

Paulo Freire, the Decolonial Curriculum and the Experience of the Professional Masters in Youth and Adult Education in Bahia, Brazil

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Abstract

In this paper we situate a discussion of the decolonial curriculum within the context of a Brazilian postgraduate programme (MPEJA) focused on adult and youth education (EJA). We draw on the work of Paulo Freire in our discussion of decolonial thinking and its pedagogical representation within EJA in Brazil. We suggest that engagement with the programme provides legitimacy and visibility for participants, supporting them in revealing the diversity and specificity of EJA (Cardoso, 2017). MPEJA also counters decolonial thought through the possibilities it provides to EJA educators for reflection on their professional context and the socio-economic influences on the experiences of their EJA students.

Keywords: Brazil, Freire, Adult Education, Curriculum, Professional Development

Introduction

In this article we discuss the contribution of Paulo Freire to the field of pedagogy for decolonial thinking and constitutional democracy in Brazil. We locate the discussion of the decolonial curriculum in the experience of the Professional Masters in Youth and Adult Education in Brazil (MPEJA), a professional postgraduate programme for adult educators offered by the Bahia State University (UNEB) in the north east region of Brazil.

Bahia is a large state with a large rural population. The poverty rate of the state is among the highest in Brazil. In this context there is great need for adult education to support Bahians in meeting the challenges of navigating what is an increasingly complex and challenging society. Education credentials are highly valued in the Brazilian job market and act as gatekeepers to better

employment. Many Bahians fail to complete their formal education, at primary or secondary level and seek adult education centres in order to earn school completion certificates. Adult education, though underfunded, provides adults with opportunities to gain the education credentials that they need to progress at work, and earn a better living.

However, adult education should also support the development of adults as autonomous subjects, able to understand their position in society and the forces that shape that, and to understand and see beyond those current circumstances. These ideas permeate all of Freire's work – his interventions in public policy, as well as his writing. Freire was highly critical of the processes and outcomes of the Brazilian education system. For Freire the primary goal of education was to enable individuals to become conscious of the forces that shape the circumstances of their lives, and to work to make positive changes to those circumstances. For this to be achieved, Freire believed that it was first necessary to achieve an in-depth understanding of the world that we inhabit, in particular the social and political contradictions within it. However, for Freire, just being conscious of the societal norms and structures that produce (and reproduce) each individual's experience was not enough. Instead, he argued that consciousness should lead to action against those elements that oppress and limit each individual's possibilities.

Paulo Freire's Pedagogy and its Contributions to Decolonial Thinking

The initial understanding that underpins this article is of democracy as a political regime based on equal rights, freedom to participate in civil life, solidarity, transfer of power, transparency, tolerance and respect for diversity. In such a democracy, the sovereignty of the people is central (Arendt, 2008). And it is through education that human beings are able to fully realise their potential – making choices and taking action in order to preserve or change beliefs, values, and practices that impact on their ability to live an autonomous life (Teixera, 1998; Fernandes, 1989). The term decoloniality is used here to refer to the questioning of, and attempts to overcome, all forms of oppression against groups considered to be subordinate, those who, historically have been subject to mechanisms of control and denial of their existence and culture (Walsh, 2009, p.27).

Paulo Freire's work and political life are the antecedents in Latin America of decolonial thinking, based as they are on a pedagogy of political, epistemological, sociological and anthropological insights that structure what has become known

in Brazil as popular education. However, Freire was not alone in criticising the educational system in Brazil. Teixeira (1998) characterized it as paternalistic and only capable of teaching the majority to obey, and just a select few to think and to govern. In this way he argues that education in Brazil failed to produce sovereign, autonomous citizens of the type needed for a healthy functioning democracy (Teixeira, 1998). We also draw on authors who discuss Freirean ideas of democracy and decolonial pedagogy, such as Walsh (2009) and Mignolo (2007). According to Mignolo (2007, p.27), the decolonial impulse relies on the 'energy of discontent and distrust' in order to resist the structures of oppression and inequality imposed by coloniality.

Freire's legacy is precisely to unveil the reality that oppresses and nullifies members of disadvantaged groups in society, and to announce the possibility of overcoming this oppression. By problematizing Brazilian society, he shows how second- and third-class citizens were produced (or produced themselves), in a context of formal democracy, contributing to, rather than solving, problems of inequality. The Brazilian population, particularly those who are illiterate, experience a kind of sub-citizenship, on the fringes, without the possibility of change or social improvement. He reveals, therefore, that the principle of equality of opportunity in education is ideological, in the sense that all societies mask domination through structured symbolic capital that denies individual autonomy in favour of a dominant ideology in which social differences are taken as natural, even by those classes who are most disadvantaged.

Freire's popular education, with transformation of the individual's circumstances through consciousness and action, is offered as one way of altering this reality. The importance of Freire's pedagogy is in its radical criticism of oppression and its potential to modify the structures that lead to social inequality. It is in this sense that we situate Paulo Freire's contribution to emancipatory education. His work provides the necessary ballast to produce the critical citizens that a democratic society demands – citizens capable of thinking about and participating in the development of public policies that meet their needs and support their aspirations. The inequalities that scar Brazilian society are increasingly evident due to the accelerated circulation of information, accentuating the lack of access of oppressed groups to the products of technological, social and educational advancement. Popular education is crucial in order to enable underprivileged groups to gain the knowledge they require to make decisions. Only in this way can they change their status as sub-citizens in a modern and globalised society.

Freire and his revolutionary pedagogy offer many ways of thinking about the contribution of the school system, and in particular its curriculum, to the reproduction of economic and cultural inequalities, and the continuation of social domination. The failure to value popular knowledge within the education system denies the lived reality of the subordinate class while paying excessive respect to the knowledge of the dominant classes. This contributes to the reproduction of inequalities. In educational terms this also means that pedagogies aimed at reducing inequalities are not valued.

Against this backdrop, Paulo Freire and his collaborators raise the flag of insurgency, and attempt to subvert this order, critiquing colonialist society, and the forms of knowledge and pedagogy on which it is based. Central to this thinking is a proposal for intercultural, dialogical popular education which leads to consciousness and action among the oppressed class. Freire's decolonial pedagogy, according to Mota Neto (2017), includes a proposal for the formation of 'subaltern' individuals, prepared to fight against the perverse logic of the modernity-coloniality dyad. Such actions should be based on ideals of freedom, justice, solidarity, and love.

A Decolonial Curriculum: Interculturality as the Materialisation of a Postcolonial Reading of the Curriculum

Decolonial pedagogy can be affected in practice by thinking of the curriculum as a 'cultural policy', that is, a process of acquisition, construction, reconstruction, and deconstruction of cultural values.

It can also be seen as 'contested terrain' (Giroux, 1999), a place of struggle, resistance and transformation, in which ideas are problematised, rather than passively accepted. Every curriculum represents certain concepts of gender, class, ethnicity, race, religion, etc. 'The curriculum is thus an intentional selection. A selection that follows a certain logic, even if this is not made explicit' (Pedra, 1997, p.51).

Thus, this space of knowledge / power called the curriculum works to create particular forms of knowledge and social identities (Silva, 2007). In this understanding, the knowledge transmitted within the educational space ensures, implements and transforms concrete social relations.

As a cultural artefact, and a powerful instrument for the construction of individual and social identities, the curriculum should be rethought in order

that it is focused on the understanding and transformation of the world inhabited by the individuals who are subjected to it. In his writing, Freire denounced the curriculum dominant in the Brazilian education system as a legacy of the colonial past. He proposed instead a curriculum for liberation, based on breaking with past understandings through critical awareness and a reinvention/reimagining of the world.

For Freire there is no such thing as neutral education. He argues that the curriculum should be seen as the continuous construction and reconstruction of meanings of a given reality, and that the basis for this constant development should be dialogue. The pedagogical relationship should be, above all, a horizontal one, based on dialogical relationships between those involved in the educational process. From this perspective, learning can be seen as an act of discovering and understanding lived reality, the actual situation lived by the student, and only makes sense when it results from a critical approach to that reality. Thus, both educator and learner educate themselves through the dialogue, problematising the world around them that they establish. This dialogue is central to an educational process which works against student passivity, encouraging them to seek liberation and independence – the transformation of their reality.

In his book *Education as a Practice of Freedom*, Freire emphasises his defence of ‘a society that is increasingly decolonized, that increasingly cuts the chains that made it, and that make it remain the object of others, which they are subjected to’ (Freire, 1967, p.35). Central to this process of decolonialisation is the emancipation of individuals. All people should be seen as producers of knowledge and this knowledge should be valued. He emphasises that the reading of the world precedes the reading of the word and highlights the importance of respect and appreciation of the experience of those being educated, which should be seen as the object of their education. Within this perspective, it is essential to build emancipatory curricula and pedagogical strategies, emphasising activity and participation, valuing the subjects and their knowledge in the educational process.

The basis for this is respect for the cultural rights of the popular levels of knowledge. According to Scocuglia (2005, p.87) there are three elements to these rights. Firstly, the right to know what they do not know, that is, the right to appropriate the knowledge that has been denied and appropriated by the ruling / dominant layers of society. Secondly, the right to know better the knowledge

they already have from their daily life experiences. And thirdly, the right to construct their own knowledge from their values, interests, practices and their culture. At the heart of such rights is interculturality. The basis for a decolonial pedagogy requires a constant political, ethical, historical, social and epistemic dialogue with the construction of different pedagogical processes and practices (Walsh, 2009, p.26). The materialisation for the realisation of such rights is interculturality in response to the colonial project. The basis for a decolonial pedagogy requires constant political, ethical, historical, social and epistemic dialogue, with the construction of different pedagogical processes and practices (Walsh, 2009, p.26).

Interculturality here should not be understood as being about human interrelationships in isolation from broader issues. Instead, it should be understood as a phenomenon that plays out within systems, structures and power relations. A commitment to intercultural education implies a commitment to enhancing the culture of dialogue and coexistence between different cultures:

Interculturality seeks to develop an equitable interrelationship between cities, people, knowledge and culturally different practices; some interrelationships that stem from the conflict inherent in social, economic, political and power asymmetries ... It is about actively promoting exchange processes that allow the construction of spaces for encounters, between different beings and knowledge, meanings and practices (Walsh, 2009, p.45).

Thus, to think of an intercultural curriculum that is based on guidelines of decoloniality implies a reconfiguration of the knowledge and actions of the pedagogical actors; actors who strive for the maintenance of the reality of subordination, or simply accept it without question, do so through pedagogical practices that foster submission through a transmissive, linear and authoritarian logic. It also implies defending the creative power of learners and stimulating their criticality, articulating the relationship between knowledge, culture and aesthetics to issues of power, politics and meaning (Silva, 2007).

In this process, the educator must engage in a constant process of invention and reinvention of the means that facilitate the problematisation of the object to be unveiled for, and apprehended by, the students. Thus, the reinvention of a democratic curriculum represents the constant struggle for decoloniality, understood as recognition of the various subjects who inhabit the curriculum.

Decoloniality recognises the importance of unofficial 'other' knowledge. It means building, implementing and evaluating curricula that promote insurgent practices of resisting, (re) existing and (re) living (Walsh, 2009).

The translation of decoloniality in the curriculum is affected by interculturality. Intercultural education goes beyond a naive view of one-off cultural celebrations, or the inclusion in the school year of a specific day to address the issue of diversity. Intercultural education implies enhancing the culture of dialogue and coexistence between different cultures. It is an attempt to promote dialogical and egalitarian relations between people and groups that belong to different cultural universes, by recognising and discussing the conflicts inherent to this reality. The project of intercultural education is not a response to diversity – a move to assimilate everything that is different from the so-called normal standards – it is a direct challenge to segregation and, consequently, a direct challenge to social inequality. Such a proposal does not ignore the power relations present in social and interpersonal relations. It recognises and assumes conflicts, and seeks the most appropriate strategies to confront them (Candau, 2002).

Thus, thinking of a curriculum for youth and adult education, within the logic of decoloniality, implies working with an insurgent, flexible, curriculum that translates the multiple realities that are present within the educational space, and which awakens and mobilises knowledge to transform reality.

Adult Education in Brazil

Between the years of 1964 and 1985 Brazil was governed by a military dictatorship. In 1988, as part of the transition from this authoritarian regime to democracy, a new Constitution was passed. This identified citizens' rights and established the responsibility of public authorities to guarantee access to services that would guarantee that these rights were respected. The right to education for all was one of those rights. Soares (2015) explains how the adoption of this new constitution brought changes to the way in which adult education was conceived in public policy in Brazil:

In the years following the Federal Constitution of 1988, we had a period of transition between the concepts of compensatory education that guided the old supplementary education and the establishment of a new configuration of education for young people and adults as a right (Soares, 2015, p.253).

Youth and Adult Education (EJA) is a teaching modality described in subsequent law, and aimed at people who did not have, for some reason, access to regular education at the appropriate age. Soares (2015, p.254) points to the adoption of the name EJA as a sign of a change in conception from adult education as compensation to education as a right. This aligned Brazil with international policy discourse through the reference to adult education, while also recognising the needs of another group excluded from access to education, young people outside the formal school system. The inclusion of Youth in EJA was also in recognition of the make-up of the population accessing its services. Di Pierro, Joia and Ribeiro (2001) describe this as being made up of three main groups:

those who start schooling as working adults; teenagers and young adults who entered regular school and abandoned it some time ago, often motivated by entering work or due to migration; teenagers who have recently entered and attended regular school, but have accumulated large gaps between their age and expected grade.

However, while the right to education for adults and young people was guaranteed in the constitution, in practice only limited progress has been made in providing effective answers to the needs of adults in Brazil (Silva de Alcantra, 2016, p.86). And these needs were and remain considerable. Nationally, the rate of illiteracy among the adult population was estimated at 7% by the Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2017). In Bahia, a poor state, out of a population of just under 15 million people there are over 1.5 million aged 15 and over who cannot read or write. And while there have been improvements in the public-school system, serious issues of quality and access remain. In 2018 only 62% of the school population completed lower secondary education (ISCED level 2) and just 43% upper secondary (ISCED level 3).

The Bahia State University (UNEB) has played an important role in addressing the legacy of educational underachievement in Bahia through its research, teaching and outreach focused on the education of adults. Created during the administration of Governor João Durval Carneiro (1983-1987), today UNEB is the largest state public university in Bahia. It has 24 campuses across the state and has a history of pioneering work for social justice policies for marginalised populations. Working with the state, municipalities, employers and social movements, UNEB has been an active partner in the development of EJA in Bahia in the areas of teaching, research and outreach since 2000, through its

Center for Youth and Adult Education. It has also provided support to successive regional and national adult education initiatives.

It is in this institutional scenario of struggles, resistances and, above all, of the achievement of reparation for societal ills, that we situate our discussion of EJA. We see EJA as an intervention designed to help correct historical distortions in the field of education, distortions that have denied or reduced access to meaningful education, with consequent impacts on individuals and the societies they live in. We also see EJA, and its central demand for the right to education, as inextricably linked to social movements, to the struggle for social justice and the exercising of active citizenship.

The Experience of the Professional Masters in Youth and Adult Education (MPEJA) in Brazil

Building on the impact and the knowledge created by this work, in 2013 UNEB proposed and gained approval for, the first Masters Level program for EJA in Brazil – the Professional Masters in EJA (MPEJA). MPEJA, aims to fill a gap: the training of professionals to work in EJA. Many authors have identified the lack of professional development in EJA as an issue to be debated (Haddad and Pierro, 2000; Arroyo 2006; Dantas, 2019). According to Guidelli (1996, p.126):

The education of young people and adults has been seen throughout its history as a teaching modality that does not require, from its teachers, study or specialization, as a field eminently linked to goodwill. As a result, educators trained in the area are rare.

This lack of recognition of EJA as a specialised area, its lack of identity, and its subsequent invisibility, has impeded the development of a coherent system of initial and continuing professional development for EJA professionals. The majority of those working with EJA students were initially trained as schoolteachers. For Arroyo (2006) teachers who lack preparation for the EJA classroom are unlikely to be able to respond adequately to the peculiarities inherent to EJA – the differences in the experiences, needs and profiles of the subjects of EJA, as compared with the students that they are accustomed to teaching in schools. For Arroyo there is a danger that such teachers will see their students through their truncated, incomplete school trajectories, denying the ‘particularity of their social, ethnic, racial and cultural condition.’ Understanding of the subjects of EJA, their needs and their social conditions, should be ‘the reference point for the construction of EJA’ (Arroyo, 2006, p.23).

In this context any initiative to support the development of the professional knowledge and practice of EJA teachers is also an act of rebellion – recognising EJA as a distinct teaching modality with its own curriculum and pedagogical approach. In this sense commitment to EJA can be seen as an act of rebellion, a form of resistance, a struggle to create a type of teaching of educational experience which has been assigned little value historically in Brazil (Haddad and Pierro, 2000).

The UNEB MPEJA was conceived as a response to this lack of recognition of EJA as a specific education sphere. Through its teaching, but particularly through the research and outreach activities of its students and staff, MPEJA provides a space for the continuing education of EJA professionals, in which they are supported in reflecting on the relationship between theory and practice in their own contexts. As noted above, UNEB is closely engaged with social inclusion activities through programmes of outreach and joint actions with the community. These have enabled the creation of internal and external networks for the production and dissemination of knowledge, making MPEJA a privileged locus for dialogue around practice and policy in EJA in Bahia.

The MPEJA's entrants are teachers from the municipal and state networks in all regions of Bahia. Since 2013, 177 people have enrolled on the MPEJA. Lopes (2019) carried out research with MPEJA graduates, exploring, among other things why they had joined the programme. A dominant theme within the response of the participants was that they had great affinity and practical experience in EJA. They liked EJA and were committed to working to improve it, and yet felt ill-prepared to resolve the issues that they confronted there. Their motivation in joining the MPEJA was to learn more about EJA in order to respond to the realities of their professional context. 'I thought precisely about the search for answers to my questions in the face of the school reality I experienced from EJA' (HC quoted in Lopes, 2019). Another participant spoke about 'fixing' the problems identified in her research (JP quoted in Lopes 2019). Indeed, a number of the responses suggest a desire to understand the demands and reality of EJA subjects, the adults and young people in and out of the EJA classroom, but also to begin the search for the resolution of specific problems in the school or the school system.

Lopes also notes that MPEJA graduates felt that their participation in the MPEJA could increase their visibility and influence in their school and the surrounding area:

When I joined MPEJA, my expectations were to expand knowledge about EJA and, above all, the desire to be able to contribute to the training of subjects who work in the school management of EJA in my municipality, without losing sight of the needs arising from the observations and experiences in the classroom (AF quoted in Lopes, 2019).

This visibility, they felt, would increase their chances of being able to improve the EJA offered to adults.

The MPEJA Curriculum

Cardoso and Passos (2016) suggest that the learning process for EJA students should prioritise the contextualisation of the reality lived by those students, allowing them to ‘think about their identities and subjectivities, their ways of being and being in the world, reading and modifying that world’. The curriculum of the MPEJA is designed to allow participants to reflect on and act within their professional context.

The common core of the MPEJA is composed of the following taught modules: philosophical and historical foundations in EJA, legal foundations and public policies of EJA in Brazil, educational concepts and curricula in education in EJA, citizenship, ethical inclusion in EJA. Participants specialise in one of three areas: 1) Education, environment and work, 2) teacher training and public policies, or 3) educational management and information and communication technologies. The MPEJA also offers a number of optional taught modules including: theoretical and methodological foundations of Freire’s conception of education, social movements and education in EJA, anthropological foundations and race relations in education, digital inclusion and EJA, processes for acquiring mathematics in EJA and applied research, development and innovation. The taught modules all take a decolonial perspective, encouraging participants to deconstruct their understanding of their current context and generate and mobilise knowledge to transform that reality.

MPEJA students also take part in thematic seminars, guided research, and supervised teaching practice. Each participant is required to complete a project in which they design, carry out and evaluate an educational intervention conceived to resolve an identified problem. These are theoretically grounded, but with an empirical basis in EJA practice. They are expected to be oriented to the production of knowledge with results relevant to the understanding of the practical context of EJA leading to new products, processes or services.

Analysis of the dissertations produced by participants in the MPEJA, during the period from 2015 to 2017 shows that participants have considered the administrative, financial, and political systems that govern EJA in Bahia in all their dimensions. Professional development of teachers, curriculum, and the use of technology are common areas of focus. Within the majority there is also a focus on unveiling the characteristics of the subjects at whom EJA education is aimed, giving voice and agency to the young people and adults (Dantas, 2019, p.36).

By centring their research on their own professional contexts, the MPEJA students reveal, and reflect on, the multiple realities of EJA. In so doing they describe the difficult situation of EJA in Bahia. One dissertation, titled 'Don't close the EJA of my school' (Rodrigues, 2018), denounces the policy of reduction of the offer of EJA in the city of Salvador. Rodrigues draws on administrative data to highlight that one in four EJA centres had closed in the period with a loss of 44% of EJA classes across the city.

In addition to the nearly one hundred dissertations so far defended by the MPEJA graduates, each the fruit of applied research, the results have been presented in academic and policy conferences, and published in scientific journals in Brazil and internationally, giving greater visibility to EJA. This also increases the visibility of EJA among policy makers at local level – in schools, as well as within municipal and regional education departments – and increases the influence of the generators of this knowledge, the MPEJA students.

Conclusion

In *Letters to Guinea-Bissau*, Paulo Freire highlights the importance of working with teachers and learners in EJA, as the former has the ability to arouse critical awareness in the latter by fostering understanding of his colonized, oppressed condition:

what is proposed to such an educator is the search for the best way, the best aids that enable the person who seeks to learn to read and write, to play the role of subject of knowledge in the process of the development of their literacy. The educator must be an inventor and a constant reinventor of these means and ways with which to facilitate more and more the problematization of the object to be unveiled and finally apprehended by the students. [...] the important thing is the exercise of a critical attitude towards the object (Freire, 1978, p. 13).

In its structure, and in the practice of those who work on it, MPEJA is epitomised by what Sordi and Ludke (2009, p.32) call 'circularity of knowledge'. They argue that 'it is not a matter of transferring knowledge from top down, but of circulating between two (or more) knowledge-producing sources, each enriching in its own way the construction of knowledge about it'. Within MPEJA knowledge is shared horizontally, through dialogue, with all participants becoming part of a culture of promotion of meaningful learning.

From a decolonial perspective, we can say that the research activity, and its ensuing dissemination, promoted within the scope of the MPEJA enables participants to renounce and denounce the reality as experienced by the subjects of EJA. It allows for them to reveal the diversity and what Cardoso (2017) refers to as the specificity of EJA:

In the spaces in which EJA takes place, the subjects are multiple, and live among diversity, and although some have similar profiles, it is necessary to pay attention to the specificity of their life trajectories, which are always unique and characterized by potential that may not immediately reveal itself (Cardoso 2017, p.169).

This increase in awareness, of consciousness, of the specificity of the life trajectories of the subjects of EJA supports MPEJA participants in seeking, testing and proposing solutions and alternatives.

The involvement of teachers of EJA in MPEJA is an important driving force of the search within the university for critical reflection, for the exercise of questioning of the standard educational models and their role in the education of young people and adults. They aim to understand the school curriculum in the varied learning spaces that make up EJA in Bahia, as well as the role of the educator in meeting the needs of the participants in programmes of EJA.

The MPEJA counters decolonial thought through the possibilities it provides to EJA educators for reflection on their professional context and the socio-economic influences on the experiences of their EJA students. The theoretically based, practical interventions carried out by participants impact the way they work with others in improving the education they offer. In line with decolonial theory, teachers require the space to understand the reality of and the influences upon their working context in order to imagine, plan for, and implement differentiated pedagogical practices.

It is important to deepen research and reflection on the teacher education process that the MPEJA offers to these educators. What is the impact on their practice? To what extent has it influenced teachers in the state of Bahia to promote critical awareness and decolonising pedagogical tools? This is the focus of studies currently underway, which we hope will unveil how Freire's practice of a decolonial pedagogy can renew EJA in Bahia. It is a complex context, full of the needs, but also the possibilities and expectations of EJA students. Hence the importance of rethinking teaching practices, curricula and other elements of the system of EJA in a reflective and collective way in light of the rich legacy of popular education promoted by Paulo Freire.

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