

From Literacy to Liberation: Reimagining Nigeria's Educational Reform through Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

The proof of sustainable development of any nation lies wholesomely, on the kind of education they practice; and the way it is articulated and presented to the citizens. The contrast between education and transformation in Nigeria serves as the precursor to our look at Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy as an alternative to 'banking system' of education and a way of unearthing the dividends of quality and holistic education in Nigeria. Education is a social process; education is growth; education is not a preparation for life but is life itself. This paper explored the freeing potential of dialogical, problem-posing education to address issues of inequality, rote learning, and civic disengagement plaguing Nigeria's formal education system. By critiquing traditional classroom practices and emphasizing humanization, critical consciousness, and praxis, the paper aligns Freirean pedagogy with Nigeria's national education policy goals and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7. It demonstrates how Freire's theory can help shape reforms in curriculum design, teacher training, and community participation, fostering inclusive, culturally relevant, and democratically engaged learners. The paper concludes with recommendations to integrate critical pedagogy into Nigeria's education system to produce a citizenry equipped for transformative development.

Keywords: Banking model, Critical pedagogy, Learning poverty, Nigeria System of Education, Paulo Freire, SDG 4.7

INTRODUCTION

The education sector in Nigeria has, for a long time, been beleaguered with issues of equity, relevance, and quality. According to Chris Onalo (2021), President and Chief Executive Officer, Postgraduate School of Credit and Financial Management (PSCFM), and also the founding Registrar, National Institute of Credit Administration (NICA), about 95 percent of Nigerian graduates are not employable because they do not meet up with the reality of the workplace and market demands (Ayodele, Adegoke, Kajimo -Shakantu, & Olaoye, 2021).

Reforms in education such as shift from the 6-3-3-4 model to a 12-year basic education system, improve technical and vocational training, integrate digital literacy and establish policies like the national anti-bullying policy, have been a recurring theme since independence in October 1960. The reforms instituted intermittently were aimed at improving the quality of education, making it accessible to all citizens, and, aligning it with national development goals. Despite the country's rapid development, Nigeria's education system remains stagnant, with a focus on mere transmission of knowledge rather than engaging students in critical thinking (Ejiofor, 2024).

The traditional model of rote learning, hierarchical structures, and rigid curricula is yet to address the dilemma of poverty, civic disengagement, and socioeconomic inequality. The paper questions why Nigeria continues to use a "banking" approach to education, where students are seen as passive recipients of information rather than active learners (Okai-Ugbaje, Ardzejewska, & Imran, 2020).

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy becomes a liberating platform for rethinking and restructuring how education is being done in the country. His emphasis on consciousness-raising, dialogical learning, and transformative praxis positions education as a tool for freedom and participatory citizenship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy: A Revolutionary Praxis for Humanization and Educational Transformation

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy is a basic evaluation of traditional education systems and an advocacy for transformative learning grounded in critical consciousness. Developed during the socio-political unrest of mid-20th-century Latin America, Freire's philosophy came as a response to the deeply entrenched inequalities of capitalist and colonial structures (Freire, 1970/2018). His theory rests on the assertion that education is never neutral; it either functions as an instrument of liberation or domination. His ideas are connected to philosophies such as existentialism, Marxism, and liberation theology; for instance, the existentialist emphasis on human freedom and agency is evident in Freire's insistence on learners as co-creators of knowledge. Drawing from Karl Marx, he viewed education as part of the ideological superstructure that sustains hegemonic power relations. Education, in Freire's view, is a political act (Darder, 2017).

In his work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970/2018) condemns what he terms the "banking model" of education, where students are treated as passive repositories of knowledge, and instead proposes a dialogical, problem-posing model that engages learners as conscious beings capable of transforming their realities. This shift is very important for achieving authentic humanization. Freire's view the notion of humanization as the central goal of education. He contends that oppressive systems dehumanize both the oppressed and the oppressors; hence, education must be a vehicle for reclaiming humanity and agency. Dialogue, in Freirean pedagogy, is not mere conversation but a collaborative, horizontal exchange rooted in respect, love, and humility. It is through dialogical encounters that learners and teachers become co-intentional subjects in the process of meaning-making and social transformation (Freire, 1970/2018; Shor & Freire, 1987).

A cornerstone of Freire's pedagogy is the development of critical consciousness—the ability to perceive and act upon social, political, and economic contradictions. This awareness leads to praxis: reflection and action directed at transforming oppressive conditions. This involves students actively engaging in inquiry and analysis of real-world problems (Freire, 1970/2018). This form of education democratizes the classroom and transforms it into a space of liberation and critical inquiry (McLaren, 2020). Freire's pedagogy is fundamentally praxis a unity of theory and action. Praxis involves not only understanding the world but engaging in deliberate action to change it. For Freire, any educational theory separated from social practice is incomplete. Teachers must be political agents committed to social justice, and education must be embedded within broader struggles for equity and democracy (Giroux, 2011).

Freirean pedagogy remains profoundly relevant, especially in postcolonial societies still largely inundated with the legacies of colonial education systems. In contexts like Nigeria, India, and Brazil, education often reflects Eurocentric epistemologies that marginalize indigenous knowledge systems. Freire's emphasis on cultural relevance and dialogical engagement offers a powerful framework for decolonizing education (Andreotti, 2011). Moreover, the global rise of neoliberalism and standardized testing regimes has resurrected the banking model under the guise of efficiency

and accountability. In such contexts, Freire's vision of an emancipatory, dialogic education is more urgent than ever (Darder, 2017).

While widely celebrated, Freire's work is not without criticism. Feminist scholars have questioned his gender-neutral language and the masculine tone of liberation discourse. Others argue that Freirean pedagogy may be idealistic in under-resourced or authoritarian settings. Nonetheless, scholars have extended and adapted his work, integrating intersectional and decolonial perspectives (Hooks, 1994; Andreotti, 2011).

In Nigeria, the banking model is vividly seen in her overcrowded classrooms, centralized and hence restrictive curricula, and exam-driven instruction. The obsession for standardized testing, overdependence on rote memorization, and poor infrastructure results in learning poverty for many learners across the country. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is simply and squarely a 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only insofar as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits is concerned (Onyebuchi, 2025). Freire directly challenges this logic, urging instead for an education that fosters dialogue, reflection, and action. It encourages educational reform that is bottom-up, culturally relevant, and community centered.

According to Freire, the humanistic facade of the banking approach to education actually conceals the attempt to reduce individuals to mere automatons, effectively negating their fundamental nature as human beings. Since the goal of becoming fully human cannot be achieved through the traditional banking model of education, Freire advocates for a new approach that fosters critical thinking and awareness among the masses, specifically designed to address the limitations and problems of the banking system. The model doesn't allow students to understand and act upon the structural causes of their oppression, and its emphasis on credentials over competence has birthed graduates who are ill-prepared for real-world problem-solving and civic engagement. (Nwobodo, 2025).

At the core of banking education (generally known as the traditional education) is what Freire call the 'narrative character' of authoritarian teaching. This, according to Freire (1994) is a relationship that involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). In the traditional education setting the relationship between instructor and student is clearly asymmetrical, with the teacher desiring total control over the 'learning' process. For Freire such teacher-student relation as delineated above is predicated on a curriculum that describes as 'lifeless, listless and petrified.' Enunciating the proposition above, Freire (1994) states that banking education is thus life-denying, and the banking educator described as a "necrophiliac". In other words, it is the kind of education that leads students to memorize mechanically the narrated content, as opposed to creatively and critically posing questions and offering original interpretations.

As a result of this model, according to Ibrahim (2022), an astounding 70 percent of pupils in most Nigerian schools are poor at learning, which prevents them from receiving adequate information that would enhance their education. Several studies by UNICEF (United Nations Children Emergency Funds), has shown that going to school does not always lead to increased knowledge or learning. Even if they are attending school, a great number of students are not acquiring the core skills necessary for competency. As a direct consequence of this, many children are living in ignorance, and with the exact percentage fluctuating from place to place. By the time they are 10, all children should be able to read (Azevedo, 2020). The fact that children are unable to read is often an unmistakable sign that the educational systems in place are not effectively structured to assist children in learning in other subject areas such as mathematics, science, and the humanities.

Children who have not mastered reading by the time they are 10 years old - or at the very latest, by the time they have graduated from primary school - are not likely to become proficient readers later on in their academic careers, despite the fact that it is possible to learn new things later in life if enough effort is put in (UNESCO, 2021).

A number of other problems identified which impede educational reforms in Nigeria include a lack of adequate data for educational planning which Edigin and Erharbor (2010) have identified as militating against effective implementation of educational reforms. They have attributed the lack of adequate data to political hysteria which attends population census, lack of institutional capacity for effective data collection and analysis with which to make projections. This is a substantial shortcoming which has led to institutional and personnel incapacities for effective implementation of the UBE. The resultant consequence is that more effort is being placed on formal basic education, while school for nomads remain few and far between. The itinerant pupils phenomena have continued to thrive as the preferred mode of education amongst the predominant rural Hausa communities in the north of Nigeria. Also, avenues for literacy and non-formal education though available are grossly inadequate.

This lack of adequate data for educational planning in Nigeria, has resulted in Nigeria not being included in the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) rankings due to a lack of nationally representative and internationally comparable data on learning outcomes. Several factors contribute to this, including challenges in data collection and a lack of consensus on measuring educational quality in a way that allows for meaningful international comparisons (Vanguard, 2015).

In order to change any educational system, it is necessary that new ideas are infused to satisfy needs that have emerged which the former system is no longer adequate. Such new ideas and needs can be internally induced; arising from within the educational system or can be induced by external forces including economic, political, cultural factors from within the larger society. Adamu (2003) recommended development of adequate capacity for initiating, planning and implementing sustainable innovations/reform programmes in the education sector.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy and the Imperative for Educational Transformation

Nigeria's current educational reform agenda typifies a bold and much needed shift toward an inclusive, and future-oriented learning system. At the heart of the reform is the vision to nurture national consciousness, unity, and self-reliance. The reform places emphasis on hands-on learning, moving from rigid traditional models to education that actively engages learners in their own development and nation-building.

The reform also complements the Ministerial Strategic Plan (MSP), on the aspect of enhancing teacher quality and ensuring curriculum relevance thereby equipping students to thrive in an increasingly complex and globalized world. Nigeria's agenda aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7, which advocates for education that fosters respect for human rights, global citizenship, gender equality, and sustainable development. The reform, therefore, not only improves the quality and inclusiveness of education but also strengthens Nigeria's human capital base and democratic values. It is already gearing toward more inclusive and participatory models, especially in the private sector, where individual and missionary schools are adapting various global models to the workability of their environment.

Freire's theory provides a conceptual backbone that when adopted can contribute greatly to the reform of the Nigeria's education sector (Nwobodo,2025). Its application can solve the problem of banking model, promote humanization, critical consciousness and competency-based education. Freire's theory emphasizes dialogue in teaching and that curriculum design can devolve classroom power and validate students' knowledge. It further promotes that education that poses questions on communal challenges can foster critical thinking, creativity, and democratic values among young citizens. Using culturally relevant and localized content can help make learning more meaningful, hence teacher training should emphasize reflective teaching practices, political awareness, and community engagement (Freire,1994). Freire's vision aligns closely with the National Policy on Education's mission to develop self-reliant, morally sound, and civically engaged citizens.

Banking education attempts to minimize the students' creative power and inhibits their credulity, there is no recognition of thinking, no collective inquiry by the student because the world is presented by the educator as 'completed.' Thus, the banking educator (the teacher) is teaching at the proverbial 'end of history,' an epoch ushered in by the so-called triumph of capitalism which seems not to have atrophied in our contemporary education

In view of this, the reason for Freirean liberation project is to confront and destruct the contradiction at the heart of the asymmetry and then reconstructing the teacher-student relationship. By so doing, reconciling the divergent poles of the contradiction of the liberatory educational context is to produce a democratized classroom where power is circulating dynamically, with no party capable of claiming control over the movement of learning that is propelled by freedom, (Freire 1994). In other words, the teacher is liberated, the students are empowered. The newly liberated teacher who also encounters himself anew becomes aerated. Shor & Freire (1987) noted that, together, the teacher and students recognize the production of knowledge as a joint effort, a collaborative and collective work. All members of the dialogic learning community "are simultaneously teachers and students", although, the implementation of this pedagogical feat is one of struggle. This is because an education for liberation, collaborative and collective effort as a reality is really a process, undergoing constant transformation. That is, liberation is the human expression of a primordial dynamic process to becoming a human, as long as human is meditated, by extension, ontological vocation.

No doubt, the work of the liberation educator is (thus first and foremost one of) calling the students into what Freire calls their humanization. Teaching according to Freire and Faundez (1989) is vocational and vocative, a calling of students to their ontological vocation to be free as being-human. Humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompleteness. But while humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the former is the people's vocation, the latter is far from human. Although, this vocation is constantly negated, it is affirmed by that very negation, it is far from contemporary education, (Freire 1994).

To promote humanization in education, government should organize seminar for teachers at all level to meet the demand of Freirean liberation philosophy of education to produce teachers that will be 'do-tanks' as against the old method, 'think-tanks'. Teachers should as well see themselves as co-learners, rather than omniscient. In line with Freire strong stand on teacher's training, Mezieobi, Nwanekezi and Okoli (2011), agrees that the teacher who is seen as projector of knowledge needs to be properly educated, trained and guided for professional efficiency in order to inculcate a positive attitude that will enable students become outstanding for the benefit of the

society. Little wonder (FRN) 2014 states that no education system can rise above the quality of its teachers.

Freire's concept of conscientization refers to the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality, particularly the structures of oppression that exist within it. Freire's theory aims to develop students' critical consciousness, enabling them to analyze power structures and social inequalities. Instead of passively receiving information, students engage in critical analysis of their own reality and collaboratively seek solutions to real-world problems. Nwobodo (2025), agrees that Freire's conscientization concept can foster a more engaged and relevant learning experience for Nigerian students, connecting education to their lived experiences. Concurring, World Bank (2011) noted that education raises people's productivity, creativity with matching humanism that enhances entrepreneurship and technological advancement for sustainable development.

Freire's pedagogy encourages incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into the learning process. This can help foster a sense of belonging and promote social justice within the Nigerian education system. Integrating culturally relevant materials, examples, and teaching methods into the curriculum can make learning more relatable and meaningful for students from diverse backgrounds. In line with the above thought, Onwuka (2018) maintains that education is a means of transmitting culture and mores of a given society from one generation to another. In other words, education makes a complete man and man makes a society

Okemakinde (2013) believes that Freire's theory when adopted wholly will help to cushion the effect of high rate of literacy, emancipate the masses from the shackle of ignorance, equipping them with cognitive skills for critical thinking to induce development. With this model, the author continued, the individual will have the skill and intellect to understand the political, economic and social terrain in the society and then the acceptable behavior to channel them in the right trajectory for development.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative desktop research design based on a critical review and thematic analysis of existing literature. Rather than collecting primary data through surveys or interviews, the study relies on secondary sources to examine the relevance of Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy to Nigeria's educational reform agenda. The choice of this approach is appropriate because the study seeks to analyse educational philosophies, policy frameworks, and scholarly debates relating to educational reform rather than measure empirical outcomes. Data for the study were drawn from a range of documentary sources, including Paulo Freire's foundational works on Critical Pedagogy, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government policy documents, and reports published by national and international organizations. Key documents reviewed include the Federal Republic of Nigeria's *National Policy on Education* (2021), UNESCO reports on education and Sustainable Development Goal 4, World Bank reports on learning poverty and educational quality, and contemporary scholarship on critical pedagogy, learner-centred education, curriculum reform, and teacher development.

The analysis employed a thematic approach. Relevant literature and policy documents were systematically examined to identify recurring themes relating to the challenges confronting Nigeria's education system, including rote learning, examination-driven instruction, graduate unemployment, learning poverty, inequitable access, teacher-centred pedagogy, and weak civic engagement. These themes were subsequently analysed through the conceptual lens of Freire's Critical Pedagogy, with particular emphasis on the principles of dialogue, critical consciousness,

problem-posing education, praxis, and humanization. This analytical process enabled the study to evaluate the extent to which Freire's philosophy provides a viable framework for strengthening educational policy and classroom practice in Nigeria. The paper is anchored in an interpretivist research perspective, which recognizes that educational reform is shaped by social, political, and philosophical contexts. Accordingly, the paper critically interprets existing evidence rather than testing statistical relationships. The findings are synthesized to generate practical recommendations for curriculum development, teacher education, assessment practices, and stakeholder participation within Nigeria's education sector.

Although the paper does not provide empirical evidence from fieldwork, its reliance on authoritative policy documents and contemporary scholarly literature offers a comprehensive conceptual analysis of the issues under investigation. The findings are therefore intended to contribute to ongoing scholarly and policy discussions on educational reform and to provide a theoretical foundation for future empirical studies on the implementation of Critical Pedagogy within Nigeria's education system.

Reimagining Nigeria's Educational Reform Through Freire's Critical Pedagogy

Nigeria's persistent educational challenges demonstrate that meaningful reform requires more than policy revisions or institutional restructuring. While successive reforms have expanded access and revised curricula, comparatively little attention has been given to transforming classroom pedagogy. Freire's Critical Pedagogy provides a practical framework for addressing this gap by repositioning education as a participatory, learner-centred, and transformative process rather than the passive transmission of knowledge (Freire, 1970/2018). This perspective aligns with Nigeria's National Policy on Education, which advocates learner-centred instruction, critical thinking, and the development of skills for national development (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2021).

A central implication of Freire's philosophy is the transformation of classroom practice through dialogical learning. Rather than relying on teacher-dominated instruction, dialogue positions teachers and learners as co-creators of knowledge who critically engage with real-life challenges (Freire, 1970/2018). Within the Nigerian context, Nwobodo (2025) argues that Freire's problem-posing approach provides a practical model for moving beyond rote learning toward inquiry, creativity, and learner participation. Similarly, Onwuka (2018) emphasizes that educational philosophy should encourage reflective thinking and active citizenship rather than passive knowledge acquisition.

Curriculum reform should likewise become more contextualized and culturally responsive. Freire maintained that learning is most meaningful when it reflects learners' social realities and lived experiences (Freire, 1970/2018). This aligns with Nigeria's educational philosophy, which promotes relevance, self-reliance, and national integration (FRN, 2021). Integrating indigenous knowledge, entrepreneurship, civic education, digital literacy, and community-based learning would therefore make the curriculum more responsive to local development needs (Onwuka, 2018).

Teacher quality remains fundamental to successful educational reform. Freire viewed teachers as facilitators of learning rather than transmitters of information. Consequently, teacher education programmes should strengthen learner-centred pedagogy, reflective practice, and continuous professional development (Freire, 1970/2018). Studies by Mezieobi et al. (2011) further demonstrate that effective teacher preparation significantly influences instructional quality, while Okai-Ugbaje et al. (2020) highlight the importance of innovation and stakeholder readiness in improving educational practice.

Assessment practices also require reform. Although Nigeria has adopted competency-based educational goals, assessment continues to emphasize memorization and high-stakes examinations. Freire's concept of praxis suggests that assessment should evaluate learners' ability to analyse, apply, and create knowledge through projects, collaborative learning, community engagement, and problem-solving activities rather than relying solely on written examinations (Freire, 1970/2018; Shor & Freire, 1987).

Finally, sustainable educational reform requires stronger collaboration among government, schools, teachers, parents, and local communities. Adamu (2003) observed that many educational reforms in Nigeria have been constrained by weak implementation and inadequate stakeholder participation. Freire similarly argued that educational transformation is a collective process built on dialogue, participation, and shared responsibility (Freire, 1970/2018). Consistent with Sustainable Development Goal 4, strengthening these partnerships can promote inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education that equips learners with the knowledge, values, and competencies needed for national development (UNESCO, 2021).

Ultimately, Freire's Critical Pedagogy offers a coherent framework for repositioning Nigeria's education system. By integrating dialogical teaching, contextualized curricula, reflective teacher education, authentic assessment, and community participation, educational reform can move beyond expanding access to improving learning outcomes, critical thinking, democratic participation, and sustainable national development (FRN, 2021; Nwobodo, 2025; World Bank, 2018).

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigeria's education reform agenda can benefit immensely from the integration of critical pedagogy. Beyond policy documents and strategic plans, the transformation must reach the classroom, pedagogy, teacher training, and community engagement levels. For education to be truly liberating and developmental, it must enable learners to read the world as much as the word. Nigerians, if they are truly committed to liberation, must discard the banking concept of education in its totality and abandon the educational objective of deposit making and substitute it with the posing of problem of men in their relations with the world (Nwobodo, 2025). Concurring with the above view, Grub (2007) posits that the measure of any country's development depends on the number of its educated citizens. It cannot be out of place to pointedly state that it is the priority of teachers to ensure that students receive worthwhile, wholesome and dialogic education through effective educational practices. And if Nigerians, "universities and academics want to genuinely contribute to socio-economic transformation in the country and on the African continent, they have to profoundly change what they teach and how they do it" (Heleta, 2016, p. 6). This paper recommends following:

1. Government should reform teacher education curricula to include critical pedagogy, political consciousness, and community engagement.
2. Teachers should move away from high-stakes standardized testing and promote inquiry-based learning.
3. National Education Research and Development Council (NERDC) must decentralize curriculum development to reflect local realities and indigenous knowledge.
4. All stakeholders must promote civic education that fosters active citizenship and democratic values.
5. School owners and administrators must encourage school-community partnerships that democratize decision-making and knowledge production.

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