

More than Filling the Pail:

**The influence of Paulo Freire
on education in Brazil**

By Jill Ferris

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History of the Andes

Professor Townsend

As Latin America has undergone revolution and tumult since the 1960s, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* stands as one of the most influential works in the field of education. According to Richard Schull, author of the 1973 English edition's foreword, Freire was raised in Brazil during the Great Depression, experiencing the horrors of hunger and poverty despite a middle-class background. Dedicated to the field of education, Freire taught at the University of Recife before being jailed and forced into political exile in Chile following Brazil's 1964 coup. For Freire, these experiences in Chile allowed him to process his experiences in Brazil:

It was in the intense experience I was having in Chilean society—my own experience of their experience, which always sent me back in my mind to my Brazilian experience, whose vivid memory I had brought with me into exile—that I wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in 1967 and 1968.¹

Thus Freire was enabled to write the text, which has had a great impact on education on both the national (Brazilian) and international levels.

Background

Many works on education in Brazil, even today, refer to great “lags” in the nation's educational system. A former colony of Portugal, Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery, only doing so in 1889; additionally, it maintained an agrarian model that left the nation divided between social classes.² Educationally, this division is evident in the dual public-private school system that has existed since the sixteenth century when the Jesuits founded the first schools in Brazil: primary schools were built to “catechize

¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Robert R. Barr, (New York: Continuum, 1994), 52.

² Paulo Renato Souza, “Education and development in Brazil, 1995-2000.” *CEPAL Review* 73 (2001): 66, *HAPI Online* (21 March 2006).

poor white and Indian children,” while other secondary schools were built to educate the sons of landowners.³

As the nation began to industrialize at the beginning of the twentieth century, the *Escola Novista* movement emerged, promoting a modern school system based on North American educational progressives like John Dewey.⁴ The movement emphasized the provision of a free education for all such that schools would be “capable of satisfying the requirements of modernity and development.”⁵ The constitution of 1934 which followed the movement drew on these principles and declared basic education to be a citizen’s right, though the 1937 constitution which followed a coup d’etat by Getúlio Vargas declared that this right was to be provided by the state only when private families and organizations failed to offer a suitable option.⁶

Thus Brazil’s foundations of education supported a great division between levels of education. Brazil developed “the best post-graduate specialized study facilities of any of the developing countries,” however illiteracy was also high (40 percent in 1960) and of children ages seven to fourteen, only 60% attended school.⁷ Many of these uneducated citizens lived in rural areas, especially in the northeast which constituted fifteen percent of the country’s land and a third of its population.⁸ This illiteracy was seen by many to be a challenge to the nation’s economic development.⁹

³ David N. Plank, *The Means of Our Salvation: Public Education in Brazil, 1930-1995* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 63.

⁴ Maria del Pilar O’Cadiz, Pia Lindquist Wong, and Carlos Alberto Torres, *Education and Democracy: Paulo Freire, Social Movements, and Educational Reform in São Paulo* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 18.

⁵ Plank, 65.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Souza, 67.

⁸ Andrew J. Kirkendall, “Entering History: Paulo Freire and the Politics of the Brazilian Northeast, 1958-1964.” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 41, no. 1 (2004): 169, *HAPI Online* (21 March 2006).

⁹ Kirkendall, 170.

In light of all this, Paulo Freire began developing revolutionary literacy teaching techniques in northeast Brazil in the late 1950s through his work with the Popular Culture Movement in poor neighborhoods of Recife.¹⁰ Freire devised his methods to be both practical and political, teaching adults words to depict their daily life, as well as teaching students that through literacy they could vote and demand their rights as citizens; his approach engaged students in discussion, with teachers serving as “dialogue coordinators.”¹¹

Additionally, Freire was deeply influenced by his Catholicism,¹² and the advent of the Second Vatican Council, also known as Vatican II, inspired him through the postulation of liberation theology.¹³ It is also very likely that Freire was influenced by Marxism and the Cuban Revolution in 1963, which had claimed to reduce illiteracy rates significantly within one year.¹⁴

In 1964, though, Freire was pushed from the country by a military dictatorship and forced into exile in Chile.¹⁵ The new government supported education, but despite acknowledging the “crucial role of primary schooling in economic development,” the government devoted its attention and resources to higher education and vocational training programs, and not basic educational programs such as those Freire promoted.¹⁶

¹⁰ Kirkendall, 172.

¹¹ Kirkendall, 175.

¹² Adriana Puiggrós, *Neoliberalism and Education in the Americas*, trans. Gustavo Fischman and Julie Thompson, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 158.

¹³ O’Cadiz, 21.

¹⁴ Puiggrós, 157 and Kirkendall, 170.

¹⁵ Puiggrós, 158.

¹⁶ Plank, 67.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Freire's Philosophy

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire explores how marginalized populations are and should be taught, and to what purpose. The book is written in four chapters, however it is in the second chapter that Freire most comprehensively discusses the current, oppressive model of education (the “banking” concept) and an alternative, promised to be not only more successful, but also more humanizing (the “problem-posing” concept). Other chapters cover information such as the impact of oppression and instruments of both education and oppression, however this chapter’s handling of the models of education is most appealing.

According to Freire, “education” has traditionally been used by the oppressors as a tool, as “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.”¹⁷ As a result, educators simply try to impart knowledge to their students, engaging in the “banking” concept of education. Students are depositories for raw facts without a perception of their meaning or significance.¹⁸

Freire poses this method of education as oppressive in that it mirrors practices of oppressive society. Teachers are seen as absolute holders of knowledge, choice and authority, while students are kept in a position of weakness, rewarded for meekness and punished for opposition and dissent.¹⁹ In fact, this method of education is used to preserve the system of oppression, teaching the marginalized peoples “simply to adapt to the world around them as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.”²⁰

¹⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), 58.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Freire, *Oppressed* 59.

²⁰ Freire, *Oppressed* 60.

The oppressed are thus not taught to think for themselves, as such a teaching method could possibly open the door to instability and change; it is instead in the best interest of the oppressors to preserve the status quo and the situation surrounding the oppressed.

The banking model of education proposes that “[t]he educated man is the adapted man, because he is better ‘fit’ for the world.”²¹ Essentially, men are thus reduced to simply objects, metered and best fit for existence within an oppressive system. The challenge, however, is to develop liberation through a revolutionary society that does not employ the banking concept. According to Freire, “Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world.”²² Instead, he proposes educators take up the “problem-posing” method, in which students and teachers engage in dialogue, taking a joint responsibility for the education of all parties. By eliminating the traditional job descriptions of student and teacher, students “will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge.”²³ Indeed, Freire writes:

Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from men.²⁴

Through the encouragement of discussion and analysis from students as the integral part of their education, the problem-posing method offers a completely different, freedom-based perspective for the traditionally oppressed masses.

²¹ Freire, *Oppressed* 63.

²² Freire, *Oppressed* 66.

²³ Freire, *Oppressed* 68.

²⁴ Freire, *Oppressed* 69.

Practically, the main difference between banking education and problem-posing education is the presence of dialogue between teacher and student. “Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication,”²⁵ Freire wrote. The restrictive banking process involves two steps: the teacher recognizing material to be taught and then speaking one-sidedly about that information. The process of problem-posing education, however, demands students take an assertive role in their education, engaging in dialogue with each other and the teacher.²⁶

Freire also emphasizes the importance of cultural awareness in education. As Adriana Puiggrós summed up from Freire’s philosophy: “The nonliterate Brazilian peasants do not learn if they are not part of their own culture, and thus the teacher must learn this culture and value it.”²⁷ By engaging students in dialogue, a teacher is partaking in that culture. Freire himself made an effort to “study popular language” while teaching illiterate peasants in northeast Brazil; his work also emphasizes the importance of engaging students in a manner familiar to them.²⁸

Freire’s Influence

In the Preface of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire professes to be aware that his work may anger a number of readers not willing to accept his message about the education as a tool of oppression.²⁹ According to Freire, “the pedagogy of the oppressed...is a task for radicals; it cannot be carried out by sectarians.”³⁰ Still, the work

²⁵ Freire, *Oppressed* 64.

²⁶ Freire, *Oppressed* 68.

²⁷ Puiggrós, 163.

²⁸ Kirkendall, 172.

²⁹ Freire, *Oppressed* 21.

³⁰ Freire, *Oppressed* 24.

has received a wide reception, and not just in Latin America. It is certainly conceivable that many in Freire's audience have experienced banking education to at least some extent, such as the teacher or professor who takes his task to mean lecturing for nearly an hour, allowing the average reader to relate to illiterate peasants in Brazil. Indeed, Freire's educational theory is not case-specific; though written with Latin America in mind, especially Freire's experiences in Brazil and Chile, the oppressed and oppressors are not specific to a particular nationality. Instead, quite simply, "[p]roblem-posing education does not and cannot serve the interests of the oppressor. No oppressive order could permit the oppressed to begin to question: Why?"³¹

Freire's work, however, emerged at a time when third-world Latin American nations were struggling for stability and definition, fighting against new military dictatorships in Latin America. His book was connected to socialist movements internationally. There is certainly an inherent radicalism to Freire's work as it advocates education as a method of overturning the status quo to bring freedom to the masses. Freire's prefacing statement about problem-posing education as the work of radicals therefore seems to hold some truth. Nonetheless his distinction between the banking method and problem-posing education outline what has become an important theory in the education of the general population.

While Freire's pedagogical theory has had a great impact on the teaching of people across the globe, the impact on the educational system in Brazil appears to be less straightforward. Brazil still has a legacy of illiteracy – over fifteen million citizens over the age of fourteen are illiterate.³² According to an economic study by Francisco Ferreira

³¹ Freire, *Oppressed* 74.

³² Souza, 67.

and Ricardo Paez de Barros, for urban Brazilians in the top fifteenth percentile, they have faced “some hard climbing along a slippery slope,...to gain an average of two extra years of schooling,...in order to counteract falling returns in both the formal labour market and self-employment.”³³ Still, in more recent years efforts have been made and great improvements have been seen in the amount of primary education that the average person obtains, with over 89 percent of children attending school by the mid-nineties, a jump of nearly 30 percent from 1960.³⁴

The educational system in Brazil has continued to develop in a tiered fashion, offering infant, primary, secondary and higher levels of education, with the primary level being compulsory and universally accessible to all students.³⁵ For reaching the neglected, oppressed masses with which Freire was concerned, the expansion of primary education has been crucial. According to Anthony Hall, primary school enrollment increased, especially in the north and northeast regions of Brazil which were among “the poorest regions of the country where many children has previously been excluded from the education system.”³⁶

Brazil did, however, have a history of expansion of education, so this trend cannot be directly tied to Freire, though he did advocate for the education of the masses. To obtain a better sense of his direct impact, changes in the curricula of Brazilian schools ought to be examined. The educational system in Brazil is greatly decentralized, with public education being the responsibility of states and municipalities, of which there are

³³ Francisco H.G. Ferreira and Ricardo Paes de Barros, “Education and Income Distribution in Urban Brazil, 1976-1996,” CEPAL Review 71 (2000): 60, HAPI Online (21 March 2006).

³⁴ Souza, 67.

³⁵ Souza, 69-79.

³⁶ Anthony Hall, “Education Reform in Brazil under Democracy,” *Brazil Since 1985: Economy, Polity and Society*, ed. Maria D’Alva Kinzo and James Dunkerley (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 2003), 279.

26 (in addition to a Federal District) and approximately 6,000, respectively.³⁷ Freire, in fact, served as the Secretary of Education for the municipality of São Paulo from 1989 to 1991, during which time such changes were made to the curriculum of the city's public schools. He oversaw 678 schools, 700,000 students and 33,000 teachers as Secretary of Education under the government of the Workers' Party (PT); when the party was defeated in November 1992 elections, Freire and his party members were removed from power. According to Pia Lindquist Wong, many of the reforms Freire and the party were responsible for have been changed or eliminated in São Paulo, though it is unfair to assume that Freire's influence stopped at the outskirts of São Paulo or in 1992.³⁸

According to Maria del Pilar O'Cadiz,

Many of the activists who participated in reshaping São Paulo's educational system and the pedagogic vision of its schools, including teachers and members of social movements, still carry out major tenets of the Freirean program today in São Paulo and elsewhere in the country.³⁹

São Paulo offered Freire a chance to set up an educational system according to his principles, but these reforms were not restricted solely to one Brazilian municipality. Rather, it is the best studied and the educational reform movement most closely tied to Freire.

Of the changes that the Freirean administration impressed upon the São Paulo educational system, many seem to be based almost directly on Freire's pedagogical approach, outlined in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; dialogue became a critical aspect of

³⁷ Souza, 67.

³⁸ Pia Lindquist Wong. "Constructing a Public Popular Education in São Paulo, Brazil," *Comparative Education Review* 39, no. 1: 122, *ERIC*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 1, 2006).

³⁹ O'Cadiz, 2.

the São Paulo teaching strategy. Teachers were forced to shed previous conceptions of a student/teacher relationship for a more Freirean, dialogical approach, a particular challenge “given the density and social-cultural-political diversity of São Paulo’s metropolitan milieu.”⁴⁰ In fact, one of the stated “Five Priority Areas of the San Paulo Municipal Department of Education” is the Educator/Student Relationship which draws on four points:

1. Overcome the individualism that characterizes student attitudes and behavior.
2. Create a new understanding that both educator and student are subjects in educational action and the construction of knowledge.
3. Stimulate a relationship based on equality, equity, and mutual respect.
4. Overcome the banking concept of education where educators deposit information into the minds of students, who are seen as not knowing anything.⁴¹

Thus Freirean theory, especially dialogue, is seen as crucial to the development of a successful education system.

More practically, Freire and his colleagues developed theories posited in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* into actual curricular ideas. Interdisciplinary projects were created and teachers were encouraged to engage “with the students to develop responses to these generative questions,” developing an understanding of both the subject area and related concepts in other fields.⁴² Freire had developed this idea of an interdisciplinary project in the 1960s during his work promoting literacy in northeastern Brazil and revised the concept to apply to São Paulo’s youth.⁴³ According to Wong,

Throughout both the organization and application of knowledge phases, teachers were encouraged to introduce and explore these subtopics using a pedagogy that drew from diverse sources and created opportunities for students to explicitly

⁴⁰ O’Cadiz, 91.

⁴¹ Wong, 139.

⁴² Wong, 126.

⁴³ Ibid.

construct their own knowledge – particularly through interactions with their peers and the teacher.⁴⁴

Thus Freire and his administration tried to strip São Paulo of the “banking theory” of education, instead replacing it with Freire’s “problem-posing” type of education.

Wong also details the measures used to implement Freire’s ideas and practices. Whereas *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* deals mainly with the pedagogical theory, Freire’s administration was challenged to practically apply those principles to a functioning school system. Teacher education thus became an integral focus, as Freirean pedagogy could not be applied unless the educators themselves were aware of it. Practically for the PT, this translated into “Continuing Teacher Education Groups” which encouraged teachers to read and discuss theoretical texts, classroom practices and plan for interdisciplinary units.⁴⁵ Though application varied from school to school, teachers were paid for ten hours of such meetings a week in an effort to successfully implement Freirean pedagogy.

It is seemingly a safe conclusion that Freire’s pedagogy has had a significant influence on education in Brazil, especially when São Paulo is analyzed as an example. Yet, the decentralization of Brazilian education and the history of a dual education system have continued to plague efforts to further education in the nation. While constitutionally citizens are guaranteed the right to education, “the right to choose a school can only be exercised by those who have sufficient resources to pay tuition and

⁴⁴ Wong, 128.

⁴⁵ Wong, 129.

buy the required school materials.”⁴⁶ While compulsory primary education has thus expanded, the access to upper levels of education has remained limited.

Additional challenges have been posed such as the urbanization of Brazil; much of the focus for educating illiterates has turned to peasants in rural areas, however the explosions of cities in recent decades have also increased the number of “street children.” Estimates from the early 1990s have suggested that 500,000 such children may live and work on the streets of São Paulo alone; at that time estimates numbered 24 million street children in Brazil as a whole.⁴⁷ Even if a strong educational structure is in place, these street children are least likely to benefit from it, as they are among the least likely to attend school; additionally, these children often find themselves in very violent situations as street crime in Brazil has targeted these children.⁴⁸ Originally employing a policy of incarceration to deal with the situation, the nation has since turned to NGOs, though many challenges still face the process of educating street children in Brazil.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Ultimately, Paulo Freire’s education administration set forth a series of reforms to change the educational structure of São Paulo. As Wong wrote, “there was no room for multiple incentives, as its [PT’s educational reform] position was clearly oriented toward constructing a public education that would serve the liberatory interests of the popular classes.”⁵⁰ Such a platform is certainly in line with Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

⁴⁶ Moacir Gadotti, “Brazil: Conflicts between Public and Private Schooling and the Brazilian Constitutions,” *Education, Policy, and Social Change: Experiences from Latin America*, ed. Daniel A. Morales-Gómez and Carlos Alberto Torres (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 116.

⁴⁷ Irving Epstein, “Educating Street Children: Some Cross-Cultural Perspectives,” *Comparative Education* 32, no. 3: 294, *ERIC, EBSCOhost* (accessed May 1, 2006).

⁴⁸ Epstein, 296.

⁴⁹ Epstein, 297.

⁵⁰ Wong, 135-36.

as “education does not only have a political dimension, but...education is always and necessarily political.”⁵¹

Indeed, Brazil proved to be a prime incubator for Freire’s ideas about education. The divided educational system which offered education to all but with an emphasis on those able to afford private education, especially at higher levels, left the most inaccessible of citizens – rural peasants – without even primary education. When Freire came on the scene, these conditions left Brazil with an education level far below that of other nations. Under his influence, however, the system has seemingly progressed. Illiteracy has decreased – even among rural poor – and efforts have been made to engage students through revolutionary pedagogy, rather than simply “depositing” information into them. While his impact has been scattered due to the decentralization of the educational system and party politics, educational statistics in Brazil have improved. Certainly, though, challenges still face the system including, most currently, the dilemma of how to educate an abundance of street children. One might posit, though, that without Freire, these questions would not be as important as greater issues such as how to effectively teach illiterates would still need to be answered.

⁵¹ Danilo R. Streck, “Towards a Pedagogy of a New Social Contract: Lessons from Participatory Budgeting in the State of Rio Grande Do Sul (Brazil),” *ERIC*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 1, 2006), 13.

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