Paulo Freire and critical consciousness in conflict-affected contexts

Arran Magee, Doctoral Scholar, Centre for Education and International Development, University College London, UK

arran.magee@icloud.com

Tejendra Pherali, Associate Professor in Education and International Development, Centre for Education and International Development, University College London, UK

t.pherali@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

In this article, we introduce some of the key tenets of Paulo Freire's pedagogical vision of education for peace, social justice and democracy, and some limitations in terms of its application. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate its relevance and importance to conflict-affected contexts.

Key Words

Conflict

Critical pedagogies

Social transformation

Freire

Introduction

While Paulo Freire did not use the term 'empowerment' directly, his emphasis on education as a means to critical consciousness and transformation for social justice provides an important backdrop for social activists concerned with empowering the poor and marginalised (Rai et al., 2007). At its heart lays a pedagogy for empowerment and transformation, with relevance to all those seeking to tackle social injustice in its various forms (gender, race, ethnicity, class, caste to name but a few). As Mayo (2013: 36) suggests, 'it is an education that is dynamic and which prepares people for a world not as it is, but as it should be'. This alternative vision of education, we believe, can offer a useful tool to engage in educational research, policy making and practice in conflict-affected contexts.

In this article, we will introduce some of the key tenets of Freire's pedagogy and its relevance to education in conflict-affected contexts, before highlighting some of its limitations. It is not an attempt to present Freire's vision as a comprehensive or coherent whole, a framework or method. Freire was often the first to deny it could be such a thing (Freire, 1998). Instead, it aims to present some of the key concepts of Freire's pedagogy and its evolutions under later scholars, to highlight fundamental themes we believe to be relevant to conflict-affected contexts today.

Freire in theory

Central to Freire's work is the emphasis on the political nature of education. For Freire, education is always for either domestication or liberation.

Traditional education approaches are seen adopting what Freire terms 'banking education', where codified knowledge chosen by those who control power in society is inculcated uncritically in learners who are treated as passive recipients (Freire, 2000). Through this process, education can domesticate and normalise political, social and cultural views that serve reproduction of existing power relationships and ideologies of the ruling class (Bourdieu, 1984; Freire, 2000). These processes of indoctrination prevail equally in authoritarian, progressive and democratic societies. Liberal Western education has been criticised for disconnecting learners from the basic principles of humanity such as love, compassion, mutuality and social justice in favour of commercial, market orientated based learning (Bourdieu, 1984; Pherali, 2016). In these contexts, education becomes a means of depositing neo-liberal agendas that serve the capitalist model of society.

In contrast, Freire (2000) suggests education can liberate individuals from their acceptance of the status-quo and their inability to effect social change. The educator's role is to create a learning environment where learners are active and equal participants in a democratic learning process. Knowledge is not possessed by the educator, but co-constructed and co-investigated between participants. Through this process, participants aim to move beyond 'banking education' and engage in critical dialogue to raise awareness of social realities (Freire, 2000); or as Ira Shor once put it, 'extraordinarily re-experiencing the ordinary' (Shor, 1979). Freire terms this new awareness 'conscientization', and believes that with it, individuals can recognise their potential and take action according to their new understanding (Freire, 1974). The goal of conscientization therefore, is not just to deepen understanding, but to invoke 'praxis'; that is, informed action understood to have the power to challenge oppressive structures (Freire, 1974). Learners then observe and reflect on the impact of their action, drawing on their evolving knowledge, self-efficacy and ability in order to revise their actions in a continuous cycle of learning and engagement (Bajaj, this issue).

Praxis therefore, by its very nature, will manifest in disparate forms, directed by individual's evolving conscientization and newfound agendas. While at the heart of Freirean pedagogy lay a political agenda for social justice, the conceptualisation of that justice and the means of achieving it lay in the hands of the participants who are encouraged to draw on wider contexts outside the educational setting (Biesta, 1998; Mayo, 2004).

Freire in practice

Freire outlines a literacy method to be used in practice, which can be instrumental for both educators and learners in conflict-affected contexts. The educator's role is initially to gain knowledge of the community through immersion, interviews and observations. The educator then codifies the information gathered under a number of themes that relate to the participants' lives. Questions may, for example, orientate around the availability of education, health care, an ongoing conflict or forced migration. Educators then facilitate investigation of these topics, assisted by indirectly related pictures that allow participants to explore the realities of these situations and become gradually aware that the problems in their lives have causes which can be addressed through action. Through a second phase, participants will deconstruct a series of 'generative words' that relate to the themes in order to begin to learn the mechanics of the studied language (Taylor, 1993; Freire, 2000).

One of the most accessible and extensive resources for its practical implementation today is Reflect (Archer and Cottingham, 1996), a development programme underpinned by the Freirean philosophy of conscientization. Key to the Reflect approach is creating a space of learning where people can feel comfortable to meet and discuss issues relevant to them with the aim of improving their meaningful participation in decision-making and practical action.

Freire in conflict-affected contexts

A number of scholars have highlighted a role for critical pedagogies in a range of disciplines, including globalisation and ecology (Bowers and Apffel-Marglin, 2006), health education and wellbeing (Wallerstein, 2006; Wiggins, 2012), gender (Weiler, 1988), the mitigation of extremism (Davies, 2009) and youth education (McInerney, 2009). One we believe to be particularly relevant to current initiatives in conflict-affected contexts is peace education.

Since the end of the Second World War, peace has often been referred to as the prevention of inter-state conflicts in which education is viewed as a crucial process in socialising young people (Lerch and Buckner, 2018). Today, education is increasingly recognised as key to creating a culture of peace through the transformation of societal divisions and conflict into peaceful and sustainable relationships (UNICEF, 2011). It highlights the importance of not only ceasing violence (negative peace) but challenging the root causes of violence (positive peace); that is, dealing with the structures and cultures that reproduce unequal power and conditions of life chances (Galtung, 1990). These approaches are underpinned by the transformative agendas proposed by Freire (2000) and others in order to enable collaboration and engagement in socially transformative efforts to curb violent and oppressive attitudes, behaviours, knowledge paradigms and social structures, which are key to peaceful coexistence (Gill and Niens, 2014; Bajaj, 2015).

Subsequently, there has been increasing calls over the past decade for a *critical peace education*. Rooted in a Freirean analysis of consciousness raising it attends to power, local meanings, and enabling voice, participation and agency through the peace education process (Bajaj, this issue).

Critiques and challenges of Freire in conflict-affected contexts

Freirean pedagogies face both theoretical and practical challenges (Blackburn, 2000). We have chosen to focus here on six challenges we perceive to be particularly relevant to conflict-affected contexts today. First, Freire's binary concepts, such as oppressed vs oppressor, and banking vs liberation, have been challenged as a simplistic understanding of reality that can hide the far more complex lived experience of difference (Taylor, 1993). Pherali (2016: 198) for example, critiques the concept of banking education, suggesting 'the idea that pupils and educators are passive recipients of hegemonic curricula imposed by the state and can therefore do nothing about the role of education in reproducing social inequalities is essentially flawed'. Instead, therefore, it is important to recognise that resistance to the structural determinants of the education system can also emerge within the autonomy of a school,

while simultaneously recognising oppression as an active phenomenon affecting learners' incentive and ability to constructively do so (Apple, 1995; McLaren, 1998; O'Brien and O'Shea, 2011).

Second, the concept of dialogue as a tool to overcome oppression is criticised for overlooking the potential for open forums to become a microcosm of more complex lived experiences, where intersecting inequalities such as wealth, gender, race and ethnicity exclude or submerge the voices and agendas of the marginalised and in turn risk reinforcing rather than challenging injustices (Ellsworth, 1989; Burbules, 2000; Choules, 2007).

Third, is the possibility that educators may be unable or unwilling to use their position for liberation, instead manipulating those over which they (potentially) have power (Burbules, 2000). For these critics, the assumption that dialogue serves democracy, promotes communication across difference, and enables the active co-construction of new knowledge is contested by its potential to be hijacked in order to promote agendas under the guise of empowerment.

Fourth, despite the development of numerous frameworks for attempting to measure or understand empowerment processes (Zimmerman and Zahniser, 1991; Naraya, 2005; Peterson et al., 2011; Oxfam, 2017), there is still a belief that 'human agency is indeterminate and hence, unpredictable in a way that is antithetical to requirements of measurement' (Kabeer, 1999: 462). Yet donors, governments and other stakeholders insist on measurement and translation of programme outcomes into metrics that serve those competing for scarce resources (Kabeer, 1999; Natsios, 2011). Subsequently, practitioners are at risk of being driven towards manipulation of transformative programming into its more measurable 'banking' counterpart or are deterred from the implementation of such pedagogies at the outset.

Finally, empowerment programmes underpinned by Freirean pedagogies may be unrecognised and unaccredited, which can compromise learners' ability to gain access to work or further education and training (Singh, 2018; UNESCO, 2018). As has been the case with Syrian refugee youth, without accreditation and recognition

of qualifications, prospects for progression into further education or employment opportunities can be diminished and subsequently learners are less likely to engage in non-accredited empowerment programmes (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2014). When learners do enrol in accredited programmes, previous research has found that learners can view critical reflection as antithetical to the goal of gaining accreditation, leading to the manipulation of the programme into its uncritical, banking counterpart (Magee and Pherali, 2017).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted some of the key tenets of Freire's vision for an alternative pedagogy, its relevance and importance to conflict-affected contexts and some caveats in terms of its application. It is not intended as a framework or method, but an introduction to some of the principles of a liberatory education aimed at encouraging further exploration of Freirean pedagogies and their interrelated concepts; many of which are introduced in this special edition. By presenting some critiques and challenges to the approach, it has also aimed to highlight areas for future research and action required to realise a Freirean vision of education for peace with social justice.

Author Bios:

Arran Magee is a doctoral scholar in Education and International Development at UCL Institute of Education, University College London. His research centres on education in emergencies with a particular focus on transformative education for conflict-affected forced-migrants. Over the past decade he has undertaken research on EiE across a range of countries, including Jordan, Syria, Bangladesh, India and Afghanistan. He has also held senior roles in a number of NGOs in the MENA region, most recently as Director of Education for an NGO serving forced migrants in Egypt.

Tejendra Pherali is Associate Professor in Education and International Development at UCL Institute of Education, University College London. His research and teaching focus on education in contexts of forced displacement, post-conflict educational reforms and the role of education in peacebuilding. He is also interested in social movements, political economy of education and critical pedagogies. Tejendra is the research theme leader on 'Education, Conflict and Peacebuilding' at the Centre for Education and International Development and the editor of Education and Conflict Review. He is currently involved in research in Afghanistan, Nepal and Lebanon.

References

Ahmadzadeh, H., Corbatir, M., Husseini, J., Hashem, L. and Wahby, S. (2014) Ensuring quality education for young refugees from Syria: mapping exercise on quality education for young refugees from Syria (12-25). Available at: http://www.unhcr.org/584698257.pdf.

Apple, M. W. (1995) *Education and power*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

Archer, D. and Cottingham, S. (1996) *Reflect – Mother Manual*. Available at: http://www.reflect-action.org/sites/default/files/u5/Reflect%20Mother%20Manual%20-%202012.pdf.

Bajaj, M. (2015) Pedagogies of resistance" and critical peace education praxis, *Journal of Peace Education*, 12(2), pp. 154–166. doi: 10.1080/17400201.2014.991914.

Biesta, G. J. J. (1998) Say you want a revolution… suggestions for the impossible future of critical pedagogy, *Educational Theory*, 48(4), pp. 499–510. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-5446.1998.00499.x.

Blackburn, J. (2000) Understanding Paulo Freire: reflections on the origins, concepts, and possible pitfalls of his educational approach, *Community Development Journal*, 35(1), pp. 3–15. doi: 10.1093/cdj/35.1.3.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Bowers, C. and Apffel-Marglin, F. (eds) (2006) *Rethinking Freire: Globalization and the environmental crisis*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. doi: 10.4324/9781410611741.

Burbules, N. (2000) The limits of dialogue as a critical pedagogy, in *Revolutionary Pedagogies*, New York: Routledge.

Choules, K. (2007) Social change education: Context matters, *Adult Education Quarterly*, 57(2), pp. 159–176. doi: 10.1177/0741713606293912.

Davies, L. (2009) Educating against extremism: Towards a critical politicisation of young people, *International Review of Education*, 55(2–3), pp. 183–203. doi: 10.1007/s11159-008-9126-8.

Ellsworth, E. (1989) 'Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy', *Harvard Educational Review*, 59, pp. 297–324.

Freire, P. (1974) *Education for critical consciousness*. London: Continuum.

Freire, P. (1998) *The Paulo Freire reader*. Edited by A. M. A. Freire and D. Macedo. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd.

Freire, P. (2000) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Galtung, J. (1990) 'Cultural violence', *Journal of Peace Research*, 27(3), pp. 291–305. doi: 10.1177/0022343390027003005.

Gill, S. and Niens, U. (2014) 'Education as humanisation: dialogic pedagogy in post-conflict peacebuilding', *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 44(February 2015), pp. 1–9. doi: 10.1080/03057925.2013.864522.

Kabeer, N. (1999) Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment', *Development and Change*, 30(3), pp. 435–464. doi: 10.1111/1467-7660.00125.

Lerch, J. C. and Buckner, E. (2018) 'From education for peace to education in conflict: Changes in UNESCO discourse, 1945–2015', *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 16(1), pp. 27–48. doi: 10.1080/14767724.2017.1387769.

Magee, A. and Pherali, T. (2017) Freirean critical consciousness in a refugee context: a case study of Syrian refugees in Jordan, Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, pp. 1–17. doi: 10.1080/03057925.2017.1403312.

Mayo, P. (2004) *Liberating praxis: Paulo Freire's legacy for radical education and politics*. London: Praeger (Critical studies in education and culture series).

Mayo, P. (2013) *Echoes from Freire for a critically engaged pedagogy.* New York: Bloomsbury Academic (Critical pedagogy today).

McInerney, P. (2009) Toward a critical pedagogy of engagement for alienated youth: insights from Freire and school-based research, *Critical Studies in Education*, 50(1), pp. 23–35. doi: 10.1080/17508480802526637.

McLaren, P. (1998) Revolutionary pedagogy in post-revolutionary times: Rethinking the political economy of critical education, *Educational Theory*, 48(4), pp. 431–462. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-5446.1998.00431.x.

Naraya, D. (ed.) (2005) *Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi: 10.1596/0-8213-6057-4.

Natsios, A. (2011) *The clash of the counter-bureaucracy and development*. Available at: https://www.cgdev.org/files/1424271_file_Natsios_Counterbureaucracy.pdf.

O'Brien, M. and O'Shea, A. (2011) *Pedagogy, oppression and transformation in a 'post-critical' climate: The return to Freirean thinking*. Available at: http://www.amazon.co.uk/Pedagogy-Oppression-Transformation-post-critical-Climate/dp/1441142347.

Oxfam (2017) *A 'How To' Guide to Measuring Women's Empowerment.* Oxfam. Available at: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/a-how-to-guide-to-measuring-womens-empowerment-sharing-experience-from-oxfams-i-620271.

Peterson, N. A., Peterson, C., Agre, L., Christens, B. and Morton, C. (2011) Measuring youth empowerment: Validation of a sociopolitical control scale for youth in an urban community context, *Journal of Community Psychology*, 39(5), pp. 592–605. doi: 10.1002/jcop.20456.

Pherali, T. (2016) Education: Cultural reproduction, revolution and peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies, In Richmond, O., Pogodda, S., and Ramovic, J. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Disciplinary and Regional Approaches to Peace*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rai, S. M., Parpart, J. L. and Staudt, K. (2007) *(Re) defining empowerment, measuring survival: Paper prepared for 'Workshop on Empowerment: Obstacles, Flaws, Achievements'*. University of Warwick. Available at: http://www.ethicsofempowerment.org/papers/RaiEmpowerment.pdf.

Shor, I. (1979) Extraordinarily re-experiencing the ordinary: An approach to critical teaching, *New Political Science*, 1(2–3), pp. 37–56. doi: 10.1080/07393147908429480.

Singh, M. (2018) *Pathways to empowerment: recognizing the competences of Syrian refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey*. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000262918.

Taylor, P. V. (1993) *The texts of Paulo Freire*. Buckingham: Open University Press. Available at: https://books.google.com/books?id=TxScAAAAMAAJ&pgis=1.

UNESCO (2018) *Migration, displacement and education: building bridges, not walls*. Available at: https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2019/migration (Accessed: 30 December 2018).

UNICEF (2011) *The role of education in peacebuilding - literature review*. Available at: http://www.unicef.org/education/files/EEPCT_Peacebuilding_LiteratureReview.pdf.

Wallerstein, N. (2006) *What is the evidence on effectiveness of empowerment to improve health?* Available at: http://www.euro.who.int/ Document/E88086.pdf.

Weiler, K. (1988) 'Feminist analysis of gender and schooling', In Weiler, K. (ed.) *Women Teaching for Change: Gender, Class & Power*. Greenwood Publishing Group, pp. 27–56.

Wiggins, N. (2012) Popular education for health promotion and community empowerment: A review of the literature, *Health Promotion International*, 27(3), pp. 356–371. doi: 10.1093/heapro/dar046.

Zimmerman, M. A. and Zahniser, J. H. (1991) Refinements of sphere-specific measures of perceived control: Development of a sociopolitical control scale, *Journal of Community Psychology*, 19(2), pp. 189–204.