



SOFIA DEDOTSI | EFROSYNI-ALKISTI PARASKEVOPOULOU-KOLLIA | MARGARITA ALLOZA | MERITXEL GARCÉS | ANA LÁZARO  
AGUSTÍN QUÍLEZ | TERESA SÁNCHEZ | MARÍA JOSÉ MUÑOZ | LUIS M. RODRÍGUEZ OTERO | LYDIA DEL CARMEN ÁVILA ZÁRATE  
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DESPOINA KOMPOTI | ELENI KONTOGIANNI | GEORGIA GOUGA

# Anti-oppressive education: Messages from Paulo Freire

## Educación anti-opresiva: mensajes de Paulo Freire

Sofia Dedotsi\*, Efrosyni-Alkisti Paraskevopoulou-Kollia\*\*

\* University of Northumbria. sofia.dedotsi@northumbria.ac.uk

\*\* University of Thessaly. frini@uth.gr

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### Abstract:

This paper provides a critical discussion of education as a process in classroom but also as an institution within wider contextual structures. The limitations and challenges faced by educators have reduced education in a target/outcome focused process that reproduce societal norms and 'knowledge'. However, the anti-oppressive pedagogy of Freire, it is argued, can be used as an inspirational and helpful tool to deconstruct and reconstruct oppressive reality within and outside class. Following an in depth description of Freire's conceptualization of education, the paper concludes with a number of implications for educators who are committed to anti-oppression and social justice.

**Keywords:** anti-oppressive education, anti-oppressive pedagogy, Paulo Freire.

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### Resumen:

El presente artículo presenta una discusión crítica acerca de la educación como un proceso en el aula pero también como una institución contextualizada en ámbitos más amplios. Las limitaciones y los desafíos afrontados por los educadores han reducido la educación a un proceso orientado a lograr metas y resultados que a menudo reproducen las normas y el conocimiento de la sociedad. Sin embargo la pedagogía antiopresiva de Freire puede ser utilizada como una herramienta inspiradora y útil tanto para deconstruir como para reconstruir realidades otrora opresivas y tanto desde dentro como desde fuera de las aulas. Siguiendo una descripción en profundidad de la conceptualización freireana de educación, el artículo concluye con una serie de implicaciones para educadores comprometidos con la justicia y con lo anti opresivo.

**Palabras clave:** educación antiopresiva, pedagogía antiopresiva, Paulo Freire.

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### Article info:

*Received: 20/07/2018 / Received in revised form: 03/03/2019*

*Accepted: 08/07/2019 / Published online: 29/07/2019*

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5944/comunitania.18.1>

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## 1. Introduction

### *Setting the context: The complexities and challenges of education*

In any educational institution's "micro-community," (Mialaret and Isambert-Jamati 1997) pedagogical processes are the result of social processes that occur outside of it (Durkheim, 1987) and vice versa. This leads education to a process that is not mechanistic, but is part of social relations. What takes place in the classroom is in a sense development of terms of "negotiation and conflict" (Mavrogiorgos 1992: 41) of the wider social context and its characteristics.

Marx argued that "all the ideas of the ruling class, in every age, are the dominant ideas" (Marx and Engels 1979). Educational institutions such as schools and universities, being the main vehicle of socialization could be (and maybe are) one of the most important places of application of this position (Theologou 2005: 135). Education is an area that is appropriate for many types of functional reconstruction of society. For this reason, particular attention should also be paid to the main modulators of its operation.

Durkheim (1947) reports that social events are true; that is, they happen in the context of everyday life and influence us. This is also the case in the classroom through the interaction of teachers and students, influencing the behavior of both. Education is, simultaneously, a symptom and the result of social developments. Also, literature is often vague when it comes to defining concepts and some definitions are so broad they could encompass almost any social process (Reed et al. 2010).

Teaching is an exceptionally complicated process and is conducted through many different ways and choices (Calderhead 1978). In this context the educator is expected to have knowledge and ability, talents and personal values (Giannakaki 1997: 202; Lortie 1975). Moreover, it is required by them to have communication dexterities but also infectiousness (Calderhead 1987). Accordingly, educators are called to demonstrate at the instructive process dexterities and characteristics that are considered to suit them. These are important reasons for which educators find themselves many times confronted with dilemmas and contradictions that can be attributed in the pressing expectations that others have from them. Lawn (1990) supports that teaching needs to be seen beyond the direct teacher-student relationship; it involves complexities in student admission processes, preparation of courses, attendance in institutional meetings and other administrative duties. This is a set of competences that imply that an educator has many abilities (see also Michie 2009; Phillipppo 2013; Phillipppo and Kelly 2014; Phillipppo, Brown and Blosser 2018). But "teaching is a lot more than just showing up to class and grading assignments" (Saunders and Ash 2013: 498). Such an approach considers the importance of scientific knowledge and specialisation as main criterion of the teaching effectiveness. This is an additional dimension that makes education multi-collective and challenging.

One of the most influential learning theories that have shaped education –especially higher education– is the concept of constructive alignment by Biggs (1999). The concept, highly driven from cognitive psychology and constructivist theory, advocates for an ‘outcomes-based’ education – in other words, students are viewed to construct learning on *what they do*. Therefore, educators need to design teaching and learning activities that are clearly linked with the intended learning outcomes. Whilst this theory has been useful in designing the content of education and in-class activities, it is limited in taking into account the wider structural components of teaching that can significantly shape students’ learning and doing.

As far as society is concerned, most educational processes are considered as oppressive. They are related with certain, concrete obligations and rules that the educator is supposed to follow during teaching procedure (Giannakaki 1997: 205). It should however be underlined that the process of teaching is directly connected to the frame of the social formations and relations that exist outside the educational institution. One could say that in the institutions ‘a certain belief system’ is embodied ‘via the structures of educational policy and ideology’ (see also Valentine 2001; Cudworth 2015; Mavrogiorgos 1992). This relation is bidirectional (relation of correspondence). This makes the teaching procedure not mechanistic, but a part of the social relations within the modern social formation. What takes place in the classroom is in a way a term of “negotiation and conflict” with the wider social frame and its characteristics. As mentioned above, classroom is a small ecosystem (Kalantzi-Azizi 1998: 13), a micrograph of society (Filiass 1994; Hatton, 1994: 235<sup>1</sup>) and the educational activity is both a symptom and a result of events happening in society. According to Bowles and Gintis there is a relationship of “correspondence” between society and education (Bowles and Gintis, 1976: 12). Respectively, the educational institution’s “micro-society” (Mialaret and Isambert-Jamati 1997) pedagogic processes are a result of the social ones that occur outside from it (Durkheim, 1987).

During the recent decades, the explosion of information and its distribution via network and other electronic means encouraged the intensification of the educational programmes, a thing that made teachers’ task more complicated and onerous (Paraskevopoulou-Kollia 2006). In a society that has gone through many changes and could be characterised from industrial to a network-based one (Lai 2011; Castells 2010; Riele and Crump 2003), teaching in various settings from schools to university has undergone a lot of structural changes as regards daily interaction with students; students seem to prefer social networks to communicate even for schools’ or Department’s needs (Greenhow et al. 2009; Márquez-Ramos and Mourelle 2018). However, this intensification was more quantitative than qualitative. A great number of educa-

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<sup>1</sup> The author mentions that class structure is one of the most characteristic elements showing the impact that society has upon educational issues and those who are connected to them.

tors end up feeling that they place or deposit into the heads of their students amounts of knowledge, just like money depositors do in the bank accounts –“the banking concept of education”– (Freire 1970: 53). Educators, quite often, consider themselves as simply knowledge providers; -only responsible for their students’ information and not for their critical thought development. In other words, they help their students get adjusted to society’s rules and they are obliged to follow the instructions and the commands of the government even though they sometimes do not agree with them (Gudjons 1989; Brunnhuber 1988 and see also Turner-Bisset 2007).

There always are some conceptual issues, which are “unique and interpersonal”; as Nias has argued (1989: 14). On the other hand, when we think of educators, we should, simultaneously think about the governments, the bureaucracy and the financial matters that are connected with the educational process: “Targets, accountability, competition and choice, leadership, entrepreneurship, performance related pay and privatisation articulate new ways of thinking about what teachers do, what they value and what their purposes are (Ball and Youdell 2009: 79). Also, Harré and van Langenhove (1999) underline that: “Not only what we do but also what we can do is restricted by the rights, duties and obligations we acquire, assume or which are imposed upon us in the concrete social contexts of everyday life” (p. 4). Karabel and Halsey reflected the social scheming that surrounds educational issues and their words analyse explicitly a context which disorients educators’ work: “we have referred to bureaucratisation within the organisation of research, to biases growing out of the experience of particular generations, to the blandishments of service to dominant powers, and to the prejudices that come from commitment to particular ideologies or social groups” (Karabel and Halsey 1977: 77 and see also Tickle 2000).

Whilst discussing the complexity in teaching and classroom practice some other factors need to be taken into consideration. One of the factors on that theme (classroom performance and practice) is that teaching may be a reflective, cognitive activity and Calderhead (1987) talked about teachers possessing not only specialised knowledge but also training experience (see also Putnam and Borko 2000; Shulman 1996, 2001).

In light of the above, education cannot be seen only within the walls of a classroom. The context of education as discussed above – policies, targets, governmental agendas – all structure of what constitutes teaching and learning, and actually reproduce societal norms and divisions. In Bowles and Gintis (1976: 5) words, educational institutions are ‘the laboratory, where social inequalities are tested’. However, is this what we are aspired to advocate for as educators?

Education has also been described to produce ‘rebels’ (Bowles and Gintis 1976). But how is this possible in a market-driven education arena? The majority of theories in literature such as Biggs (1999) focus so much in the processes within classroom that leave limited if no space for understanding and challenging the wider context.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to use Paulo Freire's anti-oppressive pedagogy as a conceptual tool for a libertarian education within and outside classroom.

## 2. Discussion

Paulo Freire (1921-1997), was a Brazilian educator and policy maker, who was considered as the leading philosopher of critical pedagogy (Hegar 2012; McLaren 1999). His writings, including the two most well known books *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970) and *Pedagogy of hope* (1994), have been influential across several disciplines, including social work (Carroll and Minkler 2000; Moch 2009). Freire's work has been strongly debated; however, both proponents (i.e. Giroux 1993; McLaren 1999; McLaren and Leonard 1993) and critics (i.e. Elias 1994; Taylor 1993) have widely acknowledged his legacy and contribution to critical theory. One of his most important contributions is that he put theory into practice (McLaren 1986). In addition, acknowledging the interconnectedness of education, politics, domination and liberation, Freire is suggested to have provided both critique and hope – one of the main strengths of his writings (Giroux 1993; McLaren 1986, 1999). His critique involved the banking model of education (knowledge is deposited into passive students); notions of expertise (e.g. educators, social workers); and the power mechanisms that reinforce and reproduce oppression (e.g. institution of education, welfare services, etc). Nevertheless, his message of hope included the advocacy of problem-posing education; the significance of critical consciousness and praxis (which involves both reflection and action); the centrality of dialogical relationship between educators and students as co-learners; and last, emphasis on the context within the self is located.

However, Freire's writings have accepted much criticism too. The main attacks to Freire's work offer arguments such as: that his analysis of oppression is limited because it is considered as class-based; he uses a sexist and male-biased language; he presents oversimplified understandings of either/or way; and last, he does not offer a deconstruction of his own writings and concepts as he does for others (hooks 1993; Elias 1994; Taylor 1993). Freire in his later writings (1993, 1994) acknowledged himself some of the above criticisms and tried to respond by expanding his analysis of oppression to racial and gender oppression as well as providing a critical and reflexive account of his thoughts and emotions (Schugurensky 2011). Apart from Freire, there have also been responses to the above criticism by other thinkers and scholars within literature (Giroux 1993; McLaren 1986, 1999; McLaren and Leonard 1993; Schugurensky 2011). However, what constitutes anti-oppressiveness in education of Freire?

### *The Freirean education*

As discussed briefly above, Freire advocated for a problem-posing education, in which central aim is raising critical consciousness: 'learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive ele-

ments of reality' (Freire 1970: 35). Therefore, for Freire, education is not neutral; it can be a functional tool to 'silence' the oppressed or to liberate them by discovering how they can transform their world and reality. In this investigation of reality, both participants (educator and student) are co-learners and actively engaged in dialogue and action. This mutual learning and action are central features of Freire's education, in contrast to traditional education in which students are 'empty vessels' to be filled with the knowledge by the 'experts' teachers.

Freire's writings (1970, 1993, 1994) suggested that education needs to involve a thematic investigation process of search-dialogue-action through deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge and reality. Freire described this process as a cycle: co-learners identify the problems/circumstances they want to investigate, then they critically reflect on these, and lastly, they are involved in praxis through exploration of new concepts, further experiences and reflection. Freire (1993) advocated that change is only achieved through this process, where people rethink their assumptions in action. In addition, this investigation cannot be a-historical. Instead, historical awareness was considered as deeply educational for Freire as it is within history that knowledge is produced and appropriated.

Based on this notion, problems/oppression are exposed and revealed in their historical context and learners link these with their own conditions and making of reality that dehumanizes people. The power of this knowledge was suggested to lead into praxis – perceiving oneself as maker of history and taking social action against oppression and the dominant discourse (Butler et al. 2003; Carroll and Minkler 2000; Freire 1970; 1994, Narayan 2000).

The content of the problem-posing education is not fixed but existential – constantly expanding and renewing itself (Freire 1970, 1993, 1994). Similarly, Freire did not consider that anti-oppressive pedagogy provides final answers or fixed 'truth' regimes. Instead, he advocated that liberation is 'becoming', through the constant struggle within (and against) different and competing structures and institutions. Therefore, discussing a number of mechanistic strategies would be somewhat anti-theoretical to Freire's work. However, in literature a number of pedagogical strategies have been suggested, named as experiential learning (Allensworth Hawkins and Knox 2014; Cramer et al. 2012; Early et al. 2003) participatory learning and action techniques (PLA) (Bozalek and Biersteker 2010); problem-based learning (PBL) (Abel and Campbell 2009); activist pedagogy (Preston and Aslett 2014) and participatory action strategies (Peabody 2013). Across and beyond the various pedagogical strategies discussed in literature, the common base has been to engage students in dialogue, reflection and praxis (Dedotsi 2016; Dedotsi and Paraskevopoulou 2015). However, how has Freire's anti-oppressive education been used in practice?

Freire's pedagogy has been debated and discussed in a number of disciplines across social and health sciences, such as education (i.e. Kumashiro 2000; 2001);

social work (i.e. Dedotsi et al. 2016; Dedotsi and Young 2018); and health and nursing (i.e. Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988, Rozendo et al 2017). Whilst his contribution is widely acknowledged in shifting traditional approaches to education/pedagogy of such disciplines into more radical and political ones, yet, this has been limited due to the neo-liberal agenda that prevails in the Western context (Reisch 2013; Spolander et al. 2014). Neo-liberal educational policies driven from the 'market demand' along with downsizing practices as well as institutions' functionalities and operations as discussed earlier, re-produce an oppressive context and content of education – the one that Freire protested against. Therefore, students and professionals in the making are exposed to a depoliticised (Giroux 2010) learning environment, disabling them from engaging in critical consciousness.

However, Freire's concepts on education can be an inspiring and helpful tool for educators across different disciplines, who are committed towards social justice and want to expose and transform reality in and outside class. Action – or praxis according to Freire – therefore, involve educators that are committed to anti-oppressiveness themselves. It is true that educators have their personal beliefs concerning the educational process. It is a mixture of knowledge and experience that they have accumulated during their life and it is strongly connected with the way they confront life in general<sup>2</sup> (Erickson and Pinnegar 2017; Eilam and Povas 2009). In light of this, it is important to ask ourselves – what kind of educators we want to be?

### 3. Conclusions

This paper has discussed education as activity and as a context, using Freire's conceptual tools of anti-oppressive pedagogy. Without reducing Freire's pedagogy into a technocratic approach, we argue that there are a number of implications that emerge for education based on his concepts.

First and foremost, the content of education (curriculum, strategies and approaches within class) needs to reflect current social needs and reality in their historical context. Even under curricula that are pre-designed from wider structures, educators and students can critically discuss them, exposing their oppressive components and challenging 'knowledge' within class (Kumashiro 2001).

Educators whilst still being directive in relation to the process (Shor and Freire 1987), could involve students in the design and delivery of their education as active

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<sup>2</sup> Since 1966, Bourdieu has underlined the fact that differentiated instruction is extremely important, in order to put each person into a fertile teaching situation that activates her/him in a way that s/he can learn (Mialaret, G. 2011. *About Pedagogy and Education*. Eds.: P. Kalogiannaki and K. Karras, Transl.: M. Malafeka. Athens: Gutenberg. [in Greek]).



collaborators, by co-deciding the emphasis, the method and the assessment of their learning where possible. Here, educators could prioritise issues of social justice and anti-oppression to be debated and exposed in class.

Action is also important within this process – educators and students need to engage with the wider community, reflecting on emerging issues, raising their voices together with community groups and participating in community/advocacy projects.

It needs to be acknowledged that the individualizing processes of the market-driven education leave no space for such a libertarian education. Also, Freire's theories cannot be studied uncritically but in their limitations and potential contribution across different disciplines, context and levels of education. However, it is argued that they can inspire towards the struggle and construction of an alternative education that is based in equality, justice and anti-oppression.

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