are reviewing curricula taught in schools for any hint of content that might make students—particularly white students—feel uncomfortable. With this in mind, *critical race theory* (CRT)

has come under attack from critics who believe it is harmful to young learners. This theory asserts that “racism is ordinary, not aberrational—‘normal science,’ the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Further, this theory gives credence to personal stories and experiences with racism. It also critiques liberalism as being too slow to bring about urgent, needed change for people of color and asserts that whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation (Ladson-Billings, 1995, pp. 11–12). Thus, CRT challenges systemic racism and requires a cross-examination of educational practices that have been dehumanizing and, in too many cases, violent toward students. It calls for an accurate telling of history. Freire’s notion of giving voice to the voiceless as a means to overturn systems of oppression is aligned in part with the basic tenets of CRT.

Just like the tensions around critical pedagogy and the assault on critical thinking and happening in Brazil, the United States is experiencing a time when ideas like those forwarded by Freire (e.g., acknowledging that racism and classism exist in society) have been denounced by far right, conservative groups who view any questioning of inequitable systems as an attack on them, personally. While CRT is primarily taught at the graduate school level, conservatives have argued, incorrectly, that it has overtaken the PK-12 public school system (Alfonseca, 2021, p. 1). There seems to be gradual, chipping away at the legacies of critical theorists like Paulo Freire, who held a fundamental belief in the power of education to confront the ills of society.

Conclusion

Paulo Freire was chased out of his country in 1964 for suggesting that learners of all ages should have a say about what happens to them in school and in life. It seems a simple notion but one that continues to be fraught with controversy. Right now in the United States, educators are engaged in the same conversations about equity and schooling that they have had for decades. While a great deal of course has changed, *not enough has*. Paulo Freire fought for those who had no voice and whose brilliance could only be realized through pedagogy that honored all aspects of their humanity. He asserted that true freedom requires everyone to acknowledge and dismantle systems of oppression. He believed that a loving world would embrace and uplift those without power and that these efforts could begin in the classroom, with a courageous teacher committed to the ideals of liberty and justice for all.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Bell Hooks](#)
- ▶ [Gloria Ladson-Billings](#)
- ▶ [Henry Giroux](#)
- ▶ [Maxine Greene](#)

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