

Critical Pedagogy and Social Transformation, from the Perspective of Paulo Freire: Paths to Awareness in Contemporary Education

Antonio José Muller¹, Eliane Kormann², Josely Cristiane Rosa³, Sidnei Gripa⁴

¹(Universidade Regional de Blumenau FURB, Blumenau, SC, Brazil)

²(Centro Universitário de Brusque - UNIFEBE, Brusque, SC, Brazil)

³(Centro Universitário de Brusque - UNIFEBE, Brusque, SC, Brazil)

⁴(Centro Universitário de Brusque - UNIFEBE, Brusque, SC, Brazil)

Background: *In the world education ranking, Brazil shamefully appears in the last places. Several reasons contribute to this reality and one of them is the lack of interest among students in theoretical concepts that are outside the reality in which they live. One of the possibilities to increase students' interest would be related to what the student usually appreciates within their culture, such as arts and sports, for example. The arts and sports are cultural expressions that most people admire and that could be better used as a motivational tool to keep students in schools. Based on this, this research aims to understand how sport and the arts can play their role in effectively contributing to the promotion of social inclusion and academic motivation. This theoretical research brings bibliographic sources closer to cultural interests, from the theoretical perspective of Conscientização (Awareness), Pedagogy of Desire and Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy.*

Keywords: *Contemporary Education; Education and Society; Philosophy of Education; Paulo Freire.*

Date of Submission: 28-12-2024

Date of Acceptance: 08-01-2025

I. Introduction

Basic education is a right offered to the entire population and a duty of the State established by the 1988 Constitution. However, data on Brazilian Education provided by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) in 2018 describe the condition of the public education system and that, even close to universalizing elementary education, it has not yet been able to meet the educational needs of Brazilians of all ages. So much so that illiteracy still persists. In 2021, there were 11.3 million people aged 15 or over who were still illiterate, which means a rate of 6.8% of the adult population. Among other negative data, 40% of people over 25 years old did not complete elementary school; 30.7% of high school students were behind in age/grade or out of school. Another 46% did not work, were not qualified for work, and even less so worked (Maia, et al. 2021).

These data reflect the situation of Brazilian education, which is considered inefficient and keeps Brazil in a depressing ranking. In 2021, a study prepared by the IMD (World Competitiveness Center) compared the prosperity and competitiveness of 64 countries. The research assessed the economic and social environment of countries to generate innovation and levels of competitiveness in the global scenario. In the axis that evaluates education, Brazil had the worst evaluation among the countries analyzed, reaching the 64th position (last position) (Maia, et al. 2021).

Several issues contribute to these numbers, among them the lack of efficient public policies aimed at improving education. One of the issues that interfere in improving the quality of education involves the application of practices where the student is evolving in the construction of the necessary knowledge, both for technical training issues and for the construction of critical and creative thinking. The teaching and learning practices used in the day-to-day life of schools seek to develop these skills, but it is difficult to quantify them and qualify them as effective and efficient. Many of these practices are derived from the theoretical thoughts of great educational thinkers, such as Rousseau, Vygotsky, Montessori, Dewey, Freinet and Freire. One of Freire's central principles was "education as a form of freedom" that leads to true liberation, of which the concept of "banking education", where students are empty spaces to be filled, acts as an instrument of oppression. On the contrary, Freire called for the cultivation of a critical awareness (*conscientização*), allowing students to reflect on their own reality and, thus, transform it. To achieve this goal, he suggests that education be problematizing and dialogic, based on the student's knowledge.

Despite his importance in global education, Freire has been criticized on several fronts, mainly politically, but also by authors who do not consider Freirean pedagogy applicable to current practical education. The arguments are that his ideas, although striking and important, are restricted to issues of shaping the political and social thinking of students and teachers, and therefore there are no examples of how his pedagogy would be advancing towards improving quality levels in Brazil or anywhere else where it would be implemented.

The presence of Freirean legacy, in itself, does not clearly determine the success or failure of education where it would be used. Despite several examples, there has not yet been a deep and direct study on the real contribution of his ideas to the results of these applications in practice.

This theoretical study aims to understand how sports and the arts can play their role in effectively contributing to the promotion of social inclusion and academic motivation, relating them to Paulo Freire's pedagogical ideas.

II. Resignifying Paulo Freire

Paulo Freire, born in 1921 in Recife and died in 1997 in São Paulo, developed his revolutionary pedagogical theory that influenced educational and social movements around the world and whose philosophical writings influenced several academic areas, including theology, sociology, anthropology, applied linguistics, pedagogy and cultural studies.

Paulo Freire is considered one of the most important thinkers in world education. His main work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is used as one of the fundamental texts in teacher training courses and in the emergence of so-called critical pedagogy. According to Google Scholar (Green, 2016), this book was the third most cited in the area in the social sciences worldwide in 2016.

Freire's conception of education as a profoundly political project oriented towards the transformation of society has been crucial to the education of revolutionary societies and societies in civil war, as well as established Western democracies. Freire's work has had considerable influence among progressive educators in the West, especially in the context of the emerging traditions of critical pedagogy, bilingual education, social justice, and multiculturalism (McLaren, 2000). Freire advocated an education that was concerned with the problems of our time and with developing students' critical awareness, and this thinking is as relevant today as it was decades ago. After all, the learning process suggested by Freire is based on the active participation of students, increasing their self-esteem and, consequently, also increasing their autonomy and active participation in society. Therefore, for Freire, current education must follow a condition of praxis (action with reflection) within a perspective of dialogue between educator and student (Pereira, 2020). The presence of Freire's legacy crosses borders in various realities. According to Veiga (2019), Freire is studied at several renowned universities in the United States, has a statue in his honor in Sweden, the name of a study center in Finland, and is an inspiration for scientists in Kosovo. There are educational institutions that follow the Paulo Freire method in several countries. This is the case of Revere High School, a school in Massachusetts that in 2014 was rated as the best public high school in the United States (Veiga, 2019). Freire's thinking is present in teacher training courses at the best universities in the world. There are annual conferences and seminars to promote Freirean thinking in Canada, Germany, South Korea, Australia, Chile, South Africa, Finland, among other countries where education is a priority. Furthermore, according to the Paulo Freire Institute (2019), there are countries where there are Paulo Freire Institutes (established or in formation): South Africa (Cape Town), Germany (Berlin and Munich), Argentina (Buenos Aires, IPF-Chacabuco, Rosario, Tandil), Canada (Toronto), Korea, Chile (Santiago), China (Hong Kong), Colombia (Bogotá), Egypt, Spain (Valencia), United States (Los Angeles), Greece (Thessaloniki), Guinea-Bissau (Bissau), India (Calcutta and Mumbai), Israel (Mazkeret Batia and Jerusalem), Italy (Bologna and Milan), Malta, Mexico (Hermosillo), Puerto Rico, Portugal (City of Porto), United Kingdom (Manchester), Dominican Republic, Sweden (Gomes, Muller, 2019).

There are several problems in education today, and one of the most important is the lack of interest students have in the curriculum offered in the learning process. Freire suggests that the curriculum could increase students' interest in education if it promoted new knowledge based on knowledge already constructed by the student in advance and if it took into account the student's own reality and culture.

The curriculum must respect the cultural background that students bring to school. As Freire (1998) says: "why not establish an 'intimate' connection between the knowledge considered basic for any school curriculum and the knowledge that is the fruit of the lived experience of these students as individuals? The curriculum has the potential to increase motivation, since it can take advantage of the student's life experiences and encourage

students to be present and participate in the learning process that could make the school an authentic place of 'student-centered instruction'. The development of programs that are responsive to social and cultural changes in society. There must be a connection between what children practice and enjoy with what is taught in the school curriculum, and a variety of activities that closely relate to the customs and traditions of local life and culture must be incorporated (Rossatto, 2001).

In addition, the curriculum can promote and foster interest in education in unmotivated communities, where students do not perceive the importance and relevance of school, since it represents a world different from the reality in which they live daily. School must be connected to a student's local culture in order to develop a universal culture, which is the combination of social, individual, physical and mental development. Freire (1994) explains that when children come to school, they bring with them an understanding of the world, in different dimensions and according to the social class to which they belong. The places they come from and the cultural context in which they live are the beginning of their knowledge bases. Furthermore, Freire was convinced that a curriculum for student achievement should be a process of analyzing reality, so that they can become critically aware of their situation. This connection must take into account forms of oppression, since the ruling class can manipulate the population by teaching what it wants to keep people immobilized by the ideology of fatalism – adapting the student to what is inevitable and cannot be changed. Perhaps this is a Freirean utopia, but if education cannot do everything, there is something fundamental that it can do. If education is not the key to social transformation, neither is it intended solely to reproduce the dominant ideology (Freire, 1998). The school curriculum could be prepared to change this historical fatalistic ideology and critically educate students. From this perspective, the curriculum is about optimism and hope that can expand curiosity, creativity and imagination. This refers to Freire's general critique of education. He argues that any curriculum that ignores racism, sexism, exploitation of workers and other forms of oppression at the same time supports the status quo (Freire, 1970). Ignoring marginalization inhibits the expansion of awareness and blocks creative and liberating social action for change.

III. Awareness Raising Through Sport and Art

According to Freire (1970), people are oppressed by lack of knowledge. He proposes that education is a means of freedom, and through education one can develop awareness (consciousness with action). This is a continuous process by which the student advances towards a process of critical awareness as the spirit of liberating education, giving meaning to the world in a critical context.

Awareness raising means breaking with prevailing mythologies to reach new levels of awareness, in particular, the awareness of oppression, being an "object" in a world where only "subjects" have power. The process of awareness raising involves identifying contradictions in experience through dialogue and becoming a "subject" with other oppressed subjects, becoming part of the process of changing the world (Paulo Freire Institute, 2004).

Based on this principle and with the correct technique, passive spectators can become actors and players. In this way, Freire's philosophy of education is put into practice with immense impact. This transition from spectators to "players" can enhance learning and collective empowerment. Educators can explore this technique and turn theory into action due to the social relevance and adaptability of sports and the arts, and by exploring issues ranging from racism, sexism and social exclusion. As a result, sports and the arts reflect individual or collective awareness and people become part of a cultural context, strengthening their vocations.

Freire introduced the anthropological concept of culture that distinguishes between nature and culture. He believed that discussing this distinction would lead illiterate people to discover that they are creators of culture as much as literate people. He would often draw pictures to stimulate discussion. People could identify with his experience and realize that they could be part of this image. Sports could be an image to stimulate education, adding the action or physical expression promoted by sports.

The school must be connected to the local culture of the students to develop a universal culture. Freire (1994) explains that when children arrive at school, they can bring with them an understanding of their world in many different dimensions. Their origins and culture are the beginning of the knowledge they acquire about the world over time.

Another link between education and sport would be possible through the Paulo Freire Method for adult literacy. According to this method, illiterate people use words related to their daily lives to learn to read and write and, mainly, to be able to engage in political issues with a critical perception. These words, called generative

words, can be linked to sport and have the same objective as teaching the alphabet to children. Freire (1970) comments that the pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and liberating pedagogy, is no longer the pedagogy of the oppressed, but becomes the pedagogy of men in a permanent process of liberation. Sport promotes this liberation, where both adolescents and adults become free through their action and expression through the use of techniques and body language. The rules of a specific sport restrict this freedom. However, they do not limit the power of creativity and decision-making that sports provide. Freire defines (1970) "Freedom to create and build, to admire and to venture".

For sports to have a connection with schools and society, they must be inserted in a vast universe. Just as regionals come from local, national comes from regional and continental comes from national. In the same way, global comes from continental as the dimensions of an individual's contextual reality to recognize the interaction and achieve a clearer perception of the whole (Freire, 1970). Therefore, it is wrong to remain "stuck" to the local because we can lose a more global vision. This cannot be achieved only through technical training, which is characterized by sports, but according to the context in which we live, be it historical, political, social and cultural (Freire, 1994).

IV. Pedagogy of Desire

The school must promote knowledge related to the culture and desire of its students and thus become a pleasant place. According to Lacan (cited by Rossatto, 2001), the pedagogy of desire focuses on the relationship between the symbolic (curriculum) and the real (students' world). Children show great interest in playing, so the curriculum implemented is designed around outdoor activities (sports) or cultural activities (arts).

Through the fun provided by playful activities, they can determine an evolution in their learning. Freire (1998) suggests: "What students discover for themselves is usually retained for the rest of their lives".

These activities are fun, enjoyable and emotional. Their teaching should be constructive in education. Teachers must be attuned to the joy, fun, pain, humor and metaphor of their students. In their denial of pleasure, schools promote a regime of discipline and devotion to the transfer of play to work. Much can be learned about students' behavior in the classroom by observing and investigating their socialization during recess, sports participation or extracurricular activities. Understanding the use of pleasure in the social construction of individuals, our psychological insight into the formation of personality, learning styles and the motivational dynamics of young people will be, at best, profound (Kincheloe, et al, 2000).

One application of this idea is the respect for the approach of children's culture to popular culture. According to Kincheloe et al., (2000) "Children's culture and popular culture exert specific influences, affecting maps that emerge in the social context in which children encounter these cultural expressions". From a phenomenological perspective, we as teachers must understand the cultural reality of students in order to connect it to the curriculum in order to produce new meaning and positive knowledge in the classroom. Adults must understand the connection between sport and students' culture, perceptions, and desires, which can promote the transformation of schools. Insights into the hidden cultural rules of school can be surprising and even profound, and acting on acceptance of such cultural dynamics can transform schools (Kincheloe, et al., 2000).

Curriculum has the potential to transform students' reality. Curricular theorizing is critical to developing programs that are responsive to social and cultural changes in society. Sport and other extracurricular activities serve as important agents of socialization for young people. During late childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, it is peers, not family, who serve as the most powerful socializing agents for sports involvement (Seefeldt and Vogel, 1986).

When Freire's principles are combined with regional sports, as well as arts and folklore, they have great potential to improve the development of students' learning abilities. Furthermore, they can promote and foster interest in education in unmotivated communities, where students do not perceive the importance and relevance of school because it represents a world different from the reality they live in everyday life. By incorporating these updated pedagogical techniques, we will be able to stimulate and reach these students. This cause and effect relationship can be correlated with regional characteristics, which evolve from social and religious values and beliefs. Cause and effect result in the same way that someone is influenced by the music they listen to and the sports they practice or participate in.

V. Critical Pedagogy and Student Culture

Critical pedagogy is a way in which education should provide an education for liberation, since critical thinking or problem-solving cannot happen without critical learning or, again, critical pedagogy. Perhaps critical pedagogy is a deconstruction of regular pedagogy into a critical theory. I can understand that critical pedagogy is a different methodology from awareness-raising, which Freire defines as one in which men and women use a critical way of thinking about their world and become part of a democratic world. But again, what about sports and the arts? Freire urges students to be active participants, to link awareness with practice (hooks, 1994). Critical pedagogy should emphasize wholeness, a union of mind, body, and spirit. Sports in correlation with critical pedagogy can be a very useful instrument for educating people. The idea is to understand how sports and art, combined with critical pedagogy, can be used to improve education.

Many researchers have found that sports and culture, when presented and organized appropriately, contribute significantly to the social and moral education of young people and are an effective way to produce benefits for both the individual and society. Sports education is regularly used in schools in many countries with the aim of providing comprehensive and complete development through physical-cognitive connections. Artistic education can be used to develop the aesthetic sense and increase creativity. However, its links with critical pedagogy are not very well recognized or explored by authors and teachers. Given that there is a gap in the current literature, it is very difficult to explain critical pedagogy related to sports and culture.

VI. Final Considerations

Sports and the arts can be instruments to promote awareness and help people change their history in many alienated and oppressed societies. Both can be agents of transformation in society, as some successful athletes and artists from disadvantaged minorities can become role models of hope against oppression in their communities. The great challenge is to increase the opportunity for all young people to develop and enrich their lives through sport and the arts while they are at school. Teachers need to have a solid sociological understanding of how race, ethnicity and racism function in society, in schools and in the curriculum. Critical pedagogy should be used to reduce discrimination and promote ethnic integration in society and issues of race and racism should be discussed in schools.

Sports and the arts can provide the link between culture and a true democracy and can promote critical pedagogy in the form of altruistic activity. Sports and the arts can be used as a tool to transform schools and the world into what Freire dreamed of and we should all strive for a less ugly, more beautiful, less discriminatory, more democratic, less dehumanized and more human world.

References

- [1]. FREIRE, Paulo. (1970). *Pedagogia do oprimido*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra.
- [2]. FREIRE, Paulo. (1994). *Pedagogia da esperança*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra Press.
- [3]. FREIRE, Paulo. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom. Ethics, democracy and civic courage*. Lahman: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- [4]. GOMES, Walmir Marcolino. MÜLLER, Antonio José. (2019). Paulo Freire: do (Re)Exílio Brasileiro às Cátedras Norte-Americanas. *Revista Pedagógica Unochapecó*, v. 21, p. 395-412.
- [5]. GREEN, Elliott D. "What are the most-cited publications in the social sciences (according to Google Scholar)?" 12 May 2016. LSE Research Online. London School of Economics and Political Science. Disponível em <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/66752/>. Acesso em 07 Jan 2023.
- [6]. OOKS, bell. (1994). *Teaching to transgress*. New York: Routledge.
- [7]. INSTITUTO PAULO FREIRE. Paulo Freire. Uma pequena biografia. 2004. Disponível em: <https://acervoapi.paulofreire.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/010c2d36-b5ef-446b-8234-c4b4b806d0e5/content>. Acesso em: 10 out. 2023.
- [8]. KINCHELOE, J. L.; SLATTERY, P.; STEINBERG, S. R. (2000). *Contextualizing teaching*. New York: Longman.
- [9]. MAIA, Rodrigo, HERÉDIA, Thais, COELHO, Larissa. Educação brasileira está em último lugar em ranking de competitividade. Disponível em: <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/nacional/educacao-brasileira-esta-em-ultimo-lugar-em-ranking-de-competitividade/>. Acesso em 22 nov 2023.
- [10]. MCLAREN, Peter. (2000). *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.
- [11]. PEREIRA, Lucila Conceição. Método Paulo Freire. Disponível em: <https://www.infoescola.com/pedagogia/metodo-paulo-freire/>. Acesso em: 4 jan 2023.
- [12]. ROSSATTO, C. (2001). Social transformation and *popular schooling* in Brazil. *Journal of the Association for Childhood Education International*, 77, No. 6, 367-374.
- [13]. SEEFELDT, V.; VOGEL, P. (1986). *The value of physical activity*. Reston, VA: American Alliance for Health Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance.
- [14]. VEIGA, Edson. Paulo Freire: como o legado do educador brasileiro é visto no exterior. BBC News Brasil, 12 jan. 2019. Disponível em: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-46830942>. Acesso em 18 out 2023.