

The Relevance of Paulo Freire's Liberation Education to the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Indonesia

Ryan Juppenny^{1*}, Hadi Cahyono², Singkir Hudijono³, Ardhana Januar Mahardhani⁴

Abstract

Education in Paulo Freire's view has a great urgency as a means of liberation from social, political, and economic injustice. In the context of globalization, education is often used as a means of oppression that makes individuals passive and not critical of social reality. This article examines the concept of Paulo Freire's education, which is oriented to humanization and critical awareness (conscientization) to fight dehumanization. Freire rejected the education model "bank style," which only positioned students as passive objects, and offered a dialogical approach as a solution to create interactive, critical, and relevant learning spaces in social contexts. The method used in this article is the study of literature, by examining various books, journals, and articles related to Freire's thought. This study found that liberating education involved dialogue as the core of learning, where the teacher and students both acted as subjects. This process builds critical awareness that allows individuals to understand and change the structure of oppression in society. Education must be relevant to the life experience of students, allowing them to develop critical thinking to understand the root of the problem and find solutions. The results of the discussion show the relevance of the concept of Freire to the free curriculum of learning in Indonesia, which emphasizes the freedom and autonomy of students in exploring the potential of. This article recommends the application of dialogue and reflection-based education as an approach to overcoming the challenges of globalization and improving the quality of education. Thus, education is not only a means of transferring knowledge but also a tool to empower individuals as agents of social change.

Keywords: critical consciousness; dialogic approach; independent curriculum; liberating education; Paulo Freire

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¹³⁴²Universitas Muhammadiyah Ponorogo, Indonesia

*Author Correspondent: ryanjuppenny@gmail.com

Introduction

Education plays a crucial role in improving the quality of human beings and the culture of a nation, as it enhances students' spiritual, cognitive, and social abilities in a planned manner. Various traditions of educational concepts, from the Greek (pedagogik), Roman (educare), German (Erziehung), to the local Javanese concept (*panggulawentah*), demonstrate that education is defined as the process of humanizing humans through the development of natural potential and the formation of culturally appropriate character. In Indonesia, education is understood as a deliberate effort to develop the capabilities of learners comprehensively, as explained in the Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language and the ideas of Ki Hajar Dewantara. The importance of this research lies in the condition of national education, which has not been able to resolve the problems of uneven quality, lack of equity, and low critical thinking skills of students in the global era (Dahyanti et al., 2025; Kurniawati, 2022).

This research focuses on Paulo Freire's educational philosophy, which highlights the idea of liberatory education (pedagogy of the oppressed) and its relationship to the educational situation in Indonesia, particularly within the framework of the Freedom to Learn policy (Mahardhani, 2025). The scope of discussion includes the concept of dialogue-based education, the process of humanization, critical awareness, and learning interactions as intersubject relationships between teachers and students. This study utilizes Freire's thinking as a basis for

analysis to understand how education can act as an instrument of social transformation and empowerment, rather than merely as a mechanism for the reproduction of hegemonic knowledge.

Recent studies indicate that research on the relevance of Freire's thought in contemporary education is growing. According to Rafid et al. (2025) liberation education is aimed at developing critical awareness as a prerequisite for social change. Conversely, research by Rahmi et al. (2025) reveals that gaps in facilities, teacher technological capabilities, and educational access remain major obstacles to the implementation of liberation education in Indonesia. Globally, research by Ncube & Tawanda (2025) confirms that Freire's pedagogy remains crucial in addressing structural injustices in digital education. Recent literature on Freedom to Learn (*Merdeka Belajar*) (Istianah et al., 2023; Widiyono et al., 2021) also emphasizes learning changes that lead to student independence and creativity.

However, these publications have several weaknesses, particularly the lack of integration between Freire's concept of liberatory education and the implementation of empirical policies related to Indonesian education. Much of the research is normative-descriptive, without discussing how dialogical and consciousness-raising concepts can be applied in school curricula and learning practices. Furthermore, previous studies rarely systematically connect Freire's thinking with the *Merdeka Belajar* policy, thus failing to provide a comprehensive conceptual analysis model that bridges theory and practice (Kamil & Ratnasari, 2023; Nugraha et al., 2024). This research gap highlights the need for research that connects Freire's thinking with contemporary educational policy practices in Indonesia.

Research in this area was conducted to explain the relevance of Paulo Freire's thoughts on education to the concept of Freedom to Learn as a transformation of Indonesian education. This research is novel because it elaborates efforts to integrate the principles of dialogical liberation education, humanization, and critical awareness with independence-based learning practices and innovation in the implementation of current national policies. This principle is important considering the need for independent, critical, and adaptive self-development for students facing global challenges such as digitalization, cultural abrasion, and educational disparities. Therefore, this research contributes theoretically and practically by mapping the relevance of Freire's concepts in the current context of Indonesian education.

Method

The research method applied in this journal is formulated with a library research approach (Hamzah, 2019; Pahleviannur et al., 2022), aiming to analyze in-depth the thoughts of Paulo Freire and their relevance to the concept of *Merdeka Belajar* in Indonesia. The objects of this research include Paulo Freire's original works, national education policies related to *Merdeka Belajar*, and the latest scientific publications reviewing liberation education and educational transformation. Data were obtained through documentation methods by searching books, scientific articles, national and international journals, and related policy documents using academic databases such as Google Scholar and DOAJ. The research tool is a literature analysis paper used to identify the main themes, concepts, and findings from each source. The collected data are then analyzed using content analysis and thematic analysis, resulting in a grouping of concepts that align with the research focus. This research design allows researchers to formulate a comprehensive and reliable theoretical synthesis and provides in-depth insights into the relationship between liberation education and the implementation of *Merdeka Belajar*.

Result and Discussion

Intellectual Biography and the Foundations of Paulo Freire's Thought

Paulo Freire was born in Recife, Brazil, on September 19, 1921, into a lower-middle-class family. However, the 1929 global economic crisis plunged his family into poverty and affected his access to education. This social reality showed him how poverty hindered educational opportunities, while some of his friends were forced to leave school to work. This life experience shaped Freire's belief that education is not only a process of transferring knowledge, but also a tool of liberation that enables individuals to understand the realities of oppression and take action to change them. Recent literature has shown that Freire's biographical experiences were the primary foundation for the birth of a pedagogy of liberation focused on the practice of social transformation (Iqbal, 2024), which subsequently provided a new direction for critical educational thought globally.

Freire's intellectual evolution is closely linked to various schools of thought that influenced him, such as the personalism of Emmanuel Mounier, the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, the Marxism of Karl Marx, and liberation theology in the context of Latin American Christianity. This thinking gave rise to a view of education that makes individuals active subjects with an awareness of structural oppression in history. Contemporary studies describe the synthesis of Freire's thought as a paradigm of radical humanization, emphasizing the importance of freedom through dialogue and collective action (Nadlir & Zamzami, 2023). Therefore, his approach is not merely theoretical, but also oriented towards social practice based on the realities of neglected communities.

This view was further solidified when Freire directly participated in the world of education, starting from his experience as a Portuguese teacher to his involvement in the literacy program in Pernambuco. His success in teaching 300 sugarcane farmers to read and write in 45 days marked the beginning of national recognition for his teaching method, which then motivated the formation of thousands of cultural groups in Brazil. The military coup of 1964 led to Freire's imprisonment and exile, but his exile in Chile actually broadened his views and produced monumental works such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, now a key reference in the critical education movement. Recent research has shown that Freire's contributions serve as the basis for transformational education in Latin America, Africa, and in postcolonial educational contexts (Corbett & Guilherme, 2021).

Freire's legacy of thought continues to influence current educational reforms, with a dialogical approach that positions students as subjects, and through educational direction that leads to critical awareness and social liberation. His consistent advocacy for educational rights for oppressed groups, his emphasis on simplicity, and his ethical struggle have made him a key figure in global critical pedagogy. Today, Freire's thought is once again crucial in addressing educational injustice, unequal access to digital literacy, and the prevalence of authoritarian educational practices. Recent literature suggests that Freire's pedagogy can be another approach to addressing global educational challenges, particularly in efforts to democratize learning spaces and empower communities (Cortina & Winter, 2021; Iqbal, 2024), thus making his contributions remain relevant today.

Paulo Freire's Thoughts on Education as a Tool of Liberation

Paulo Freire is one of the most influential figures in critical education, owing to his belief that education should not simply be a means of transferring knowledge but also a means of liberation for oppressed communities. His critique of the traditional education system, which he called "banking" education, suggests that students are viewed as empty vessels, simply receiving information from instructors without the opportunity for critical thinking or active engagement. This model is considered to maintain oppressive social structures and diminish students' awareness of the social realities they experience. Freire observed that this type of education system not only hinders students' intellectual development but also fosters a culture of silence that makes it difficult for them to recognize the forms of oppression they experience (Mahardhani & Utami, 2022)

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire offers an alternative through liberation-focused education, namely dialogical education, which allows teachers and students to learn from each other. This approach views learners as subjects who can develop knowledge through active participation in their social realities. Recent studies on critical education show that dialogical learning can improve critical thinking skills, social participation, and awareness of structural injustices around learners (Cui & Teo, 2021). Education, from this perspective, is not limited to cognitive aspects but aims for transformational action that encourages social change.

The concept of education as a means of liberation is based on fostering critical awareness. Students are encouraged to thoroughly examine information, question social norms, and identify the root causes of injustice in society. Freire asserted that without critical awareness, education merely serves as a tool for reproducing unjust social structures. The process of conscientization is essential to liberation theory, as through this process, individuals can recognize the connection between personal experiences and larger social structures (Cortina & Winter, 2021). Education further serves as a medium for enhancing reflective skills and planned social action.

The execution of emancipatory education necessitates a change in the teacher's role from total authority to a guide. Educators are now seen not just as the primary source of information but as collaborators in the learning journey who promote students' active participation in building knowledge together. This model shows effectiveness in establishing a pertinent, democratic, and significant learning space. Recent studies reveal that dialogic methods can improve learning independence and boost student engagement in the educational process (Ahmad & Inamullah, 2024)

In the Indonesian setting, Freire's concepts are highly significant in the execution of the Merdeka Curriculum, officially launched in 2022 to address poor results in the 2019 PISA evaluation. This curriculum highlights adaptability, student independence, and the opportunity for learners to cultivate their abilities based on their requirements and surroundings (Hewi & Shaleh, 2020). The parallels between the Merdeka Curriculum and Freire's ideas are evident in their common aims of humanization and empowering students. Nevertheless, in reality, the execution still encounters difficulties like inconsistent access to resources, varying teacher quality, and a learning environment that continues to focus on the teacher. These factors suggest that emancipatory education still needs more robust structural initiatives to be fully achieved within the Indonesian education system

Dialogue, Critical Consciousness, and Humanization in Liberation Education

Dialogue is the most fundamental element in Freire's concept of education. He rejected unidirectional education because dialogue allows educators and students to construct knowledge together in an equal relationship. Dialogue is not just an exchange of words, but a communication process that encompasses love, humility, trust, critical thinking, and hope. Without conversation, education is merely a verbal activity that does not bring about significant change. Recent literature shows that dialogue in education can strengthen social relationships, enhance conceptual understanding, and support experiential learning (Darsan et al., 2025; Mercer et al., 2019)

Through dialogue, students develop critical awareness, namely the ability to analyze and understand the social, political, cultural, and economic realities that impact their lives. Critical awareness is not merely reflection, but a combination of reflection and action that drives social change. Freire emphasized that human consciousness is dynamic and can grow through a continuous process of awareness-raising. Recent studies indicate that education based on critical awareness can improve students' reflective thinking, social engagement, and problem-solving skills (Firdaus et al., 2024)

Critical consciousness emerges through three stages: magical consciousness, naive consciousness, and critical consciousness. These three stages reflect an individual's transformation from an inability to understand the social order to the ability to recognize the

sources of oppression and take action to change it. People with a magical consciousness tend to accept reality without understanding the structural relationships behind social issues, while naive consciousness begins to question the situation but is not yet able to change it. Critical consciousness demonstrates the ability to understand reality structurally and act collectively for change (Campbell et al., 2025). This process is crucial to understanding how education can be a means of sustainable liberation.

The concepts of dialogue and critical awareness further lead to Freire's primary goal of education: humanization. Humanization refers to the process of making humans more human, enabling them to fully understand their existence through freedom of thought and action. Humanist education aims to eliminate structural oppression and empower individuals as agents of change in society. Recent educational literature confirms that humanist education plays a significant role in developing independent, critical learners who can contribute to social development (Putu et al., 2023; Ramadan et al., 2023).

Humanization is only realized through a dialectical process of awareness between the individual and their social reality. Education that relies solely on verbalism will not be able to develop students' creativity, while education that links theory with practice enables students to understand the meaning behind reality and act transformatively. In the context of Indonesian education, the value of humanization has begun to be implemented through the Independent Curriculum, which provides freedom of learning, potential development, and autonomy for students. However, its implementation still faces structural obstacles such as inequality in educational facilities, teacher quality, and a learning culture that still focuses on memorization, so the value of liberation has not been fully achieved (Mahardhani, 2023). This indicates that the integration of Freire's thinking still requires policy strengthening and a paradigm shift in national education practices.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis in this article, it can be concluded that education, according to Paulo Freire, plays a significant role as a tool of liberation that can shape individuals into active subjects in facing oppressive social, political, and economic conditions. By rejecting the banking-style educational model and adopting a dialogical approach, education is seen as an interactive process that stimulates critical awareness and encourages students to identify the roots of social problems and act in a solution-oriented manner. Liberating education makes students' life experiences the foundation for learning, making the educational process relevant, useful, and empowering. The results of this article indicate that Freire's educational thinking is highly relevant to the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Indonesia, which emphasizes freedom in learning, student autonomy, and the development of maximum potential. Thus, education functions not only as a means of transferring knowledge but also as a tool for social transformation that can create critical, independent, and empowered individuals who can become agents of change in society.

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