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Paulo Freire: The Man and the Philosophy

Brazilian born Paulo Freire is regarded by many social critics as one of the most significant educational thinkers of the Twentieth Century. He began his long educational career in the northeastern Brazilian city of Recife, located on the Atlantic coast and a key rail, air and sea transportation hub. Here, Freire worked primarily with preliterate adults in nonformal educational settings. At the heart of his literacy work with adults, influenced to some extent by the emerging Catholic Base Communities Movement, was a commitment to grassroots education and the development of a critical consciousness among poor people. This radical approach to literacy gained nationwide recognition for Freire and his colleagues and during a period of political populism in Brazil, his theories took hold at the governmental level. In 1964, Freire was appointed head of a new National Literacy Program sponsored by the government of João Goulart who was elected in 1960.

However, shortly after Freire's appointment, the Goulart administration was deposed by a military coup d'etat, forcing Freire and other progressive thinkers into exile. In Freire's case, this exile lasted nearly twenty years. His work as consultant to UNESCO and to the World Council of Churches in those years took him to Chile, Switzerland and Guinea-Bissau, a former Portuguese colony on the west coast of Africa. His seminal work is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which provides the theoretical framework for his ideas and practice in literacy training. Other important works include *Education for Critical Consciousness*, *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, and *Pedagogy in Process: Letters to Guinea-Bissau*.

With a change of government, Freire was able to return to Brazil in 1981. Once again he set to work communicating his profoundly humanistic

PROFILE



Paulo Freire with wife Ana Maria and guest editor, Pia Wong.

He equates the act of becoming educated with the act of becoming liberated, of becoming the subject or actor within the history of one's life.

vision to others and struggling to put his ideas into practice in many settings throughout the country.

In 1989, following an electoral victory for the Worker's Party (PT) and Mayor Luiza Erundina in São Paulo, Freire joined the municipal administration as Secretary of Education. As Secretary of Education, Freire served an ethnically and culturally diverse population. With the broad goal of "constructing a public popular education," the Municipal Department of Education sought to foster the local development of educational programs that pursued the following five objectives: (1) increased access to schooling; (2) democratization of school administration; (3) an improved quality of instruction; (4) education for working youths and adults; and, (5) the formation of critical and responsible citizens.

Among the programs established during this period was the Interdisciplinary Project which sought to move schools towards the following goals: (1) Transformation of the relationships between educators and those being educated; (2) Reconceptualization of the knowledge

production process; (3) Redefinition of the content areas covered in school curriculum; (4) Reorientation of the understanding and use of school curriculum; and, (5) Transformation of the role that schools play in students' lives and in local communities.

In November 1992, the Workers' Party lost the municipal elections to the considerably more conservative and educationally traditional PDS (Partido Democratico Social). With the victory of the PDS has come substantial defeat for most of the ideas associated with the Interdisciplinary Project.

However, Freire's work and impact continue worldwide. The enduring popularity of Freire's educational philosophy can be attributed to the fact

that, above all, he is a humanist. He equates the act of becoming educated with the act of becoming liberated,

of becoming the subject or actor within the history of one's life.

This philosophy relies on a practice which honors and builds on the knowledge and experience of the student, places popular knowledge on a par with academic or elite knowledge, and allows the learning to be driven by the interests, life experiences, critical situations and realities of the learner. The ultimate aim of this method of teaching is to develop in students the capacity to participate fully in all aspects of public and private life.

Note: In the Brazilian article in this issue of Global Pages, Ms. Copetti describes and analyzes her experience in the Interdisciplinary Project. Despite the dismal epilogue to this educational experiment, it is evident from the experiences of both Ms. Copetti and Mrs. Brito that their brief contact with the ideas of the Interdisciplinary Project has resulted in new attitudes and beliefs that should sustain them through the current administration.

by *Silvandra de Almeida Copetti*
(translation by Pia L. Wong)



Pracinhas da FEB was built in 1988 during a pre-municipal election public works frenzy. Approximately 600 students attended the school, distributed over four daily shifts. The FEB stands for Forças Expedicionarias Brasileiras, or the armed forces that fought in WWII.

As the site of the Interdisciplinary Project, Pracinhas became a democratic beacon which guided teachers, students and parents into expanded ways of thinking and communicating, ultimately transforming instructional practices and values.



Opportunity for Democratic Practice

The Interdisciplinary Project, São Paulo, Brazil

My professional experience with the practice of democracy occurred in a school on the southern periphery of the city of São Paulo, Pracinhas da FEB. From the beginning it seemed that our school was different from most in our municipal system, due to the foresight and leadership of our principal, Maria Silvia Bonini Tararan. She pushed for us to take advantage of a project offered by the municipality, the Interdisciplinary Project, where instructional staff were given ten extra paid hours per week for meetings to work together to transform the school. A primary goal of these meetings was to use a participatory democratic process to reorient both curriculum and pedagogy. Thus, this collective hour, as we termed these meetings, was devoted to discussing the overall goals and objectives of the school, studying, conducting research, engaging in reflection about our own teaching practice and values, and exchanging information with our peer group.

The Interdisciplinary Project was predicated on the belief that instructional content emerges from a particular reality and through a process where there is effective participation by all people involved. What one tries to understand is how a school community thinks, views the world, and acts upon day-to-day realities. From this understanding, a generative theme develops as the cornerstone for action in the school.

Phase One (Study of the Reality)

This phase requires an investigation of the school and local community. It requires an understanding of the history of the neighborhood, its challenges, successes, and problems. The study of the reality is extremely important as it is not possible to transform a society without full and comprehensive knowledge of its problems, deficiencies, difficulties, and realities.

Phase Two (Organization of Knowledge)

In this phase, links between what students have experienced and formal school knowledge are created. In daily life, situations are complex and interrelated. During the organization process, the students' world is systematized, organized and then transformed into instructional content. In our study of the reality, we discovered situations that we would never have imagined existed; for example, as the urban population expanded, it encroached upon watershed lands that should never have been urbanized. From this discovery, we were able to develop instructional content areas such as: What is a watershed? What are the water sources that feed this region? What types of problems do human occupation of this region pose to the watershed?

This type of questioning is brought to bear on each particular point or group of points exposed through the Study of the Reality and mapped into a "thematic network" that then guides the development of instructional units. This instruction is accomplished in an interdisciplinary manner.

Phase Three (Application of Knowledge)

In this phase, one assesses the new knowledge that students construct for themselves. This is accomplished by reflecting with students on their initial understanding of the problem and how that understanding changed and expanded through the research they conducted. In our case, to complete our assessment many different techniques were utilized such as: creating newspapers where students write the articles, performing plays written by students, and conducting laboratory experiments.

The Interdisciplinary Project, from my perspective, is the most complete and encompassing system of studying because, in addition to requiring a constant search for under-

standing on the part of teachers and students, it forces us to leave the confines of the school and explore the neighborhood. It's like a snowball that keeps growing and involving more and more people, requiring us to constantly expand our skills, breaking our fragmented vision by giving us a picture of something much bigger.

Learning to Teach for Democracy

Although ultimately very successful in our school, the Interdisciplinary Project was peppered with challenges and difficulties along the way. Without a doubt, the collective hour was a crucial springboard that allowed our school to develop a very high level of instruction and curriculum.

Our most important accomplishment during these meetings was that we began to learn how to express ourselves, think critically, and communicate those thoughts to others. These basic skills were unfamiliar to us as we had all grown up in a dictatorship. Under authoritarian circumstances, you *can* think freely; but expressing yourself — only if you were in favor of what the government was doing. As far as criticizing — only if you were crazy!

This process of democratization and transformation of teachers forced us to take a more conscious and reflective attitude towards our role as educators. Historically, we had, as a group, primarily been interested in content, viewing ourselves as transmitters of a knowledge base that was disassociated from the reality of our students as well as the political, economic, and social reality of our country. Another product of this process was the friendship, collegiality, solidarity, and mutual respect that developed among our staff. We stopped behaving as if we were apprentices waiting to be spoon fed everything by those farther up in the hierarchy.

The Effect on Students

There were, in fact, two central moments in our transformation process. The first

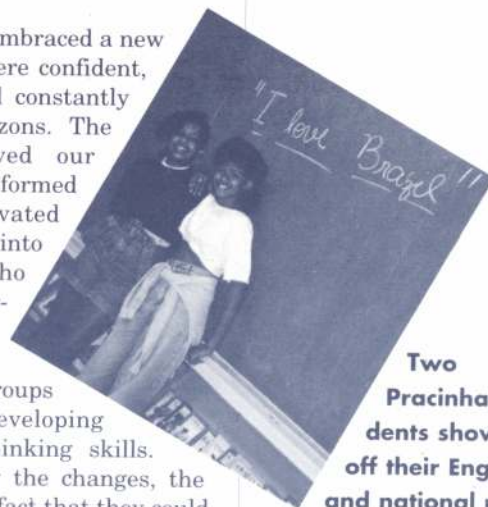
occurred when teachers embraced a new role as educators who were confident, full of enthusiasm, and constantly searching for new horizons. The second moment involved our students who were transformed from receptive, unmotivated and submissive children into young researchers who were participative, interested, analytical and critical.

Students worked in groups and concentrated on developing research and critical thinking skills. Initially overwhelmed by the changes, the students grew to love the fact that they could rotate between the classroom, multi-purpose room, and a newly created study hall area; work in groups with their peers; conduct research by reading magazines, literature, and newspapers; watch educational videos; and create dances and plays to perform for the school. Most of all, they were enthralled by the fact that these activities focused on issues that were a part of their every day concerns.

These two changes created an about face in the interior of the school. Historically, students only came to school to attend classes. With this new democratic spirit in the school, the students began to hang out at the school even during non-school hours. Parents were concerned about the whereabouts of their children.

Involving Parents

Parents' concerns led them to visit the school and they ended up becoming involved in this new school dynamic. More importantly, they began to participate in the School Site Council. (Please see INTERVIEW with two parents on page 14.) This was actually the third pivotal moment of transformation, and arguably the most important because the school opened itself up, spontaneously and democratically, to the community. The neigh-



Two
Pracinhas stu-
dents showing
off their English
and national pride.

Brazil - Educational Statistics

	Teachers	Students		
Pre-primary	155,358	3,740,512	1990 Illiteracy Rate	19%
Primary	1,260,501	28,943,619	1990 Primary School Enrollment	88%
Secondary	243,246	3,498,777		

(From The World Bank Atlas 1994, Washington D.C.: The World Bank)

It is about improving the quality of life of the entire population, decreasing hunger, homelessness, unsanitary living conditions, and promoting public services. In the final analysis, it is about the promotion of humanity.

borhood surrounding Pracinhas is poor and without many options for leisure or entertainment. With the changing role of the school, the community had an open cultural space where each member was valued, and felt they played a useful and important role.


This brief history reveals several elements that contribute to success in changing a school. First, structural changes must precede alterations of curriculum and pedagogy. In our school, we experienced a flattening of our former hierarchy so that teachers, coordinators and administrators worked together as partners. Second, structural changes must be accompanied by new ways of developing teaching and learning strategies — the stuff of education.

Finally, a grassroots democratization

cannot omit mention of the ways in which this Project affected our personal lives. In my case, I changed in terms of my various roles as wife, mother, and historical actor. My transformation carried into my struggles for better work conditions, improvements in my salary, and respect for my rights as a citizen. This expanded even further to passing these values on to my children, husband, and friends. Because of conditions in my country, I knew that it would take the efforts of many to change our reality. For this reason, I have tried hard to involve as many people as I can.

As a final note, it is important to mention that although the Interdisciplinary Project was conceived and launched by the Workers' Party, it cannot be linked only to particular party interests or a particular ideological line. It is about improving the quality of life of the entire population, decreasing hunger, homelessness, unsanitary living conditions, and promoting public services. In the final analysis, it is about the promotion of humanity.

We have suffered many disappointments with politics in Brazil. Corruption is in the very fabric of our institutions, and we feel we have very few choices. However, today, seniors, youth, adults, children fill up the streets of our cities demanding dignity and respect, and displaying their discontent with corruption, the faltering economy, and the ways in which social issues are treated. This new habit of participation is, without

doubt, the fruit of work done at the grassroots. The Interdisciplinary Project is a teacher's way of working at the grassroots. The Interdisciplinary Project provides the early opportunity for youth to establish democratic practice for a lifetime. 

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This artwork appeared in a 1991 publication for teachers providing an annual update on the overall Secretariat effort.

process is essential in reaching these objectives. The traditional leaders, such as the school director, continued to play a role at Pracinhas. But the heart of the teaching and learning process at our school depended on the collective efforts of the students, teachers, and parents. As a by-product, our school has reached out to the community so that even neighbors without children in school still get involved in activities uniting the school and community.

Personal Growth

To this point, we have focussed on the professional growth that we experienced, but I