

CRITICAL EDUCATION AS A PRACTICE OF LIBERATION: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF PAULO FREIRE'S THOUGHT

Dewi Sriwahyuni^{1*}

¹Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta

*Corresponding author: dewisriwahyuni.2025@student.uny.ac.id

Abstrak

Pendidikan kritis merupakan salah satu paradigma pendidikan yang berpengaruh dalam merespons berbagai bentuk ketimpangan sosial, dominasi, dan dehumanisasi yang terjadi dalam praktik pendidikan. Paulo Freire sebagai filsuf dan pendidik asal Brasil mengembangkan konsep pendidikan pembebasan yang menekankan dialog, kesadaran kritis, dan tindakan transformatif. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pemikiran filosofis Paulo Freire mengenai pendidikan kritis sebagai praktik pembebasan serta relevansinya terhadap tantangan pendidikan kontemporer. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kepustakaan (library research) dan analisis filosofis. Data diperoleh dari karya-karya utama Paulo Freire dan berbagai literatur ilmiah yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Freire mengkritik model pendidikan gaya bank (banking education) karena menempatkan peserta didik sebagai objek pasif penerima pengetahuan. Sebagai alternatif, Freire menawarkan model pendidikan hadap masalah (problem-posing education) yang mendorong peserta didik menjadi subjek aktif dalam membangun pengetahuan dan mentransformasi realitas sosial. Pendidikan kritis menurut Freire berfungsi sebagai sarana humanisasi melalui dialog, refleksi, dan praksis. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pemikiran Freire tetap relevan dalam membangun pendidikan yang demokratis, partisipatif, dan emansipatoris pada abad ke-21.

Kata kunci: Pendidikan Kritis, Pembebasan, Paulo Freire, Kesadaran Kritis, Humanisasi

Abstract

Critical education has become one of the most influential educational paradigms in responding to social inequality, domination, and dehumanization within educational practices. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, developed a liberating educational philosophy that emphasizes dialogue, critical consciousness, and transformative action. This study aims to analyze Freire's philosophical thoughts on critical education as a practice of liberation and examine their relevance to contemporary educational challenges. This research employs a qualitative approach using library research and philosophical analysis methods. Data were collected from Freire's primary works and relevant scholarly literature. The findings indicate that Freire criticized the banking model of education because it positions learners as passive recipients of knowledge. Instead, he proposed a problem-posing educational model that encourages learners to become active subjects in constructing knowledge and transforming social realities. Critical education, according to Freire, serves as a means of humanization through dialogue, reflection, and praxis. The study concludes that Freire's educational philosophy remains highly relevant in promoting democratic, participatory, and emancipatory learning environments in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Critical Education, Liberation, Paulo Freire, Critical Consciousness, Humanization

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the fundamental instruments in the process of shaping human beings and civilization. Through education, individuals not only acquire knowledge and skills but also develop the moral, social, cultural, and political awareness necessary to live

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responsibly within society (Kubiszyn & Borich, 2024; Dewi & Siwi, 2024; Faizah, 2024). From a humanistic perspective, education is understood as a process of humanization, enabling individuals to develop their full human potential. Ideal education is not merely oriented toward academic achievement but also toward character formation, critical thinking, and social awareness among learners (Tilaar, 2015; Zabadi, 2013; Putri et al., 2024).

However, the reality of education in many countries, including Indonesia, demonstrates that education has not always functioned as a means of human liberation. In many educational practices, learners are still positioned as passive recipients of information delivered by teachers. Learning processes tend to emphasize memorization, examination performance, and compliance with established systems. Consequently, education loses its emancipatory function as a means of fostering critical thinking and social consciousness. This condition aligns with the criticism advanced by Freire (2020), who argued that education can become an instrument of domination when it merely transfers knowledge without encouraging learners to understand the social realities surrounding them.

The development of global society in the twenty-first century further highlights the importance of education that promotes critical consciousness (Martinez, 2022; Umami et al., 2023; Sari & Wardhani, 2020). Advances in information and communication technology have transformed the ways people access, process, and disseminate information (Khanh, 2021; Lombardo et al., 2023; Wiwin et al., 2022). On the one hand, these developments provide significant opportunities to expand access to education and knowledge. On the other hand, societies face challenges such as the spread of misinformation and fake news, manipulation of public opinion, social polarization, economic inequality, and increasingly complex forms of injustice. In such circumstances, education must do more than equip learners with cognitive abilities; it must also cultivate reflective, analytical, and critical capacities that enable them to understand and respond wisely to social issues (Giroux, 2011; Shor, 2019).

It is within this context that the thought of Paulo Freire becomes particularly relevant. Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educational philosopher and social activist widely recognized as a pioneer of critical pedagogy and liberatory education. His ideas emerged from his experiences living amid poverty and social inequality in Brazil during the mid-twentieth century. These experiences shaped his conviction that education plays a strategic role in liberating people from oppression and social injustice (Freire, 1973). Freire viewed poverty and underdevelopment not merely as consequences of individual inadequacy but as outcomes of unjust social structures. Therefore, education should help individuals understand these structures and empower them to pursue social transformation.

One of Freire's central arguments is that education is never neutral. According to Freire (1970), every educational practice embodies particular ideological interests. Education can be used either to maintain the status quo and perpetuate domination or to serve as a means of liberation and social change. This perspective highlights the inherently political dimension of education and its inseparable connection to social life. Consequently, educational processes should be directed toward developing learners' critical consciousness so that they can understand the relationship between their personal experiences and broader social structures.

Freire's critique of traditional educational systems is reflected in his concept of banking education. In this model, teachers are positioned as the sole possessors of knowledge who "deposit" information into learners, who are assumed to know nothing. The resulting relationship is hierarchical and authoritarian, reducing learners to passive recipients of information. According to Freire (1970), such an educational model not only hinders intellectual development but also contributes to dehumanization by suppressing freedom of thought and individual creativity.

As an alternative to banking education, Freire proposed the concept of problem-posing education. In this approach, learners are viewed as active subjects who possess experiences, knowledge, and the capacity to construct understandings of social reality. Teachers and learners engage in an egalitarian and dialogical relationship, jointly examining the problems faced by society. Through this process, learning becomes a means of developing critical consciousness and the capacity for social transformation (Freire, 2005).

Dialogue occupies a central place in Freire's pedagogy of liberation. Dialogue is not merely understood as verbal communication between teachers and learners; rather, it is a process of human encounter grounded in respect, trust, and a shared commitment to the pursuit of truth. Through dialogue, learners are given opportunities to express their perspectives, question established assumptions, and reflect on their lived experiences. According to McLaren (2015), dialogue in Freirean thought functions as a pedagogical instrument that enables democratic and participatory educational relationships.

Another key concept in Freire's philosophy is *conscientização* or critical consciousness. Critical consciousness refers to an individual's ability to understand the relationship between personal life conditions and the social, economic, political, and cultural forces that shape them (Freire, 1973). Individuals who possess critical consciousness are not only able to recognize various forms of injustice but are also motivated to take action to transform those conditions. Therefore, education, according to Freire, should not end with reflection alone; it must lead to praxis, the integration of reflection and action aimed at transforming social reality.

The relevance of Freire's thought is increasingly evident in the Indonesian educational context. Although various educational reforms have been implemented, teacher-centered learning practices remain common in many schools. Furthermore, rote learning, examination-oriented instruction, and limited critical thinking skills among students continue to pose significant challenges. Research indicates that educational systems overly focused on academic achievement often neglect the social, moral, and emancipatory dimensions of education (Tilaar, 2015). As a result, learners may lack the capacity to understand and respond effectively to the social issues within their communities.

In the digital era, these challenges have become even more complex. Learners are exposed to an enormous and diverse flow of information, making critical thinking an essential competency. Education grounded in the principles of dialogue, reflection, and praxis, as advocated by Freire, offers a promising approach for preparing a generation that is not only academically competent but also socially conscious, critically minded, and responsible as citizens.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study focuses on a philosophical analysis of critical education as a practice of liberation in Paulo Freire's thought. This inquiry is important for understanding the ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of critical education and its relevance in addressing contemporary educational challenges. The objective of this study is to analyze the concept of critical education in Paulo Freire's philosophy and to identify its contributions to the development of a humanistic, democratic, participatory, and emancipatory educational framework in the modern era.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using the library research method. This method was selected because the focus of the study is to examine, analyze, and interpret Paulo Freire's philosophical ideas concerning critical education as a practice of liberation.

Library research enables researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical concepts developed by Freire through various primary and secondary sources of literature.

The primary data sources in this study consist of Paulo Freire's major works, particularly *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973), and *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998). Meanwhile, secondary data sources are obtained from scholarly journal articles, books, conference proceedings, and previous studies discussing critical education, liberatory pedagogy, and the relevance of Freire's thought in contemporary educational contexts.

Data collection was conducted through documentation techniques by reviewing various literature sources relevant to the research focus. The collected data were subsequently analyzed using content analysis and a philosophical approach. The analysis was carried out through three main stages: data reduction, thematic categorization, and interpretation of meaning. The data reduction stage involved selecting literature that was directly relevant to the research objectives. The categorization stage was used to classify the major concepts in Freire's thought, including banking education, problem-posing education, dialogue, critical consciousness, praxis, and humanization. Finally, interpretation was undertaken to identify the philosophical relationships among these concepts and to explore their relevance to contemporary educational practices.

To ensure data validity, source triangulation was employed by comparing various primary and secondary sources discussing Paulo Freire's educational philosophy. Through this process, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of critical education as a practice of liberation from the perspective of Paulo Freire.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

1) *Philosophical Foundations of Paulo Freire's Critical Education*

Paulo Freire's educational philosophy emerged from a social reality characterized by poverty, injustice, and structural oppression in Brazil. Freire argued that education cannot be separated from the social conditions of society because it constitutes an integral part of the process of developing human consciousness. According to Freire (1970), human beings are historical beings who are constantly engaged in a process of becoming. Therefore, education should provide opportunities for individuals to develop their full human potential.

Philosophically, Freire's thought was influenced by humanism, existentialism, phenomenology, and critical theory. Humanism provides the foundation for the belief that every human being possesses inherent dignity that must be respected. Existentialism emphasizes individual freedom in determining the meaning of one's life. Meanwhile, critical theory offers an analytical framework for understanding various forms of domination and injustice within society (Giroux, 2011).

From Freire's perspective, the primary objective of education is humanization. Humanization is the process through which individuals become conscious, free, and responsible subjects capable of shaping their own lives. In contrast, dehumanization occurs when people are treated as objects and deprived of their freedom and capacity for self-determination (Freire, 1970).

2) *Critique of Banking Education*

One of Paulo Freire's most significant contributions is his critique of the traditional educational system, which he termed banking education. In this model, teachers are regarded

as the sole possessors of knowledge, while learners are positioned as empty containers to be filled with information.

According to Freire (1970), banking education is characterized by several key features. First, the teacher teaches, and the students are taught. Second, the teacher knows everything, while students are assumed to know nothing. Third, the teacher thinks, while students are thought about. Fourth, the teacher speaks, while students merely listen. Fifth, the teacher acts, while students simply receive and comply with those actions.

Such an educational model deprives learners of the opportunity to develop critical thinking because they function only as passive recipients of information. Knowledge is viewed as static and disconnected from the learners' lived realities. Consequently, education fails to cultivate individuals who are capable of understanding and transforming the social conditions they encounter.

Table 1. Comparison between Banking Education and Paulo Freire's Critical Education

Aspect	Banking Education	Critical Education
Teacher's Role	Primary source of knowledge	Dialogue partner
Learner's Role	Object of learning	Subject of learning
Learning Process	Transfer of information	Construction of knowledge
Teacher-Student Relationship	Hierarchical	Dialogical
Goal	Compliance and conformity	Critical consciousness
Outcome	Social reproduction	Social transformation

The table illustrates that critical education seeks to transform authoritarian educational relationships into democratic and participatory ones.

3) Problem-Posing Education

As an alternative to banking education, Freire developed the concept of problem-posing education. In this model, learners are no longer positioned as objects of learning but as active subjects in the process of knowledge construction.

According to Freire (1970), learning should begin with the real-life experiences of learners. Social reality becomes the object of collective reflection between teachers and students. Knowledge is not transferred unilaterally but is constructed through dialogue and critical inquiry.

Problem-posing education enables learners to develop higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and critical reflection. Through this approach, students are encouraged to question assumptions that have long been accepted as truths and to seek solutions to the problems faced by society.

4) Critical Consciousness (Conscientization)

The concept of critical consciousness (*conscientização*) is at the core of Paulo Freire's philosophy of liberatory education. Critical consciousness refers to an individual's ability to understand the relationship between personal experiences and broader social structures (Freire, 1973).

Freire identifies three levels of human consciousness:

a. Magical Consciousness

At this stage, individuals perceive events as occurring naturally without understanding the social factors underlying them.

b. Naïve Consciousness

Individuals begin to recognize the existence of social problems but are not yet capable of critically analyzing their root causes.

c. Critical Consciousness

Individuals are able to understand the relationship between social problems and the economic, political, and cultural structures that shape them. This awareness motivates them to engage in actions aimed at social transformation. Critical consciousness is the primary goal of education because it enables learners to become agents of change within society. Education should not merely produce academically competent graduates but also socially responsible citizens.

5) Dialogue as an Instrument of Liberation

Dialogue is a central concept in Freire's pedagogy. According to Freire (1970), dialogue is a human encounter grounded in respect, love, trust, and a shared commitment to the pursuit of truth. Dialogue differs fundamentally from one-way lecturing. In dialogue, teachers and students learn from and teach one another. Teachers are no longer the sole sources of knowledge but facilitators who assist learners in critically understanding reality. Through dialogue, learners are given opportunities to express their opinions, question assumptions, and develop deeper understandings of social issues. Consequently, dialogue becomes an essential means of fostering critical consciousness and intellectual freedom.

6) Praxis as a Form of Social Transformation

Freire emphasized that education should not stop at reflection alone but must lead to concrete action. Therefore, he introduced the concept of praxis, which refers to the integration of reflection and action undertaken consciously to transform social reality (Freire, 1970).

Praxis constitutes one of the principal distinctions between critical education and traditional education. Traditional education often ends with the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, whereas critical education encourages learners to apply knowledge in real-life contexts.

In contemporary education, praxis can be realized through project-based learning, problem-based learning, community service programs, and various activities that directly involve learners in addressing social issues.

7) The Relevance of Paulo Freire's Thought to Indonesian Education

Paulo Freire's ideas remain highly relevant to the current condition of education in Indonesia. Challenges such as limited critical thinking skills, the dominance of lecture-based instruction, rote-learning culture, and unequal access to education indicate the need for a transformation of educational paradigms.

The Merdeka Curriculum currently implemented in Indonesia is fundamentally aligned with Freire's educational philosophy. Student-centered learning, the strengthening of the *Pancasila Student Profile*, and project-based learning all reflect the spirit of critical education, which positions learners as active subjects in the learning process.

Furthermore, the digital era requires students to possess critical literacy skills to evaluate and filter the vast amount of information disseminated through social media and the internet. In this context, critical education plays a crucial role in developing reflective, analytical, and responsible thinking.

The findings of this analysis indicate that Paulo Freire's concept of critical education remains relevant as a philosophical foundation for the development of democratic, humanistic, and emancipatory education in Indonesia. Education should be understood as a

process of liberation that enables learners to comprehend reality, develop critical consciousness, and actively participate in building a more just society.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the philosophical analysis of Paulo Freire's educational thought, it can be concluded that critical education is a practice of liberation aimed at developing learners' critical consciousness regarding the social realities they encounter. Freire rejected the banking model of education because it positions learners as passive recipients of knowledge, thereby potentially perpetuating various forms of domination and social injustice. As an alternative, Freire proposed problem-posing education, which views teachers and learners as subjects who collaboratively construct knowledge through a dialogical process.

The findings of this study indicate that the concepts of critical consciousness (conscientization), dialogue, and praxis constitute the fundamental pillars of Paulo Freire's liberatory education. Through critical consciousness, learners are not only able to understand social phenomena in depth but also develop the capacity to take transformative action against realities perceived as unjust. Dialogue serves as a means of establishing democratic and humanistic educational relationships, while praxis connects critical reflection with concrete action in social life.

Philosophically, Freire's critical education is grounded in humanistic values that regard human beings as free, creative, and responsible subjects. Education functions not merely as a process of knowledge transmission but as an endeavor of humanization that enables individuals to develop their full potential. Therefore, education should create learning environments that are participatory, reflective, and transformative.

In the context of Indonesian education, Paulo Freire's thought remains highly relevant in addressing contemporary educational challenges, particularly in fostering critical thinking skills, digital literacy, democratic participation, and character development among learners. The implementation of student-centered, dialogue-based, and problem-oriented learning approaches represents a practical realization of critical education that can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable educational system.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that educators integrate the principles of critical education into the learning process in order to enhance learners' reflective awareness and active participation. Furthermore, future research may examine the practical implementation of Paulo Freire's pedagogy across different educational levels, particularly in primary education, to obtain empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of critical education in improving learning quality and character development among students.

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