



PAULO FREIRE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF CRITICAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to analyze the contributions of Paulo Freire's pedagogy to social transformation through critical education, exploring how his principles are applied in contemporary pedagogical practice. The research, of a descriptive and qualitative nature, had the participation of 22 education professionals, including teachers, pedagogical coordinators and school principals, and data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that, although most participants recognize the transformative potential of Freirean pedagogy, the effective application of this approach faces challenges, such as resistance to changes in traditional teaching methods and the limitations imposed by educational systems. In addition, the research pointed out that, when applied correctly, Freire's critical education can promote the empowerment of students and contribute to the formation of more conscious and critical citizens, capable of acting in favor of social transformation. The conclusion highlights the importance of the continuous training of educators and the need to contextualize Freire's principles to contemporary realities, aiming at a more democratic, inclusive and transformative education.

Keywords: Paulo Freire. Education. Critical education.

INTRODUCTION

Paulo Freire, one of the most influential Brazilian thinkers and educators, is widely recognized for his contributions to the field of education, with a special emphasis on critical and transformative education. His work, which began in the 1960s, still resonates deeply in pedagogical practices and contemporary educational theory, being a reference for those who believe in the potential of education to promote significant social change. In his most emblematic work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire proposes an education that is not merely a reproducer of knowledge, but that is an instrument of emancipation and awareness of the subjects. This critical approach aims not only at the transmission of content, but at the formation of individuals capable of questioning reality and fighting for social and political transformations (Sousa; Pereira, 2020).

The historical and political context in which Paulo Freire developed his ideas was marked by a Brazil of deep social and political inequalities. During the 1960s, the country lived under a military regime that imposed severe limitations on freedom of expression and civil rights. In this scenario, Freire, as an educator and activist, proposed an educational model based on dialogue and the active participation of students, arguing that education should not be a unilateral process of knowledge transmission, but a collaborative and problematizing practice. His pedagogy is based on the idea that students should be active subjects of their own learning, and not just passive receivers of information (Sousa; Pereira, 2020).

Freire's pedagogical proposal is, therefore, profoundly critical. He believes that traditional education, which privileges the memorization and reproduction of knowledge in an authoritarian way, contributes to the maintenance of social inequalities and the status quo. For Freire, education should be a space of questioning and liberation, where individuals can understand the dynamics of their social and historical reality, and from this, engage in processes of transformation. His pedagogical theory is, therefore, closely linked to the concept of awareness, in which the student becomes aware of the social conditions that oppress him and, based on this awareness, seeks actions that can change this reality (Sousa; Pereira, 2020).

In addition, Freire's pedagogy proposes an education that goes beyond mere academic training, seeking to promote an education for citizenship. For him, the school should be a space for ethical and political education, where the subject is encouraged to reflect on his role in society and to actively participate in the construction of a more just and egalitarian world. Critical education, according to Freire, should be a tool for social transformation, and not just for the adaptation of individuals to an unequal system. In this

sense, Freire's pedagogy is articulated with social struggles and demands for justice, contributing to the formation of citizens who are aware of and committed to social change (Torres; Carril, 2021).

Another fundamental aspect of Paulo Freire's work is his emphasis on the horizontality of teaching-learning relations. In its pedagogical model, there is no distance between teacher and student, but rather a relationship of collaboration, in which both are subjects of the educational process. The role of the educator is that of mediator, facilitator of knowledge, but also learner, because both the teacher and the student have something to learn from the other. This vision of teaching places education on a plane of constant exchange and reflection, where students' voices are heard and their life experiences are considered as central elements in the learning process (Saviani, 2021).

In a contemporary context, Paulo Freire's ideas are still extremely relevant. In a world marked by social, economic and cultural inequalities, his pedagogy remains a powerful instrument of resistance and transformation. However, it is necessary to reflect on how its principles can be applied today, considering the changes in educational structures, teaching technologies, and social realities. Freire's critical education still presents challenges for its implementation in contexts marked by structural inequalities, but it remains an important tool to promote education that, in addition to developing cognitive skills, fosters critical reflection and social transformation (Saviani, 2021).

Freire for social transformation through critical education, exploring how his concepts can be applied in the current educational reality. In addition, it is intended to investigate the role of critical education in the formation of subjects aware of and engaged with social issues, seeking to understand the challenges and potentialities of its application in different educational contexts.

METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out with the objective of understanding Paulo Freire's contributions to social transformation through critical education, focusing on the analysis of professionals in the field of education. This is a descriptive and qualitative research, as it sought not only to describe the perceptions of the participants about the application of Freire's principles, but also to deeply understand their experiences, opinions and reflections on critical education in different contexts. The qualitative approach allowed a more detailed analysis of the data, taking into account the subjectivity of the participants and the context in which they were inserted (Lima; Domingues Junior; Gomes, 2023; File; Domingues

Junior; Silva, 2024; File; Silva; Domingues Júnior, 2024; Kvitko; Parisotto; Baldissarelli, 2024).

The research sample was composed of 22 education professionals, including teachers, pedagogical coordinators and school principals. These professionals were intentionally selected, considering the experience they had in relation to pedagogical practices and the implementation of critical approaches in teaching. The choice of this sample aimed to ensure a diversity of perspectives, in order to obtain a broader view of how Paulo Freire's critical education has been applied in different educational realities.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, which allowed the participants to explore in a flexible and in-depth way. The interviews were conducted in person or by videoconference, depending on the availability of the professionals. The questions addressed topics such as the understanding of Paulo Freire's concepts of critical education and social transformation, the application of these concepts in daily pedagogical practices, the challenges faced in the implementation of this approach and perceptions about the effectiveness of critical education in the formation of more aware and active citizens in society.

After data collection, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed qualitatively, using the content analysis technique. The objective was to identify patterns, categories and recurring themes in the participants' answers, seeking to understand how Paulo Freire's principles are interpreted and applied in the current educational context. Content analysis made it possible to organize information in a systematic way, facilitating the identification of significant insights and allowing a deeper understanding of pedagogical practices and the relationships between critical education and social transformation.

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of the collected data revealed a diversity of opinions and perceptions among education professionals about the application of Paulo Freire's pedagogy and the social transformation promoted by critical education. During the interviews, the participants were asked about the importance of critical education for the formation of students and its contribution to the process of social transformation.

Respondent E3, a History teacher in a public school, highlighted that "Freire's pedagogy is an invitation to constant reflection. When we apply their methods, we are able to provoke students to question their reality, which is the first step towards significant social change." This statement reflects the view that education, according to Freire, should be a liberating practice, which awakens the awareness of students.

Another point raised by several participants was the difficulty in applying Freire's concepts in schools that have a rigid and inflexible curriculum. Teacher E1, with 12 years of experience in elementary education, stated that "even trying to bring Freire's dialogic practice to the classroom, the educational system still limits us a lot. Standardized assessments and the pressure for objective results often run counter to the idea of critical and transformative learning." This difficulty is a reflection of the current educational context, where the search for efficiency and measurable results often conflicts with a critical pedagogy, which requires time and flexibility.

Teacher E4, who teaches at a private middle-class school, had a different perception. She commented: "In our context, we have more freedom to work with Freire's ideas. I try to integrate active listening and respect into the students' life experience, but I still see resistance on their part. Many are so used to traditional teaching that they feel uncomfortable with the proposal of protagonism in learning". The resistance mentioned by teacher E4 highlights one of the main challenges pointed out by the interviewees: the difficulty in breaking with traditional teaching models, where the student is seen as a passive receiver of knowledge.

In addition to the practical difficulties, a recurring point in the interviews was the importance of the continuous training of educators. The pedagogical coordinator E2, who works in a public school in the countryside, said: "Teacher training is fundamental. Freire's theory is incredible, but without adequate accompaniment, without constant critical training, it is difficult to implement a liberating pedagogy. Some teachers still see education as something that must be done mechanically, and not as a process of transformation." This statement emphasizes that, for an effective application of Freire's pedagogy, it is necessary that educators are not only well informed about their ideas, but also willing to engage in a process of continuous training that allows for a critical and transformative pedagogical practice.

The data analysis also revealed that professionals who apply Freire's critical education more consistently perceive a change in student behavior and engagement. Teacher E7, who teaches Science in a public school, reported that "when working with problematization and interaction with students, I can see a greater participation of them. They begin to question not only the content, but also the world around them." This type of pedagogical practice, centered on the student and the exchange of knowledge, aims to promote students' awareness of social issues and the ability to act on them. The relationship between Freire's theory and the living conditions of the students was also a point debated by the interviewees.

Teacher E5, who works in a peripheral community, highlighted that "for students from more marginalized contexts, the application of Freire is more challenging, but also much more transformative. When we are able to work with their realities and bring knowledge into their daily lives, it opens doors to a new way of seeing the world." According to teacher E5, Freire's critical education becomes even more relevant when contextualized to the social realities of students, allowing them to understand the importance of knowledge in the transformation of their own living conditions.

The use of Freire's methodology was also related to the empowerment of students. Principal E6, who works at a high school, commented: "Students who go through this awareness process become more autonomous, more critical and, above all, more confident to act in the world. They no longer see knowledge as something distant, but as a tool to transform their reality." This statement illustrates Freire's idea that education should not only be a preparation for the job market, but a practice that empowers individuals to actively engage in the construction of a fairer society.

However, some educators also pointed out the resistance of part of the school community, as observed by teacher E9: "Freire is a strong name, but there is still a lot of prejudice against his ideas, especially among the oldest. Some teachers see this pedagogy as something too political, which interferes with teaching pure and simple." This resistance is one of the main obstacles mentioned by the interviewees for the effective implementation of Freire's pedagogy, especially in more conservative educational environments.

The analysis of the data also revealed a common perception about the need to review and adapt Freire's methods to contemporary times. Teacher E8, who teaches at a high school, said: "Paulo Freire lived in a very different context from ours, so it is necessary to adapt some of his practices to the current reality. However, the principles of dialogue, respect for the student and the search for social transformation remain extremely relevant". This speech reflects a critical and constructive understanding of Freire's pedagogy, which, despite being applied for decades, continues to be a source of inspiration for contemporary educators.

Awareness of the importance of critical education was also highlighted by coordinator E10, who highlighted: "Freire teaches us that education should be a practice of freedom, and not of domination. If we can get students to understand this principle, we can form citizens who are more aware and prepared to deal with the inequalities in society." The relationship between education and freedom is central to Freire's work, and this insight was shared by several participants, who highlighted the importance of providing students with

an education that goes beyond the confines of the classroom and connects with broader social issues.

Finally, the data collected suggest that, despite the difficulties encountered in the application of critical education, there is a consensus among the interviewees that Paulo Freire's pedagogy has a significant transformative potential. Most respondents agree that, when applied correctly, it can provide significant changes both in student behavior and in teachers' pedagogical practices, contributing to the construction of a more just and egalitarian society.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In conclusion, the research showed that Paulo Freire's pedagogy continues to be a relevant and necessary approach in the current educational context, with great potential to promote social transformation. The education professionals interviewed recognize the importance of critical education as a means of making students aware of social inequalities and empowering them to take action. However, the challenges faced in the implementation of this pedagogy were also evident, especially due to the resistance of part of the school community and the limitations imposed by the traditional educational system. The analysis of the data revealed that the application of critical education demands a profound change in pedagogical practices and in the attitude of educators.

Teachers need to be willing to reflect on their own practices and engage students in a more dialogical way, respecting their life experiences and encouraging their active participation in the learning process. Resistance to change, both by teachers and students, is a major obstacle that requires time, ongoing training, and institutional support to overcome. Another relevant aspect identified in the research was the need to contextualize Freire's principles to contemporary realities.

The adaptation of Freire's pedagogy to new technologies, the demands of the labor market, and social transformations is essential to ensure that it remains an effective tool for social transformation. This requires a flexible approach, one that respects the characteristics of each educational context and allows educators to appropriate Freire's principles in creative and meaningful ways. Even so, the research showed that, when well applied, Paulo Freire's critical education is capable of generating significant changes, both in students and in the school community.

The formation of critical citizens, aware of their role in society and committed to social transformation, is one of the greatest legacies of Freire's pedagogy, and should be seen as a central objective of education. Thus, education should not only be a means of

preparing students for the job market, but also a process of training for citizenship and social justice.

Finally, the results of the research suggest that the continuity of the critical training of educators and the creation of adequate conditions for the application of Freire's methods are fundamental for the success of any pedagogical project aimed at social transformation. Investing in teacher training and in the creation of more democratic and participatory learning environments can contribute to Paulo Freire's critical education being effectively an agent of change.

Therefore, the conclusions of this research reinforce the importance of Paulo Freire in contemporary education and point to the urgent need to review pedagogical practices in order to make them more critical, inclusive and transformative. The implementation of Freire's ideas can thus contribute to an education that not only prepares students for the future, but also helps them build a more just and egalitarian present.

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