

Education and liberation of the oppressed



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Paulo Freire (2000) in his book entitled “ Pedagogy of the Oppressed” addresses the issue of a class system. A system of the have and have not, the former being the “ oppressor” and the latter being the “ oppressed” (Freire, 2000 p. 47). This paper attempts to examine the task of educating and liberating the oppressed youths in Georgia. In doing so we examine the thinking of the oppressed and reflect on the role of schools in perpetuating the class system, in particular we look at the banking system. We also discuss other tactics that are used by the oppressor to maintain the status quo. These include: conquest, divide and rule, manipulation and cultural invasion. We will also discuss tools that can be implemented in the classroom that will allow our students to engage in critical thinking and action what Freire refers to as praxis. Lastly, we discuss the steps necessary for a revolution to take place. Once the revolution occurs, the educational gap that exists between the oppressed and the oppressor will be eliminated.

Education and the Liberation of the Oppressed

According to Freire (2000), the oppressors have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. He states that the oppressors use science and technology as their tool of oppression. In today’s society, mathematics is also a tool of oppression. This is because mathematics is just as much a gatekeeper as science and technology. In Georgia, all the colleges require mathematics for entrance, and jobs in science and technology fields also require a high level of competency in mathematics. Freire (2000) argues, and we agree, that the oppressed often believe what is said about them, and as a result they display behavior that reinforces those stereotypes. They are often told they are “ good for nothing, and are incapable of learning

anything-they are sick, lazy, and unproductive” (p. 63). We believe that the internalization of these stereotypes coupled with their oppressive status can create a sense of learned helplessness in the oppressed. If the students feel they cannot effect change, or that they have no power over their education, they might give up. Basically, they will not challenge themselves intellectually, and are more prone to drop out of school. This is evident in the large gap between the graduation rate of minority students and white students in Georgia. Staple & Dodd (2009) article on the high school graduation rate in Georgia observed that African-Americans graduation rate was 72. 6 percent and the rate for Hispanics was 69 percent. Those rates showed improvement but still lagged behind whites, who had an 82. 1 percent graduation rate, and the state average. These figures are troubling, but what’s even more troubling is the fact that many of our minority students who remain in school usually prefer more teacher directed instruction. One way to remedy that situation is to incorporate task-oriented activities in our lessons, rather than worksheets. That will ensure that students are not being spoon fed, but rather challenged to think. This will also help change the students’ view that the teacher is “ the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen” (Freire, 2000 p. 63).

The statistics mentioned before poses the question: can minority students in Georgia perform at the same level as white students or are they genetically wired to fail? We would argue that minority students are fully capable of performing at the same level as white students. In fact, we believe that the existing social and political structures help to perpetuate the achievement gap between the minority students and the dominant group. In order to

eliminate the achievement gap, the oppressed must first acknowledge that they are oppressed and seek their liberation through “ reflection and action” (Freire, 2000 p. 67). Once the oppressed realize they are at a disadvantage because of their socioeconomic status, they can then mobilize and effect change through lobbying their Congressmen. In order for equal learning to take place, equal opportunity must be given. It follows that the local government has a major role to play in bridging the educational gap between the races. Firstly, by providing the poorer schools with more funding for better technology and textbooks, the government will be assisting in shrinking the gap. Also by recruiting and maintaining highly qualified teachers in these at risk schools, the government will also be leveling the playing field for these students.

Once the students are given equal access to quality education the next question that we need to ask is, how do we educate the students in this oppressed group? Freire (2000) argues that education and liberation of the oppressed begins with the students. They must believe they can transform their situation in order for education to occur. He further argues that this belief will stem from them having positive role models within their own group. Therefore educators from within the oppressed community will play a significant role in reshaping the minds of the youths. A good example of this occurred when one of our group members was asked if her husband is a drug dealer because of the size of her diamond. This was a teachable moment which she seized, as she was able to share with them that her husband was in fact a director of a company. This was in contrast to their thinking that in order to be black and successful, you have to be a drug dealer, musician or

an athlete. This opened the door for dialogue and critical thinking, because the question was asked of the students, “ why do you think that way, and is that a valid assumption in light of the new information?”

Banking System: The Role of Education

Freire (2000) examines the teacher-student relationship and its fundamentally narrative character. Education is used as a method of oppression by the oppressors, with all the control and power being in the hands of the teacher. To him, students are treated like containers (receptacles) waiting to be filled with information by the teacher. This is similar to the more “ old school” style of teaching used in some classrooms today. The teacher lectures the class for an hour and then the students are expected to retain the information. Do students learn in this manner? According to Freire (2000), the answer is no, and this is by design and one of the methods used by the oppressor to keep the oppressed down. He compares the relationship to that of a narrative subject (teacher) and a patient or listening objects (students). Students only mechanically memorize narrated content. Education is an act of depositing. Teachers only deposit information into these receptacles and no learning is actually taking place. This practice is called the “ banking concept of education” (p. 72). This method hinders the creative nature of students and the only knowledge they gain is that which the teacher gives them. This allows the oppressor to control what information is being passed from the oppressor to the oppressed.

Freire (2000) observes that:

<https://assignbuster.com/education-and-liberation-of-the-oppressed/>

“ But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of

creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system.

For apart from

inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only

through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful

inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.” (p. 72)

This quote refers to the process of oppression by use of the “ banking” concept of education. The information that is given to students is controlled and regulated so they are limited when it comes to their individual creativity. If the students are not allowed to create or think independently from the system, we believe they will lose control of their own future. Considering and operating under the assumption that “ knowledge is power,” students have only the power that is given to them and become a pawn to the oppressors to be moved according to their liking. As mathematics educators, we believe that it is our job to facilitate classroom discourses that involve more open-ended questions, so that students can see that there is more than one solution to a problem. Incorporating some history of mathematics concepts in lessons will also be helpful, because students can see how others have tackled problems in the past, and how through their critical thinking and

persistence they were able to discover the existence of things they did not know existed, such as rational numbers. They will also have an appreciation for other forms of mathematics, and see how mathematics has practical applications in certain societies. This might lead them to find other applications of mathematics in their own society.

According to Freire (2000), “ In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry.” (p. 72). In Freire’s (2000) view, the teacher presents himself to the students as the knowledgeable one and the students are completely ignorant. The banking concept limits the creative power of students and serves the interest of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed. Educators regulate the way the world “ enters into” the students. The banking method allows teacher and student to become subjects to the oppressive system. From experience we have learned that knowledge is not something that is simply bestowed on the ignorant. We believe it can be constructed, discovered, created, or generated in a number of ways.

For example, teachers can allow students to explore mathematical concepts through use of student-centered activities, such as group projects and small group activities that allow for the exchange of ideas, and use manipulatives. For example in geometry, the teacher can use geo-sticks to teach properties of congruent triangles. Through constructing their own triangles the students will discover the properties on their own, and formulate their own

understanding of the theories. With that said, we do not believe that students should be treated like ignorant vessels waiting to be filled by the “almighty powerful” teacher. We should allow them to discover knowledge, we should let them express their creativity and assist in their own learning. The teacher should serve as a facilitator of knowledge and allow students to be creative and discover knowledge. Using this method allows students to retain knowledge and generalize it to other aspects of their life. The oppressor does not want this to occur because this would create a society of individual thinkers, rather than pawns in an oppressive system.

According to Freire (2000), in order for this type of environment to come about, there must be liberation of the oppressed from the oppressor. He refers to this process as “liberation of education,” (p. 79) where the solution begins with the teacher-student contradiction. Teacher and students become simultaneously teachers and students. The teachers are able to learn from the students and the students learn from the teachers. These would create an environment in which the student eventually is capable of controlling the amount of knowledge they obtain and has some control over his or her learning. This can be achieved through allowing students to journal their thought processes as they are exposed to the new concepts. By reading the journals, the teacher can be exposed to other ways of tackling the problem, and may ask the students to share their different methods with the class. This produces a sense of pride and confidence in the students, who would no longer feel dependent on the teacher to bestow knowledge upon them. The students will feel free to create and learn and not be limited by any teacher, or any system. The students would eventually become as capable and

knowledgeable as the teacher and therefore would be afforded the same level of respect as the teacher.

Tools of Oppression in the society

Freire's ideology is not limited to the field of education only, but also extends to the larger society. According to Freire (2000) the equality and mutual respect between the oppressed and the oppressor is not evident in our society because the oppressors have implemented certain techniques to prevent that from happening. One such tool is that of anti-dialogue. By preventing the oppressed from engaging in dialogue, they eliminate the possibility of an uprising and thereby ensure their domination over the oppressed people. The author points out several anti-dialogical actions. The first is Conquest. Conquest is taking and keeping physical and psychological control over the oppressed. Freire (2000) argues that "The conqueror imposes his objectives on the vanquished, and makes of them his possession" (p. 159). He observes that myths being deposited are indispensable to the status quo. We find this quite alarming as this applies to today's society, where the top 1% of the population in the United States controls 95% of the wealth. One myth that has been deposited and is largely accepted by our society is that, "if you work hard you will be able to attain the wealth of society" (p. 139). Other myths mentioned include; the myth of industriousness of the oppressors, the laziness and dishonesty of the oppressed, and the myth of natural inferiority of the latter and superiority of the former. Of course, these myths exist in our current society and are perpetuated by and communicated through mass media outlets and the educational system.

<https://assignbuster.com/education-and-liberation-of-the-oppressed/>

Another oppressive action that the author talks about is Divide and Rule. The oppressor uses division to keep control over the oppressed. Two things come to mind- First, I think about how the oppressed group is categorized into different economic and social classes, as well as divided by ethnic groups. This separation has caused a lack of unity and totality in the minority community. There is not a total view, but rather views taken up by specific causes and groups. This deepens the rift in the minority community and keeps minorities divided, and thus oppressed. Case and point, one of us grew up in an urban community where drugs and gang violence were rampant. The on-going flow of drugs into his neighborhood has kept his neighborhood divided and distraught. The impact on his neighborhood has been devastating. This is said because many black businesses left the neighborhood thereby reducing the job opportunities available for minorities. Another consequence is that many minority students in his neighborhood became gang members. Instead of rallying as a community to drive the drug dealers out, many middle class families have moved to the suburbs to provide a better life for their families. This decision enabled the oppressor to use the divide-and-conquer technique to maintain the oppressive status quo.

The next anti-dialogical action that the author speaks about is Manipulation. According to Freire, “ One of the methods of manipulation is to isolate and inoculate individuals with the bourgeois appetite for personal success” (Freire, p. 147). Manipulation is accomplished when individuals from the dominant classes make agreements or “ deals” with individuals in the dominated class to represent the interests of the oppressors at the expense of the oppressed. These individuals are considered leaders by the lower

classes and are influential. Freire describes these populist leaders as “amphibians” (p. 150), people who interact with and have achieved a comfort level with both elements of society. The oppressors use populist leaders to manipulate the people, often without knowledge that he/she is being used. Authentic revolution can only be obtained with leaders who serve the needs of the people and refuse to be bought off by the elites. In other words, true revolutionary leaders cannot serve two masters. This brings to mind minority spokespersons today who are lining their pockets from big corporations to manipulate the people to buy products and be consumers of these corporations who do not hire minorities or invest in the minority communities.

The last characteristic of anti-dialogical action is Cultural Invasion. Cultural invasion attacks the culture of the oppressed. The oppressors mold the patterns and beliefs and the way of life of the oppressed. The oppressed no longer see an outlook of their own but of an outlook of which the oppressors create. The author says “cultural invasion is on one hand an instrument of domination, and on the other, the result of domination” (p. 159).

Revolutionary leaders cannot use methods that the oppressors use to dominate or they become part of the same oppression.

Process of Liberation: Praxis

In the process of educational liberation, Freire (2000) demands that social and political organization be dialogical and not authoritarian. This is vital to the preservation of authentic freedom at all times. In discussing dialogue, Freire (2000) describes two indivisible dimensions of dialogue i. e. reflection

and actions (praxis). He sees this kind of dialogue as a medium that the oppressed can use to call for action in humanizing their situation. He urges the dialoguers (oppressed) to engage in critical thinking that constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved. He describes critical thinking as thinking that does not separate itself from action, always perceiving reality as a process/ transformation rather than a static entity. He contrasts critical thinking with naïve thinking in which the thinker settles for a normalized “ today” (p. 92) thus creating and aiding oppression.

In applying Freire’s (2000) approach to today’s society requires that we first identify with the forms (often very subtle) that oppression takes. Banking concepts of education, but one of the examples of current teaching practice that is anti-dialogical, produces a lesser community of students who opt for the right answer at all times instead of engaging in the process of searching for solution. Eurocentric model of knowledge is another form of subtle oppression. Frankenstein & Powell (1997) observes a Eurocentric model of knowledge widely taught in our schools. This model narrows our view of what is considered mathematically significant and who is capable of owning mathematical ideas. This has then distorted excluded, marginalized and trivialized mathematical contributions of the oppressed, women and men from other world’s culture. The Eurocentric model recognizes their mathematics as “ academic” (p. 26) mathematics. A culture of silence then results where the oppressed settles for the status quo; a situation of exploitation perpetuated by lack of awareness, nihilism, apathy and even fear of freedom. The oppressed then find themselves submerged in their situation and as long as they remain so “ they cannot become engaged in

the struggle for their own liberation” (Freire 2000 , pp. 27-28). To liberate the oppressed, there must be participation in the critical and reflective action. This is a challenge to our curriculum designers, textbook publishers, and policy makers to examine the current mathematics education curriculum in the light of producing a community of critical thinkers capable of challenging the commonly held assumptions and values about what students should learn.

In today’s society Freire (2000) would be challenging our research communities and knowledge production institutions to create critical forms of research that call current ideologies into question and initiate action (praxis) in the course of social justice. Critical inquiry in mathematics education research communities should trouble the commonly held values and assumptions, challenge conventional social structures as well as engage in social actions in the interest of social justice. Freire’s (2000) ideology of critical inquiry keeps the spotlight on power relationships within our society and seeks to expose the forces of domination and injustice. Stinson et. al (2009) observes a sense of empowerment on the part of teachers participating in critical mathematics pedagogy class. Teachers felt that critical theory should be an important part of their classroom practice and felt like they were able to steer away from the traditional mathematics pedagogy that they themselves endured.

Critical inquiry into our current education system for example will additionally call for us to ask several questions. Are the current Georgia Performance Standards benefiting every child in Georgia, or are they structured to preserve the status quo and privilege the institutions that are

<https://assignbuster.com/education-and-liberation-of-the-oppressed/>

well resourced and funded? What are the power relations behind that implementation of standardized curriculum? Is there a place for critical thinking that all students can benefit from? Who are the benefactors of such decisions and what power relations are in play in the policy making? How has the implementation of standardized assessments played a role in addressing the issue of social injustice and inequalities in our societies today? Critical thinking inquiry calls for us to examine these issues especially when it involves policies and programs “ we must never provide the people with programs which have little or nothing to do with their own preoccupations, doubts, hopes, and fears- programs which at times in fact increase the fears of the oppressed consciousness” (Freire, 2000 p. 96).

Conclusion and Suggestions

Overall we find what Freire is saying to be quite interesting. It is only through continued dialogue, education, organization that a true revolution can take place. Despite the potential challenges of trying to implement Freire’s ideology in a classroom setting, Pedagogy of the Oppressed is an inspirational read for a mathematics educator who wishes to promote critical thinking in their classroom or a teacher who wishes to facilitate a transformative classroom norm in a community of practice that wishes to counteract the inequities that exist in our society today. In order to effect change, teacher within the oppressed group will also be instrumental in the reeducation of the oppressed youths, because they serve as testimonials that through hard work, they can achieve their goals and rise above their circumstances. These teachers are now given the task of building self-esteem, pride, self-confidence. This can only be achieved through building a

<https://assignbuster.com/education-and-liberation-of-the-oppressed/>

strong rapport with students and parents alike, and not giving up when the task seems too much to bear. Loads of praise and positive reinforcements will also go a long way. It is important to note that true liberation does not occur in patches, but as a collective whole, through reflection, critical thinking and political action.