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Education without Redemption: Ten Reflections about the Relevance of the Freirean Legacy

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By now, it goes without saying that very few scholars-intellectuals can lay greater claim to the notion that the hallmark of a good educational program must be its commitment to the democratization of our societies than the late Brazilian teacher and intellectual, Paulo Freire. A decade after his death, all of his books remain in print (in more than 60 languages) and some are among the best-selling titles for educators. A simple web-based search gives 1.800.000 pages with references to Freire (significantly more than almost any other author in the field of education, perhaps with the exception of John Dewey), and his name has been used to identify public and private schools, research centers, NGOs and pre-schools in more than 45 countries (Schugurensky, 2011).

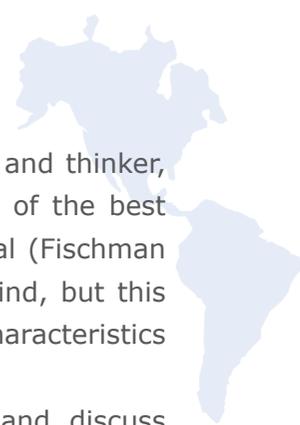
There is no doubt about Freire's impact, but it seems that the "pedagogical value" of his legacy to contribute to the democratization

of schooling is less consensually accepted. Celebrated and attacked with equal fervor by those on the right and the left, the religious and secular, intellectuals, Marxists, feminists, postmodernists, and critical scholars,¹ Freire has been quoted and misquoted an innumerable amount of times. Yet his ideas retain a unique appeal, one that virtually guarantees that somewhere at this very moment, an educator in a classroom, on a playground, or in a university hall will say proudly that she/he is implementing a Freirean project inspired by the reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire's most renowned work).

Since its publication, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (PO) has generated vigorous debate, not only about the content and orientation of Freire's work but also about how to understand his ideas.² Joe Kincheloe, among several authors (Glass, 2001; McCowan, 2006), argues that there has always been a *taming* process

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involving the use of PO, a process expressed in conflicting efforts to “read” Freire to achieve goals at opposite ends of the critical pedagogy curriculum.

On one end some teachers attempt to depoliticize his work in ways that make it simply an amalgam of student-directed classroom projects. On the other end of the continuum some teachers have emphasized the political dimensions but ignored the rigorous scholarly work that he proposed. These latter efforts have resulted in a social activism devoid of analytic and theoretical sophistication. Academic work that cultivates the intellect and demands sophisticated analysis is deemed irrelevant in these anti-intellectual articulations of Freire’s ideas. With these problems in mind the struggle to implement a Freirean critical pedagogy should never seek some form of “purity” of Freirean intent. Indeed, Paulo insisted that we critique him and improve upon his ideas. Living up to many of his pedagogical principles without sanctifying and canonizing him and his work is a conceptual tightrope (<http://criticalpedagogyproject.mcgill.ca/drupal-5.1/?q=node/37>)

What sets Freire apart? What can explain such persistence, influence, and above all, taming efforts? Why does his work continue to influence, not only the practical efforts of those working with marginalized populations, but the theoretical efforts of those working in ivory towers? Perhaps the simplest answer is that if we are still discussing his ideas, it is because they were produced by a “unique” man that belonged to that special group of intellectuals who with words and actions confer meaning and suggest directions to a society. We are sure

that Freire was a gifted educator and thinker, and without a doubt he was one of the best models of a committed intellectual (Fischman & McLaren, 2005) that one can find, but this still does not explain what characteristics confer his “uniqueness.”³

In this text we present and discuss ten “reasons” elaborated by students as they engaged in the process of reflecting about the usefulness and appropriateness of studying *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and other texts by Paulo Freire in a graduate program in the USA.⁴ What follows are several reasons proposed by the students as their answer to the question: Why do you think that Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (PO) has lasted so long and generated so much debate? We will introduce each of the reasons using the words provided by one of the students and then elaborate on the explicit/implicit rationale framed in the students’ suggestions in terms of contributing to the democratization of schooling.

Big Problems need... Big Ideas

We are always reading books and articles full of big words, or about big problems, but in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire is presenting a very, very, very big IDEA. (Claudia, 26 years old Mexican-American finishing her Masters in Educational Foundations).

The notion that PO is relevant because it contains grand ideas concerning teachers, students, schools, communities, and societies was frequently raised by the seminar participants because, they argued, Freire challenged them: “Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations [...] or it becomes “the practice of freedom” (Freire, 1993, p.



15). PO's ambitious epistemological nerve — its massive commitment to understanding and explaining everything related to education— seductively appeals to both the optimist and the pessimist, convoking and deputizing those who are inside and outside classrooms to simultaneously criticize and reinvent models, practices, institutions, experiences and dreams. In the Freirean pedagogical universe, ideas are not merely helpful; they produce a sense of control and empowerment, qualities sorely missed in contemporary schools and universities.

As educators, we believe that this sense of empowerment relates to the much-debated idea of *conscientização* in Freire. If generations of intelligent teachers and educators have been willing to commit with the PO project, it is not just because they were deceived into ideological confusion by a seductive tale of educational change and redemption. On the contrary, it is because they identified with and made their own, Freire's fundamental *ethical* message conviction that the destiny of our world was tied up with the condition of the poorest and most oppressed members of society.

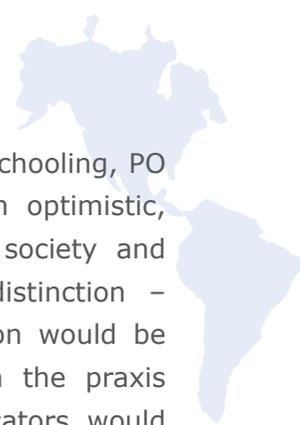
Even if you don't understand all the words... You get it

You get Freire [...] even when you don't understand all the words in the book. Reading Freire makes me feel something about the power of teaching (Rosa, 37 years old, Ph.D. student from Mexico)

The empowerment and sense of control identified previously and taken up here again in Rosa's words appear to be related to the fact that although PO was written in a complex language – dense with scholarly and political

references (difficult even for specialists) – teachers and educators reading Freire often feel that they understand the main ideas and that these ideas can be directly put into practice.⁵ PO has always been perceived as a heterodox and hybrid text.⁶ Moreover, in a clear challenge to orthodox positivistic pedagogical models (including many Marxist and so-called critical and popular models), Freire's pedagogical and political ideas resist reduction to models or methods easily applied to any context. As Adriana Puiggros has aptly noted, "The subjects of Freirean pedagogy are not reduced to an essentialist existence, or to immutable categories—they are complex subjects, determined by multiple factors, and they have diverse languages and histories" (1999, p. 123).

Freire used theoretically complex and poetically engaging language and presented it somewhat paradoxically, in straightforward terms. Being conceptually "simple", Freire argued, did not imply the abandonment of consistency in the use of theoretical categories, but it did result in the avoidance of binary positions. He argued that the language through which one presents demands and claims, or through which one proposes to change or maintain the order of the world, is a vocabulary always packed with explicit intentions and with multiple possibilities of interpretation. Yet, instead of lamenting the multiplicity of readings that his work provoked, he welcomed heterodoxy, carnivalesque readings, and the reader's appropriation of his words. In a way, Freire's concern with communication was not limited to his writing or even his being read, but encompassed a recognition of his influence: "Deep down, this must be every author's true dream -- to be read, discussed, critiqued, improved, and reinvented by his/her readers" (1998: 31).



We need technical knowledge... but we also need quilting words

Freire was a scholar, a professor, but he was also an artist, or perhaps an artisan [...] like my grandmother that by quilting, she told stories that interpreted the world, using *selectively* (and this is the key word) whatever was available, Freire quilted with ideas". (Brian, 35 years old African American and future school psychologist).

Brian's image of the quilt reflects the "hybridity" discussed regularly by students over the years. In this case, the hybrid character of the PO project relates to the intellectual model developed by Freire that displaced (by osmosis) the older Deweyan, pragmatic, spiritualist, and more importantly, Marxist and Christian modernizing utopian dreams about education. Marxist and Christian language, or language rooted in Marxist and Christian categories, gave an implicit coherence and shape to PO by providing the deep emotional "structure" of much of the progressive politics contained in Freire's book. PO was similarly a strand in the great progressive and redemptive narrative about schools of our times. In Freire's words:

In the last instance, I have to say that both my position as a Christian and my approximation to Marx, in both cases were not at an intellectual level, but at the concrete level. I didn't approach the oppressed because of Marx; I went to him because of the oppressed. My encounter with the oppressed sent me to search for Marx, and not the other way around" (1979: 74 & 75).

The quilting hybridity noted by Brian and some of his colleagues also recognizes the fact that

like other classical narratives of schooling, PO both fosters and antagonizes an optimistic, rationalistic account of modern society and its possibilities. The Freirean distinction – the assertion that good education would be an exercise in freedom through the praxis of the oppressed in which educators would be key actors in the process of educational transformation – may appear hard to believe for those who are always denouncing the crisis of education and the rotten state of schools and teachers, but it still generates more enthusiasm among educators and activists than any other pedagogical model. Freire continues to resonate with educators and PO seems possible, realizable, and real – because educators and activists can see the way theory informs practice and vice versa.

You may feel isolated... but you are not alone

PO is like a badge, a banner, something that helped me to establish a connection with other people, no matter where are you coming from, what's your race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, even if you like kimchi or tacos, if you see somebody reading Freire, you know that you belong to the same group, you are on the same side" (Kim, 27 years old is from Korea and studying early childhood education).

Two salient and distinctive characteristics of PO are highlighted in Kim's description of the influence of PO. First, the book is identified as an intellectual tool for developing "pedagogies of resistance." But Freire's resistance goes beyond refusing to obey classroom rules, because as Freire wrote:

It's necessary then, for us to have the kind of resistance that keeps us alive.



It is also necessary that we know how to resist so as to remain alive, that our comprehension of the future is not static but dynamic, and that we are convinced that our vocation for greatness and not mediocrity is an essential expression of the process of humanization in which we are inserted (1999, p. 74).

Second, reading and discussing PO has functioned as a sort of symbolic “badge,” one that indicates the willingness of educators to commit to the ideas of the wide movement of “popular education/critical pedagogy.” As a grass-roots movement (especially in Latin America) the popular education/critical pedagogy movement is identified with Freire but such strong identification has not prevented the evolution of a myriad of variations developed in dialogue with practitioners, academics and scholars. Freirean/Popular education has been implemented with all types of groups (children, the elderly, women, migrants, indigenous, incarcerated) and settings (rural, urban, poor, schools, universities, jails, hospitals, etc.). Thus, it has fostered an enormous repertoire of styles, practices and strategies. Nevertheless it maintains a non-authoritarian, directivist pedagogical orientation with the goal of consciousness raising as a pre-condition of liberation.

Over time, popular education has been adopted and incorporated into state initiatives, public policies (specially in the areas of adult education), and countless educational practices in union halls, indigenous populations, NGOs, community organizations, feminist groups, universities, and schools. The examples of the pedagogical experimentation of the Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil (Landless movement), the *Zapatistas* popular education initiative in Chiapas (Mexico), the *escola cidadã* initiative in Porto Alegre (Brazil), the Universidad Popular

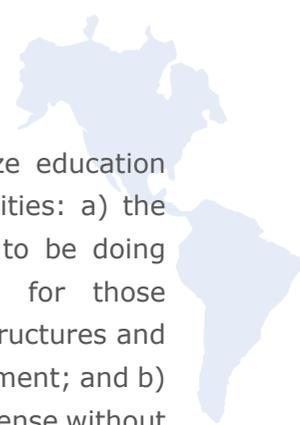
Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (Argentina), and the Universidad indígena Tupak Katari (indigenous university in Bolivia) are all good examples of a Freirean inspired popular critical pedagogies.⁷

Theory meets reality... when you feel the power of the ideas

I cannot fully explain what it felt like to have a real education issue in a context like India, teaching in a colony with women [...] where theoretical ideals met reality and I could be what I knew I wanted to be. I am probably not explaining this well but just know that it was, in my career, a real turning point. Freire’s idea about teachers and students learning and the power of developing educational models powered by the knowledge of those with the least “power” (but plenty of knowledge) turned out to be liberating for everyone. It was the most organic and uplifting experience.” (Elizabeth, White student, mother of two with lengthy experience as a qualitative researcher)

PO’s insistent claim about the political nature of education is not an abstraction, or an “empty signifier” that can be filled with just any type of orientation. Exercising radical democratic forms of education depends upon a rejection of both authoritarian and laissez-faire practices. Freire (and many teachers) see such dual perspectives as expressions of false options:

Just because I reject authoritarianism does not mean I can fall into a lack of discipline, nor that rejecting lawlessness, I can dedicate myself to authoritarianism. As I once



affirmed: One is not the opposite of the other. The opposite of either manipulative authoritarianism or lawless permissiveness, is democratic radicalism" (1998: 64).

The feeling of power noted by Elizabeth also relates to the fact that PO is adamantly eloquent throughout, but particularly in its opposition to the ideological straightjacket of teaching and learning as emotionally neutral: "It is impossible to teach without the courage to love" (1998: 4). Freirian love, however, should not be understood as a form of paternalistic coddling that leads to indulgence and accommodation, but one instead that is based on a radical perspective about the relationship between educators and learners. According to Freire, the teacher is simultaneously a student, and the student, a teacher; the nature of their knowledge may differ, but as long as education is the act of knowing and not merely transmitting facts, students and teachers share a similar status as producers linked together through a pedagogical dialogue characterized by horizontal and dialogical relationships.

Every action counts... because learning is surprising

Countless popular educators, classroom teachers and university professors have laid claim to re-inventing Freire, and undoubtedly some of them do so from perspectives commonly identified as "common sense" or "domesticated." Labeling an approximation "common sense" or domesticated usually implies that political goals, the notion of transformation, or praxis have been washed away, reducing PO to group activities and paternalistic practices.⁸ Acknowledging these concerns, it is important to recognize that

just about any effort to Freire-ize education affords the following two possibilities: a) the multiplication of voices claiming to be doing "Freire" increases opportunities for those educators to recognize banking structures and challenges to educational development; and b) one cannot "overcome" common sense without going through it (Freire, 1997).

PO tells teachers that even short-lived experiences of democratic schooling – in a single classroom or through district-wide efforts – are worth pursuing. These experiences teach us not only to expect more from schools, but also that improving education links individual and community participation with goals of equality and solidarity, as well as providing access to socially and scientifically relevant knowledge, and the improvement of individual and socio-educational outcomes. I think that the words of Anita (White, doctoral student 33 years old) capture these complex feelings quite well:

What I think that makes Freire unique among the people we usually read is that he surprises the reader, because with him there is a place for smiles as well as anger but not in the ways we usually expect. For example, I remember that I was being enthralled by an investigation of Indianness, the abuse of the "model minority" myth, and the examples of South Asian American activism, I found myself crying at the last two sentences of the book: "The taxi workers show us how immigrants and their children can be radical within the belly of the beast. Theirs is a pedagogy of hope" (203). I'm not sure why I cried, but I think Freire would have smiled.



Not only does a reading of PO elicit smiles and anger as depicted by Anita as she walks through her surprises and emotions, PO offers a pedagogical compass for re-making the world.

Through a critique of current banking educational situations that helps the reader to reflect about his/her common sense, and by depicting a pedagogical project that envisions a better, fairer and more democratic present, it bridges very important and critical gaps for educators. The first and most obvious is between theoretical ideas and how to practice them. Yet, it does more. It is one of the few “big ideas” in education where social consciousness, analysis and critique are actually transformed into viable pedagogical projects providing tangible and critical hope to those who yearn to take actions that will forge a better world.

In his reflections on the role of hope in urban schools, Duncan-Andrade (2009) is critical of what he calls *hope deferred*, where urban schoolteachers “have a critique of social inequality but cannot manifest this critique in any kind of transformative pedagogical project” (p. 184). PO offers such a pedagogical project that casts teachers and curriculum as potent weapons in the struggle for liberation. PO demystifies, in the words of Valenzuela (1999) the “sacred cow” of curriculum and troubles a pedagogy of pessimism, providing realistic and accessible pedagogical tools for transforming and classroom lesson by lesson.

Hope is... a process

What is so beautiful about Freire’s vision is that he always reminded us that even though circumstances are dreadful, they could be worse, but also they could be improved [...] We see hope and spaces for transformation at the

university. We know our history. The Revolt and the youth of Bosnia and Herzegovina require justice and truth. Friedrich Nietzsche said:

On the mountains of truth you can never climb in vain:
either you will reach a point higher up today,
or you will be training your powers so that
you will be able to climb higher tomorrow.

(Ivana, left Bosnia when she was 15 for the US. She often reminded the group that she was keeping her heart and hopes close to her native country).

Ivana mentioned in her paper that she identified with the following statement in *Pedagogy of Freedom*:

I like being human because I know that my passing through the world is not predetermined, reestablished. That my destiny is not a given but something that needs to be constructed and for which I must assume responsibility. I like being human because I am involved with others in making history out of possibility, not simply resigns to a fatalistic stagnation (Freire, 1999, 54).

Since the publication of PO, the Freirean political/pedagogical discourses propose a “hope” that demands changes for a future that is already “in” the present. In the Freirean discourse, insisting on hope for an education that merits being known as “education” must contribute to the creation of fairer and better societies. In its provision of a framework for the present,



PO demands that we change the oppressive aspects of everyday life in schools and society by engaging in the common struggles of the “here and now.” Better education need not wait for a magical situation that will result in a utopian consciousness emerging among the oppressed at the moment when the ideal objective circumstances are realized. Rather, Freire’s utopia is realizable, but only in reading the word and the world in an ever-evolving process of *conscientization*, emerging from the concrete conditions of everyday struggle within capitalist society (Freire 1993). In Freire’s utopian vision of schools, the main task is not to liberate others by applying ready-made recipes, but to develop solidarity with others through the everyday struggles that occur in classrooms, schools, and the streets.

Schools are not redemptive institutions... and cannot be

The idea that the students need to humbly accept that they are “wrong” for speaking their native language, have the “wrong” color or the “wrong” sexual orientation as the condition for accessing to decent and fair education [...] It is so empowering to abandon the redemptive model! (Carlos, 29 Math teacher and Ph.D. student)

What is a redemptive model that Carlos refers to? Simply put, it is a narrative, specifically a *Narrative of Redemption* (subsequently *NR*), in which schools are described as being horrible, oppressive, discriminatory and bad at teaching, but through the redemptive power of very mighty agents and their ideas, they will be redeemed and transformed overnight.

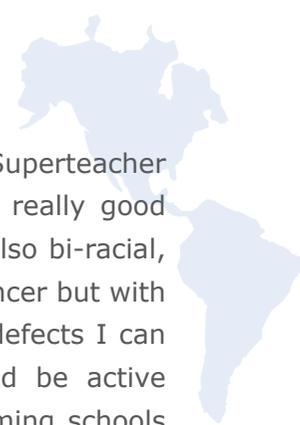
The resonance of the *NR* is related to how schools are positioned as key sites for the

transformation of future generations and the perfection of the society; the *NR* has been a dominant narrative of public schooling since the time of Horace Mann, and is part of the discursive grammar of schooling that literally defines the purpose of public education. The solution to current social, cultural, political and economic problems is deferred from the adult context of real social and political struggle, to the childhood context of formation, and the classic U.S. and enlightenment narrative of progress through the rational application of scientific child rearing gets enacted.

One of the distinctive indicators of the *NR* is that schools and educational institutions are both the target of the harsh social criticisms and the last space of hope, a frontier dividing the critical juncture between the possibility of achieving society’s dreams or the failure to uphold those aspirations. In that critical juncture of society’s imaginary about schools, they become the makers of terrible presents and hopeful futures.⁹

This framing of *NR* is quite traditional, an heir of the religious discursive tradition of sin-crisis-failure-trauma that is completed with redemption-absolution-recovery-success. If accepted, this redeeming educational vision will, after the defeat of the oppressing enemy, create an harmonious “oppression free” ideal school, in which the flawless-smiling teacher and the perfectly motivated student will co-construct learning, while with the force and strength of their wills, transform schools and lives.

A distinguishing and remarkable characteristic of the *NR* is the normative presentation of conflicts and struggles as expressions of hope in connection with educational and social change. This popular narrative strategy works quite well as a cinematic device or as a motivational speech, and it has been the dominant account of public



schooling in the Americas. These elements give to *NR* strong emotional connections. Yet, only within redemptive narratives is it possible to find real “hope” in racist situations, oppressive contexts, discriminatory practices and banking educational systems. A naïve *NR* is dangerous because it naturalizes “educational struggles,” minimizing and ignoring the risks and suffering of those directly involved in those situations. These narratives over-promise the outcomes of teaching and learning, over-simplifying the pathways that teachers and students must follow to embody, even faintly, emancipatory projects.

The problem arises when in our attempts to “teach and demonstrate” the realities of oppression, we present them “as an opportunity” for hope and transformation. It would be better to recognize that conflicts and struggles are part of the everyday life of schools and societies, sometimes explicit and clear, often implicit and confusing, but always anchored in complex manners and expressing multiple dynamics of class, race, sexuality, language, and ethnicity. It is in this unavoidability of the educational conflicts, that practitioners of Freirean pedagogies “must speak for hope, as long as it doesn’t mean suppressing the nature of the danger” (Williams 1989, p.322).

You don’t need to be a Superteacher... to be a good teacher

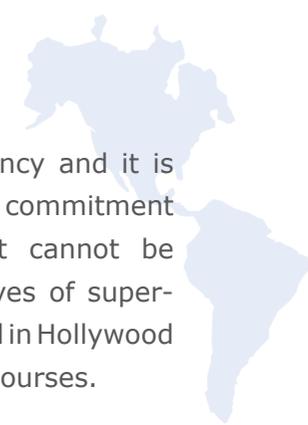
Before reading Freire my only model of a good transformative teacher was from the movie. Robin Williams (*The Dead Poets Society*) and Michele Pfeifer (*Dangerous Minds*) were my inspiration. Those were the models and in all my years of teaching I always felt that I was failing, never able to meet the challenges. Freire help me to recognize

that you don’t have to be a Superteacher to change things. I am a really good history teacher but I am also bi-racial, lesbian, and very lousy dancer but with all of those qualities and defects I can collaborate, contribute and be active in the process of transforming schools and ultimately society (Elsie, doctoral student)

Elsie’s words capture better than most the contradictions and limitations of understanding schools and teachers from the perspective of redemption, where the key connection between the terrible present and the promising future is the heroic super teacher. Besides the obvious caricature of this portrayal, redemptive narratives are common in teacher training institutions and as Elsie noted especially strong in movies and TV shows about teachers. The *NR* provides the basic discursive structure of most films about schools and the way their characters are positioned within the dynamics of schooling.

The *NR* erases the backgrounds of regular teachers and any process that leads them toward implementing more progressive educational changes, appear to be always inadequate vis-à-vis the heroic accomplishment of fictionalized educators. The heroes in these narratives are frequently people who become teachers without going through teacher education courses. Their successes are not due to anything they could learn in a teacher education program. When others follow the lead of the super teacher, the class or school as a larger system is redeemed.

Contrary to the all-powerful “heroic-teacher” or the all-knowing “super-conscious critical-teacher” of the *NR*, Freirean pedagogies advocate for teachers as committed intellectuals (Fischman & McLaren, 2005) oriented by the goals of educational and social



justice without succumbing to essentialist positions about hope or easy rhetorical discourses of good versus evil. This rejection of reductionist binaries, means that educators in concrete schools could start with naïve ideas of hope, but the reality of their schools demonstrates to them that hope is not an external characteristic or the natural resolution of a pedagogical situation, something alien to their daily struggles. Teachers as committed intellectuals can engage in individual and collective actions as an integral part of the always contradictory and conflictive on going processes of conscientization and educational change.

Freirean Pedagogies cannot be anything other than democratic by promoting the values of equity, solidarity and fairness. It is a historical and steadfast critic and adversary of the banking model of education, refusing to accept the appearance of normality imposed by unfair and sorting mechanisms, and the resignation promoted by the “There Is No Alternative” posture. As Zygmunt Baumann (2007) points out, “If an optimist is someone who believes that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and the pessimist is someone who suspects that the optimist may be right, the left places itself instead in the third camp: that of hope. Refusing to pre-empt the shape of the good society, it can’t but question, listen and seek”.

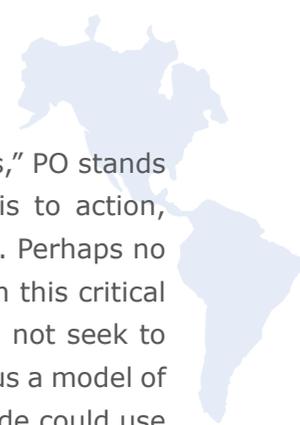
Questioning, listening and seeking alternatives for the construction of better schools and better societies as acts of hope are constitutive of *Freirean Pedagogies*. Understanding hope in a Freirean sense implies placing it in a concrete, practical experience of collective struggle, dialogue and conflict. For Freire, the concept of “hope” is historically and ontologically situated and cannot be the “natural” result of struggles, however, it is intimately tied to those struggles. Educational

hope requires solidarity and agency and it is collectively constructed. with the commitment of individual teachers, and yet cannot be sustained on redemptive narratives of super-teacher heroism, whether wrapped in Hollywood imagery or pretended critical discourses.

It’s a Pedagogy...of the Oppressed

Pedagogy of the Oppressed hit me like a gunshot the first time I read it. The words I read described *my* experience in schools with a language that I had quietly yearned for. Even though I was always a bright kid, I was never comfortable with being a high achieving student in middle and high school while my peers were less successful academically, usually by no fault of their own. Then, as a teacher in a working class barrio in California, I was deeply disturbed with the simple explanations of complex things like educational inequity, and the popular narrative that the students I taught were incapable of being successful in school and in society. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was one of the first books I read that shared that perspective – one that centered the margin. One of my most fulfilling moments as a teacher was reading selections of the text with my high school students, and watching them make the same connections. (Victor, doctoral student, Mexican-American, 28 years old.)

Although it may seem obvious, it is very relevant to highlight that Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* provides a different perspective than most of the other “big educational ideas,” as it is written from the perspective of the oppressed, and not the oppressor. This shift



in perspective leads to a number of relevant insights, but perhaps none is more important than Freire's assertion that the oppressors cannot free the oppressed. This runs against the grain of many other educational ideologies, where freedom is conceived as a gift that teachers can grant to students, or institutions can grant to marginalized populations. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* stands as one of few texts of its stature that is written from the perspective of the colonized, rather than from a supposedly enlightened, egalitarian colonizer. This is a critical characteristic that distinguished Freire's perspectives in the 1960s and it is still relevant at this time where globalizing dynamics in both economics and education appear to reinforce old colonial relationships (Kubow & Fossum, 2003).

In today's narrative about the failures of public schooling and the message that the best option for urban black and brown youth is to be "Waiting for Superman,¹⁰" the renewal of the colonial message of redemption is reinforced for both poor urban and rural youth and educators. This narrative recognizes that the oppressed are marginalized because they are not fit to be at the center. They must wait for someone in the center to develop the elixir to cure what ails them, so that all can take part in life in the center. PO counters this narrative by making the case that "Superman" or any other Super-redemptive hero does not need to arrive, because among the oppressed, there are plenty of educators, activists, intellectuals, and artists that slowly but surely are organizing and constructing more democratic and fair educational institutions.

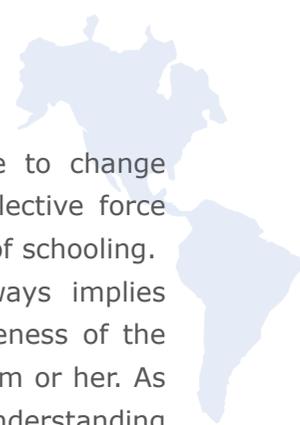
With "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" and his other texts, Freire speaks from the perspective of the oppressed in a way that few did before and few have done since. Rather than offering strictly analysis of educational and social situations, or a decontextualized set of

best practices cast as "what works," PO stands alone in its ability to link analysis to action, and engage in its very own praxis. Perhaps no contribution of PO is stronger than this critical contribution at its core. Freire did not seek to just trouble us: he sought to give us a model of praxis that the oppressed worldwide could use as a tool as their work towards their liberation.

Concluding reflections

When visiting a school or when teaching our classes, how many times do we encounter teachers who declare their commitment to the notions of equal opportunity, fairness, caring, and democracy? Clearly, in most cases those commitments are formulated as depoliticized notions, and in some cases naïve perspectives about equal opportunity, fairness or caring. Understanding teaching as an activity that involves commitment is more of an orientation than a final state of being and even more important, commitment likely precedes or at least develops with conscientization. As Paulo Freire (1989) has noted: "Concientization is not exactly the starting point of commitment. Concientization is more of a product of commitment. I do not have to be already critically self-conscious in order to struggle. By struggling I become conscious/aware" (p. 46).

Teaching future educators about their potential role in advancing the goal of democratizing schools and societies cannot start with idealized "super-conscious-critical knowledge" but with the recognition of the limitations and with the dispositions and sense of commitment that the future teachers bring to the schools. Schools need teachers that can recognize their intellectual function and can then assume the role of "committed intellectuals" (Fischman, 1998). In other words, an educator who is a committed intellectual is sometimes critically self-conscious and actively engaged in



social networks, but at other times is confused, or even unaware of his or her limitations or capacities to be an active proponent of social change. They will continue to be both oppressed and oppressors in educational systems that are not created by them, even as they struggle to become less of both. Teaching aimed at democratizing education needs commitment, but not in abstract terms. Having a deep understanding of the complex processes of oppression and domination is not enough to guarantee personal or collective praxis, because, as Daniel Schugurensky (2011) eloquently argues, “More democratic, effective and enjoyable schools require teachers who are generous, committed, democratic, and knowledgeable and who do not dichotomize cognition and emotion.” (p. 134)

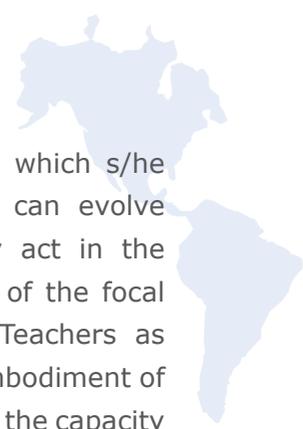
The type of commitment that we are proposing begins here and now, and it is not guaranteed forever, because as Ira Shor cleverly noted “this kind of project is no different from other exercises in social change, which begin from the concrete they are destined to erase” (1987, p. 269)

We believe that there are many teachers who are already transformative/committed intellectuals, “critical” and conscious, active participants in social and political networks. Many are taking risks by speaking out and naming oppressive realities. Yet many of these critical teachers are limited to denunciations and only able to outline the annunciations of a more just future (which can only be robustly filled in through the efforts of a movement, through collective struggle). However, we believe that large numbers of teachers as well as practitioners of *Freirean Pedagogies* have the energy and commitment but are at times confused, or even unaware of the limitations or capacities to be an active proponent of social change. One of the most pressing challenges for *Freirean Pedagogies* is to harness this

energy, commitment, and desire to change and enable it to form into a collective force that can lead the transformation of schooling.

Critical consciousness always implies that the subject has some awareness of the immediate world that concerns him or her. As Freire came to recognize, a deep understanding of the complex processes of oppression and domination is not enough to guarantee personal or collective praxis. What must serve as the genesis of such an understanding is the recognition of the existence of multiple forms of oppression and the fact that every individual participates in them. In other words, the commitment to struggle against injustice is not “organic,” neither is it more natural for some people than for others. One can arrive at critical consciousness and praxis from several positions within an oppressive situation shared by oppressor and oppressed alike. Further, this commitment could start in abstract terms, but it is actualized not just through individual struggle, but also by developing community of similarly committed fellow activists. Conscientization is embodied individually; but comes through collective dialogue, analysis, and actions. Only by developing an understanding that is born of a commitment to social justice in cooperation with others can such an understanding lead to both the type of conscientization and the counter-systemic networks necessary to challenge the hegemonic structures of domination and exploitation.

The notion of the teacher as a committed intellectual is exactly the opposite of the teacher as the organic super-agent of educational change, where he/she is able to do all the heroic tasks and where everything is possible. Relying on notions of “organic” solidarity based on stable and unshakable identities as the pre-requisite for developing pedagogies worthy to be called critical is still constrained by redemptive pedagogical beliefs.



The narrative of redemption is a powerful pedagogical discourse, as is the promise that it will deliver equity, based on just and neutral standards, and ideals of excellence. We cannot simply ignore the power and impact of those narratives, as well as those emphasizing the need to introduce technical improvements, the importance of accountability systems. Nor can we dismiss all the teachers who resonate with these notions as guilty of being ideologically corrupt, unable to get rid of their false consciousness. The inequities of Capitalism and other forms of oppression can be challenged and even defeated, but not simply by understanding their formation. Rather, it requires developing the will and the courage – the commitment – and the social, cultural and political organization to struggle against it in cooperation with others. Following Badiou (2001) it is possible to assume that the accomplishments of the committed intellectual will be a lot more humble:

The conception of politics that we defend is far from the idea that ‘everything is possible’. In fact, it is an immense task to try to propose a few possibilities, in the plural - a few possibilities other than what we are told is possible. It is a matter of showing how the space of the possible is larger than the one we are assigned - that something else is possible, but not that everything is possible. (p. 115)

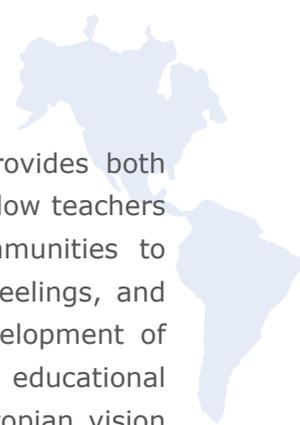
Potentially a great number of teachers could be committed intellectuals, based on the functions that they could perform and not on any essential virtue or characteristic. For these teachers the starting point will very likely be an attempt to understand how the multiple forms of exploitation are affecting his/her students, their families and communities, and him or

herself and the institution within which s/he works. The need to understand can evolve into commitments to reflectively act in the classrooms (and beyond) as one of the focal points to transform the world. Teachers as committed intellectuals are the embodiment of the Freirean notion that praxis and the capacity to engage in critical self-consciousness are not enough to transform both the repressive and integrative functions of the hegemonic orders, but nevertheless they are necessary in order to find ways to actively intervene in the world order in ways that have the potential to transform that world.

Those working in *Freirean Pedagogies* could help teachers to become committed intellectuals by working together in recognizing that hegemonic or dominant educational discourses are not perfectly consistent and conceptually seamless, but fundamentally contradictory and conflictive. Educational discourses are never immune from the larger context of concrete workplace practices also incorporated into to the international division of labor and refracted through race, class, and gender antagonisms.

Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to denounce the multiple shortcomings of the “banking model” of education, as well as the often proclaimed but never achieved equality of opportunities of the liberal tradition. It is worth remembering what distinguishes the “banking model”:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat (p. 72) [...] Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative



power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness; the latter strives for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality (p.62).

If PO and others that follow it are still inspiring teachers, educators and administrators it is in large measure because the shortcomings of the “banking model” remain the norm, not the exception, and because even today, there are teachers willing to commit and affirm that another school experience – one that is more democratic, open, tolerant, and creative – is not only achievable, but necessary. Freire’s

political-pedagogical discourse provides both ideal and achievable goals that allow teachers and students, schools and communities to reflect about situations, words, feelings, and institutions in the conscious development of institutionally fair and exciting educational spaces as part of a new civic utopian vision of democratic life. A renewed commitment to justice and fairness in society and schooling is a welcome movement for socially relevant knowledge, for respecting different perspectives on sciences and arts, for encouraging schools where disagreement is not punished, where love and a desire to know thrive, and where a passion for radicalizing democracy and creating more just alternatives is welcomed.

Endnotes

1. In an interview with Moacir Gadotti, Paulo Freire recalled the reception of PO, “Some Marxists - and also non-Marxists – who thought in purely mechanist terms, criticized me in the? 1970s, of being at worst an idealistic Kantian, or at best a neo-Hegelian, because of my proposals of conscientização that challenged the idea that the superstructure conditions the conscience”
2. It is relevant to reflect on the “controversy around Freire. How many authors can generate this type of debate and questions: Was he a Marxist? Humanist? Conservative? Was Freire the author of a *method*, a *methodology*, a *theory*, a *pedagogy*, a *philosophy*, a *program*, or a *system*? When asked which of those denominations he felt most comfortable with. “None of them”, he answered. “I didn’t invent a method, or a theory, or a program, or a system, or a pedagogy, or a philosophy. It is people who put names to things.” (Torres, 1997, p2)
3. Holst (2006) notes, “By not understanding the development of a pedagogy such as Freire’s as a socio-historically situated collective process, we fail to see the multifaceted process at work and we merely fuel the unnecessary and distorting mystique that has developed around Freire” (p. 265).
4. More than 100 students participated in the graduate seminar [*Re-Thinking Paulo Freire and the Politics of Education: Combining the Language of Critique with the Language of Possibility*](#) between 2002-2010 at the Mary Lou Fulton College of Education at Arizona State University, and although it is an elective that does not fulfill any specific requirement, it is consistently the most popular class of all the classes I teach (GEF).



5. In this quality there are risks of reducing Freire's complex ideas about praxis, methodological toolkits, transforming the political goals of social justice into crude instruments, turning dense and multilayered theories into slogans about "mastering the political economy of schooling."
6. The hybrid character was also a source of a frequent criticism. As Daniel Schugurensky has argued in a review of Freire's contributions: "In the writings of Freire we find, for instance, elements of Socratic maieutics, philosophical existentialism, phenomenology, Hegelianism, Marxism, progressive education and liberation theology. Together with Marx and the Bible, are Sartre and Husserl, Mounier and Buber, Fanon and Memmi, Mao and Guevara, Althusser and Fromm, Hegel and Unamuno, Kosik and Furter, Chardin and Maritain, Marcuse and Cabral. Even though Freire was influenced by these and other authors, his merit was to combine their ideas into an original formulation" (1998, p. 23).
7. I'm not claiming that these organizations are "pure" examples of Freirean practices, just that it is impossible to isolate them and their emergence as pedagogical models from the Freirean ideas and debates.
8. Leslie Barlett provides an example of such a situation: "Freire was a powerful symbol among the educators I met. Freirean aphorisms such as "teaching within students' reality" or teaching students to read "the word and the world" were frequently invoked during training sessions. On one occasion, the prize for a contest held during teacher training was a short booklet by Freire. And I was told by "teachers" and "students" involved that the adult literacy programs in these three organizations were deeply shaped by Freire's ideas. It is important to note, however, that the NGO teachers with whom I worked did not have an exhaustive knowledge of Freire's corpus. Practitioners tended to be familiar with only a small segment of his early opus, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Few of the teachers, other than those at university, had read more than a chapter from one of Freire's books" (Barlett, 2005, 351)
9. Unfortunately, the use of the NR in the teaching of *Freirean inspired Pedagogies* is quite common and it also contributes to the proliferation of gloom and doom educational discourses. See Fischman & Sales, 2010.
10. The film *Waiting for Superman*, directed by David Guggenheim was released in the United States in 2010 and soon became a central piece in the debates about the limitations of public schools in the USA. The film describes the experiences of several families as they struggle to send their kids to a "broken" public education system, and attempt to enroll their students in charter schools. The film has been highly praised by both the left and the right, including a glowing endorsement from President Obama as well as right-leaning media outlets like the *Wall Street Journal*, and has greatly influenced the discussion of public education in the United States. Yet, it has also drawn criticism for its attack on teacher unions and its unabashed endorsement of pro-business, neo-liberal policies in education.

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