



# Paulo Freire's Ideas and Community Psychology Leadership

Kurniawan Dwi Madyo Utomo(✉)

STFT Widya Sasana, Malang, Indonesia  
fxiwancm@gmail.com

**Abstract.** Communities must explore alternative leadership ideologies to make meaningful academic and social improvements in the society. This research aims to explore Paulo Freire's critical ideology that can be used to expand the conceptualizations of educational leadership and facilitate practical responses to multitudes of educational and social dilemmas in the society. The research method is a library study. This research found that Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed is not only related to school settings, but also it can work in other settings (e.g. neighborhood, mosque or church community, community centers, etc.) and can be manifested by community psychologists who have awareness and faith in their communities. Community psychologists should engage in people's difficulties. Freire emphasizes the importance of dialogue. In this dialogue community psychologists must have faith in the capabilities of the oppressed to recognize and oppressive systems and structures that have affected their lives. Community psychologists and the oppressed should pay attention on the importance of the sense of collective efficacy for constructive changes. As a result, they will be able to build a foundation for wellness in their community.

**Keywords:** Community psychology · Leadership · Paulo Freire · Solidarity

## 1 Introduction

Paulo Freire was born into a middle-class family in Recife, capital of the Brazilian State of Pernambuco, on 19 September 1921. The experiences of his family during the Great Depression, which started in 1929, influenced his concern about the poor and his perspective on education. In graduate school he began to explore the connections between poverty and education. From his experience, Freire believed that education hold the best hope for the promotion of social justice and the transformation of an unjust society. Implicit in this statement is that people who are rich and privileged also use education to maintain an unjust status quo (Gadotti & Torres, 2009).

Freire enrolled at Law School at the University of Recife in 1943 where he also studied philosophy and the psychology of language. Rather than a career in the law, however, he chose to be a secondary school teacher of Portuguese. In 1946, Freire was appointed to be Director of the Department of Education and Culture in the Brazilian State of Pernambuco. He worked primarily with the illiterate poor. Freire began to

develop a non-orthodox philosophy of education and literacy. He believed that the poor can transform their situation by thinking critically about their reality and then taking action. Freire acknowledged that the educational system plays an important role in maintaining oppression and thus it has to be reformed to change the life of the oppressed. His educational system focuses on the students' environment. He assumed that the students must understand their own reality as part of their learning activity and question their unjust society (Bartlett, 2005).

In 1964 a military coup took over the Brazilian government, and Freire was arrested. Freire was accused of being a subversive and a communist. He was jailed for seventy days and then offered exile instead of continued imprisonment. He moved first to Bolivia and few months later to Chile, where he worked for the United Nations. In this period, he worked as a researcher on the process of agrarian reform in Chile. It was also in Chile that he wrote *Education, the Practice of Freedom* (first published 1967) and his most important and influential book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (published in Portuguese in 1968). In 1969, he worked as a visiting scholar at Harvard University and then he moved to Geneva, Switzerland to become a special educational adviser to the World Congress of Churches. In 1980 he returned to Brazil to relearn about his country. He joined the Workers' Party in the city of Sao Paulo, and acted as a supervisor for its adult literacy project from 1980 to 1986. Finally, in 1988 he became the Minister of Education for Sao Paulo. This position enabled him to start educational reform in Brazil. He made a great effort to implement his ideas, to review the curriculum, and to increase the salaries of Brazilian educators (Gadotti & Torres, 2009).

This study examines a number of major themes from Freire's ideas about education in their relation to the goal of fostering social justice in the contexts of privilege. This study also examines how community psychologists can learn from his ideas.

## 2 Methods

The qualitative method using library research was chosen as the research method in this study. Resources related to Paulo Freire's ideas of educational leadership and the results of previous studies related to the community psychology leadership were analyzed using critical discourse analysis. The researcher analyzed texts that discussed the educational leadership of Paulo Freire. After the analysis was done, the researcher made a critical reflection on the contribution of Paulo Freire's ideas to transform oppressive structures and to establish a foundation for wellness in the community.

## 3 Results and Discussions

### a. Banking education and liberating education

Freire (1970) says that education for the privileged is only a transfer of information. He calls this the banking education where learning actually 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). Freire also states that knowledge is a gift given by those who consider themselves knowledgeable to those

whom they consider to know nothing. In this banking educational system, students are not requested to question and evaluate critically about the world in which they live. Students are simply asked to repeat information to their teacher, who may have little or nothing to do with their lives.

Freire believes that banking education allows the oppressors to sustain the system of oppression. This system decreases students' creativity and discourages inquiry. In the banking education students must deposit a fragmented view of reality because engagement with life is separated from education. Students also do not have the opportunity to critically question and evaluate the world in which they live. Therefore, they do not have opportunity to change their own lives for the better (Bartlett, 2005).

Freire (1970) proposes a liberating education as an alternative system to banking education. He believes that liberating education is a process of humanizing people who have been oppressed. The process of humanization is considered politically subversive because it empowers the oppressed to critically question and evaluate their lives in society. Freire argues that the oppressed has a task to liberate both themselves and their oppressors. The oppressed will become more fully human if they are willing to fight dehumanization. Dehumanization includes injustice, exploitation, oppression, and violence by the oppressors. Therefore, the system of education is vital in whether the oppressed will be able to move toward humanity or continue to experience dehumanization.

#### b. **Dialogue**

Freire recommends dialogue as a very important method to finish dehumanization. Freire (1970) defined dialogue as "the encounter between humans, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (p.88). In this dialogue, students or participants specifically try to identify what is oppressive and how they can take steps to end this oppression. This dialogue however must be done carefully. Freire (1970) argues that dialogue only occurs if there is "a profound love for the world and for people... love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself" (p. 89). This conceptualization of "dialogical love" is characterized by humility, faith in the people, hope, critical thinking, and, ultimately, solidarity (p. 89–91). Freire mentions that dialogue alone will not help participants become more fully human. Dialogue can become fruitful if it is combined with critical thinking. And in turn critical thinking will bring itself to transformation (Bingham, 2002).

Freire also presents dialogue as a pedagogical process, in which teachers and students actively pursue learning through debate and discussion of sociopolitical realities. For Freire learning is relational, and knowledge can be produced in interaction. Freire (1970) says "Knowledge is not a piece of data, something immobilized, concluded, finished, something to be transferred by one who acquired it to one who still does not possess it" (p. 6). Freire (1970) elaborates on this point:

"I cannot think authentically unless others think. I cannot think for others or without others... Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry [people] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other." (p. 7).

Dialogue allows individuals the opportunity to share knowledge in a supportive and constructive atmosphere.

c. **Critical thinking and problem-posing education**

Freire (1970) believes that dialogue and critical thinking or *conscientization* are correlated. He says, “Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking” (p. 92). To be able to confront oppression, students must first become critical thinkers. Critical thinking refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive parts of reality. Critical thinking includes a process of identifying what is oppressive and how someone is oppressed. It also involves taking action to oppose that which is perceived to be oppressive (Gottesman, 2010).

Freire explains that critical thinking only works in a problem-posing educational framework. In a problem-posing framework, students are asked to use critical thinking skills to examine various problems that occur in their society. Critical thinking does not work in a banking education system because students are primarily asked to memorize fragmented facts. Freire (1970) says “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. 81). Freire believes that a problem-posing framework will not only allow students to become critical thinkers, but reveal that the world is constantly transformed.

d. **Praxis**

When students have become critical thinkers, they will be able to start a process that leads to their humanization. Freire (1970) calls this process *praxis*. He defines *praxis* as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). This process includes continuous reflection and evaluation. In the reflection process students will identify an action and try to carry it out. Freire believes that reflection and action are connected. He says that reflection without action is only verbalism and action without reflection is only activism. Freire tries to highlight that people cannot act without thinking and reflection without action will not change reality (Gottesman, 2010).

Freire (1970) seeks to reconcile the teacher-student contradiction to establish a liberation education. He reasons, “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (p. 72). Freire believes that the core of an education is the idea that teachers are also students and students are also teachers. He thinks that banking education maintains this contradiction through a number of practices and attitudes that oppress society, for example: the teacher teaches and students are taught, and the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing (Gadotti & Torres, 2009).

Freire says that the teachers-students and the students-teachers need to collaborate to recognize and identify the themes to form the program content of education to be applicable and important (Gadotti & Torres, 2009). Freire (1970) argues that the program content of education “must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people” (p. 95). In this view of education, program content must be examined dialogically with the people. Freire (1970) says that the

people feel like “masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades” (p. 124).

e. **Solidarity with the oppressed**

Freire (1970) stresses the importance of an educator to stand at the side of the oppressed in solidarity. He writes “solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture” (p. 49). He argues that “solidarity is born only when the leaders witness to it by their humble, loving, and courageous encounter with the people” (p. 129). In other words, Freire argues that an educator cannot tell the oppressed what they need and how to fight oppression, but must enter the situation as partners in the struggle. Educators must be able to establish communion and relationship with the people and stand at the side of the oppressed. This may be one of the most important parts of an education based on Freirean thought: without solidarity, reflection, and action the oppressed cannot begin to oppose their dehumanization (Bartlett, 2005).

f. **Community psychology leadership informed by Freire**

Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed is not only related to school settings. For Freire, education moves beyond the notion of schooling. School is one important place where education takes place, where men and women both produce and are the product of pedagogical relations. Therefore, Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed can also work in other settings (e.g., neighborhood, church community, community centers, etc.) and can be manifested at the hands of activists, organizers, and community psychologists who have awareness and faith in their communities (Wood, 1994).

Freire suggests community psychologists who want to lead a social change must first go to the people humbly, openly, and ready to listen to their ideas. Freire (1998) argues, “In essence, the correct posture of one who does not consider him- or herself to be the sole possessor of the truth or the passive object of ideology or gossip is the attitude of permanent openness” (p. 119). In relation to this humble openness to learn from the people, Freire emphasizes the importance of dialogue. In this dialogue community psychologists must have intense faith or fundamental confidence in the capabilities of all people to recognize and identify their realities and to transform them, for those who have experienced the impact of oppressive structures and have been working for the improvement of their society. Freire (1970) explains that “faith in people is a requirement for dialogue; the dialogical person believes in others even before he meets them face to face” (p. 91). The absence of this faith generates a condition of dependence that is often created when community psychologists do not engage community capabilities (Mayo, 2007). Freire (1973) describes:

“If a social worker (in the broadest sense) supposes that she/he is the agent of change, it is with difficulty that she/he will see the obvious fact that, if the task is to be really educational and liberating, those with whom she/he works cannot be the objects of her actions. Rather, they too will be agents of change. If social workers cannot perceive this, they will succeed only in manipulating, steering and domesticating. If on the other hand they recognize others, as well as themselves, as agents of change, they will cease to have the exclusive title of the agent of change.” (p. 116).

Thus, with intense faith in the people's capabilities, dialogue centers the contextual expertise of the people as advocates for social transformation. The people are uniquely experienced and strategically positioned to initiate social change directed at humanization (Miller et al., 2011).

Freire inserts the awareness and recognition of history into his idea on social construction. He argues that humble and faith-filled transformative action only rises when community psychologists and the people contextualize their efforts in the complex pasts that characterize their communities' daunting presents. He further describes social and individual identities as being dependent on past experiences (Miller et al., 2011). Freire (1973) says that "human beings are not just what they are, but also what they were" (p. 133). Therefore, community psychologists can only go to the people and work with the people when they know the rich experiences of the people's lives that are unfolded in time.

Community psychologists must understand Freire's idea of critical thinking or conscientization. Critical thinking involves the critical consciousness of the people so that they become more aware of the systems and structures that have affected their lives. By being aware of such conditions, people will understand that their difficulties are not simply of their own choice, but are significantly influenced by unjust policies, norms, and traditions (Miller et al., 2011). Freire (1992) writes:

"A more critical understanding of the situation of oppression does not yet liberate the oppressed. But the revelation is a step in the right direction. Now the person who has this new understanding can engage in a political struggle for the transformation of the concrete conditions in which the oppression prevails." (pp. 30–31).

However, critical thinking alone will never lead people to action to take control of things which determine their lives. Zimmerman (2000) says that the process of empowerment occurs in a relationship with others. Therefore, community psychologists and the oppressed must consider the importance of the sense of collective efficacy for constructive changes. If they have this sense, they will have a stronger sense of community and will be able to establish a foundation for wellness in their community.

Finally, the success of dialogue depends on community psychologists' solidarity with the people. By joining in union with the people, community psychologists can avoid paternalistic efforts to tell the oppressed what they need how to fight oppression. Freire (1970) says, "Solidarity is born only when the leaders witness to it by their humble, loving, and courageous encounter with the people (p. 129). This solidarity is cemented in recognition that community psychologists and the people are immersed in systems of oppression that dehumanize both the oppressed and their oppressors and that humanization can only be fulfilled through dialogue (Miller et al., 2011).

## 4 Conclusion

Freirean dialogue represents a contribution to the leadership conversation in its portrayal of dialogue as a dialectic relationship between the oppressed and the oppressors. It depicts community psychologists as being engaged in people's difficulties. Their solidarity is cemented by sharing a common fate - one group's humanization is influenced and, in turn, followed by the others. This view counters ideas of educational leadership which

ask a leader to empower others. The educational leadership emphasizes facilitative and collaborative leadership which assumes that power is something that leaders share with others.

Freirean dialogue also discusses the importance role of love, humility, faith, and solidarity. Freire (1998) says that without these characteristics, progressive pedagogical practice is not possible. He writes, "Progressive pedagogical practice is possible if there are certain virtues, such as a generous loving heart, tolerance, humility, love of life, a disposition to welcome change, perseverance in the struggle, a refusal of determinism, and openness to justice" (p. 108). Progressive leadership practice also depends on love, humility, solidarity, and the like.

## References

- Bartlett, L. (2005). Dialogue, knowledge, and teacher-student relations: Freirean pedagogy in theory and practice. *Comparative Education Review, 49*, 344-363.
- Bingham, C. (2002). On Paulo Freire's debt to psychoanalysis: Authority on the side of freedom. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 21*, 447-464.
- Gadotti, M., & Torres, C. (2009). Paulo Freire: education for development. *Development & Change, 40*, 1255-1267.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum Publishing.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1992). *Pedagogy of hope*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gottesman, I. (2010). Sitting in the waiting room: Paulo Freire and the critical turn in the field of education. *Educational Studies, 46*, 376-399.
- Mayo, P. (2007). Critical approaches to education in the work of Lorenzo Milani and Paulo Freire. *Studies in Philosophy & Education, 26*, 525-544.
- Miller, P. M., Brown, T., & Hopson, R. (2011). Centering love, hope, and trust in the community: Transformative urban leadership informed by Paulo Freire. *Urban Education, 46*, 1079-1099.
- Wood, R. L. (1994). Faith in action: Religious resources for political success in three congregations. *Sociology of Religion, 55*, 397-417.
- Zimmerman, M. A. (2000). Empowerment Theory: Psychological, Organizational, and Community Levels of Analysis. In J. Rappaport & E. Seidman (Eds.), *Handbook of Community Psychology*. (pp. 43-63). Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York, NY.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

