RCMOS – Revista Científica Multidisciplinar O Saber. ISSN: 2675-9128. São Paulo - SP.
Ano VII, v.1 2026 | submissão: 08/09/2026 | aceito: 11/09/2026 | publicação: 14/09/2026

The practice of critical reflection: analyzing pedagogical experiences in light of Freire's thought

A prática da reflexão crítica: analisando as experiências pedagógicas à luz do pensamento de Freire

La práctica de la reflexión crítica: análisis de las experiencias pedagógicas a la luz del pensamiento de Freire

Cátia Mara Soares Garcêz Ribeiro; Dionne de Siqueira Azevedo; Emilene Cleide Inacia Dutra; Fabiana Rulim da Silva Lacortt; Izis Karina Ogeda de Oliveira Santana; Jucelia Santana de Sena; Lucicleide Maria de Oliveira Fernandes; Patrícia de Oliveira Silva; Sandra Bernardino da Silva Santos; Silvia Marcia do Nascimento

Abstract:
This article addresses the practice of critical reflection in pedagogical experiences in light of Paulo Freire's thought, considering its relevance to the formation of conscious, participatory subjects capable of interpreting the reality in which they live. Critical reflection is understood as an educational principle that goes beyond the transmission of content and is related to the collective construction of knowledge, dialogue, autonomy, conscientization, and praxis. The study discusses how Freirean pedagogy contributes to rethinking the educator's role, the learner's place, and the challenges of everyday school life, especially in the face of traditional practices, standardized assessments, and social inequalities that permeate Brazilian education. The investigation was conducted through bibliographic research based on works by Paulo Freire and recent Brazilian academic publications selected for their relationship to liberating education, teacher education, dialogue, diversity, digital culture, and reflective practice. The results indicate that critical reflection fosters a more democratic, ethical pedagogical practice committed to social transformation, because it enables schools to recognize students' knowledge, problematize reality, and build more inclusive educational alternatives. It is concluded that critical reflection, when incorporated into planning, classroom relationships, and teaching practice, strengthens learners' autonomy and contributes to a more humane, participatory, and socially committed education.

Keywords:
critical reflection; pedagogical practice; conscientization; social transformation

Resumo:
O presente artigo aborda a prática da reflexão crítica nas experiências pedagógicas à luz do pensamento de Paulo Freire, considerando sua relevância para a formação de sujeitos conscientes, participativos e capazes de interpretar a realidade em que vivem. A reflexão crítica é compreendida como um princípio educativo que ultrapassa a transmissão de conteúdos e se relaciona à construção coletiva do conhecimento, ao diálogo, à autonomia, à conscientização e à práxis. O estudo discute como a pedagogia freiriana contribui para repensar o papel do educador, o lugar do educando e os desafios presentes no cotidiano escolar, sobretudo diante de práticas tradicionais, avaliações padronizadas e desigualdades sociais que atravessam a educação brasileira. A investigação foi desenvolvida por meio de pesquisa bibliográfica, com base em obras de Paulo Freire e produções acadêmicas nacionais publicadas nos últimos anos, selecionadas por sua relação com os temas da educação libertadora, formação docente, diálogo, diversidade, cultura digital e prática reflexiva. Os resultados apontam que a reflexão crítica favorece uma prática pedagógica mais democrática, ética e comprometida com a transformação social, pois permite que a escola reconheça os saberes dos estudantes, problematize a realidade e construa alternativas educativas mais inclusivas. Conclui-se que a reflexão crítica, quando incorporada ao planejamento, às relações em sala de aula e à atuação docente, fortalece a

autonomia dos educandos e contribui para uma educação mais humana, participativa e socialmente comprometida.

Palavras-chave:
reflexão crítica; prática pedagógica; conscientização; transformação social

Resumen:
Este artículo aborda la práctica de la reflexión crítica en las experiencias pedagógicas a la luz del pensamiento de Paulo Freire, considerando su relevancia para la formación de sujetos conscientes, participativos y capaces de interpretar la realidad en la que viven. La reflexión crítica se entiende como un principio educativo que supera la transmisión de contenidos y se relaciona con la construcción colectiva del conocimiento, el diálogo, la autonomía, la concientización y la praxis. El estudio analiza cómo la pedagogía freireana contribuye a repensar el papel del educador, el lugar del educando y los desafíos presentes en la vida escolar cotidiana, sobre todo ante prácticas tradicionales, evaluaciones estandarizadas y desigualdades sociales que atraviesan la educación brasileña. La investigación se desarrolló mediante una revisión bibliográfica basada en obras de Paulo Freire y producciones académicas brasileñas recientes, seleccionadas por su relación con la educación liberadora, la formación docente, el diálogo, la diversidad, la cultura digital y la práctica reflexiva. Los resultados señalan que la reflexión crítica favorece una práctica pedagógica más democrática, ética y comprometida con la transformación social, pues permite que la escuela reconozca los saberes de los estudiantes, problematice la realidad y construya alternativas educativas más inclusivas. Se concluye que la reflexión crítica, cuando se incorpora a la planificación, a las relaciones en el aula y a la actuación docente, fortalece la autonomía de los educandos y contribuye a una educación más humana, participativa y socialmente comprometida.

Palabras clave:
reflexión crítica; práctica pedagógica; concientización; transformación social

1 Introduction

Education, from a critical perspective, cannot be understood merely as the transmission of content, because it involves historical, social, and cultural subjects who actively participate in constructing knowledge. Freire (2021a) argues that teaching requires respect for learners' knowledge, ethical commitment, and openness to dialogue, fundamental elements for making school more democratic and formative. In the same direction, Freire (2021b) understands education as a practice linked to freedom, awareness, and the transformation of reality, which allows the classroom to be seen as an environment of listening, problematization, and collective participation.

Critical reflection occupies a central place in this process, since it enables educators and learners to assess their experiences, question naturalized practices, and recognize contradictions in social reality. Freire (2021c) relates human formation to the ability to read the world even before reading the word, while Gomes (2021) emphasizes that Freirean thought helps confront contemporary teaching-learning problems. Pedagogical practice is thus understood as

conscious, situated action committed to forming subjects capable of thinking, dialoguing, and acting upon their context.

This study is justified by the need to understand how critical reflection can help overcome traditional teaching models still marked by teacher centrality, memorization, and limited student participation. The problem arises from the fact that many schools still struggle to promote dialogical, autonomous, and socially meaningful practices. Therefore, the question is: how can critical reflection grounded in Paulo Freire's thought contribute to more democratic, humanizing, and transformative pedagogical experiences?

The general objective of this study is to analyze the importance of critical reflection in pedagogical experiences in light of Paulo Freire's thought. Its specific objectives are to understand critical reflection as a principle of liberating education; discuss dialogue and praxis as paths for constructing knowledge; analyze the educator's role in forming critical, autonomous subjects; and identify the main challenges of critical reflection in everyday school life.

The adopted methodology is bibliographic research based on the analysis of books, scientific articles, and Brazilian academic works related to the topic. The inclusion descriptors were “Paulo Freire,” “critical reflection,” “pedagogical practice,” “liberating education,” “dialogue,” “praxis,” “teacher education,” and “autonomy.” Classic works by Paulo Freire in recent editions and Brazilian articles preferably published between 2021 and 2026 on critical reflection and Freirean pedagogy were included. Texts without identified authorship, materials unrelated to the topic, publications lacking complete bibliographic data, non-academic sources, and studies not engaging with critical education, teaching practice, or the formation of autonomous subjects were excluded.

2 The practice of critical reflection in pedagogical experiences in light of Paulo Freire

The practice of critical reflection in pedagogical experiences is one of the most relevant ways to understand the contemporary significance of Paulo Freire's thought. His educational proposal values dialogue, listening, the problematization of reality, and subjects' active participation in learning. School should therefore be seen not merely as a place for transferring content, but as an environment of human, social, and political formation. Freire (2021a) understands teaching as an ethical practice marked by responsibility toward others, while Freire (2021b) states that liberating education grows stronger when educators and learners adopt an active stance toward the world.

Students cease to occupy a passive position and are recognized as subjects who think, feel, question, and produce knowledge. Silva and Campos (2021) emphasize the relevance of critical pedagogy to the democratization of education, while Cassiani and Pereira (2021) broaden this debate by linking Freirean dialogicity to intercultural teacher education. Critical reflection therefore means not only assessing school practices, but also understanding how they may foster or restrict learners' autonomy, diversity, and participation.

2.1 Critical reflection as a principle of liberating education

Freire (2021a) understands education as a practice committed to forming subjects capable of intervening in the world; this requires treating critical reflection as a structuring principle of pedagogical action. At school, reflecting critically means going beyond repetition and creating conditions for educators and learners to analyze reality, question inequalities, and recognize their own social positions. Silva and Campos (2021) affirm that critical pedagogy remains current because it advocates democratic education capable of confronting authoritarian practices and models that reduce teaching to numerical outcomes. Critical reflection is therefore not an isolated activity, but a permanent stance toward knowledge, human relationships, and social challenges.

The liberating education proposed by Freire (2021b) rejects the idea that learners are mere recipients of information, recognizing that every subject carries knowledge, memories, experiences, and distinct ways of interpreting the world. This conception brings pedagogical practice closer to a humane relationship in which teachers retain responsibility without being the sole owners of knowledge. Gomes (2021) notes that methods inspired by popular education value participants' concrete reality and make learning more meaningful. Critical reflection thus enables school content to engage with life, everyday problems, and possibilities for social transformation.

Freire (2021c) argues that reading the word cannot be separated from reading the world, because knowledge acquires meaning when related to subjects' concrete experience. This occurs when educators organize situations in which students critically analyze texts, images, social events, and community experiences. Zuin and Mello (2021) also state that digital culture requires rethinking relations among teacher, student, and knowledge, because access to information alone does not guarantee critical thought. School must therefore transform information into understanding, opinion into argument, and experience into reflected knowledge.

Freire (2021d) stresses that teaching demands respect, listening, and commitment to learners' dignity, because teaching involves ethical and affective dimensions. Cassiani and Pereira (2021) extend this discussion by relating dialogicity to valuing different cultures, voices, and experiences, especially in teacher education. Critical reflection is thus not limited to the intellectual plane; it recognizes the other as a legitimate subject with a history, identity, and right to participate.

Freire (2021e) views popular education as a practice directed toward social commitment, reinforcing the importance of a pedagogy that does not ignore real conflicts. In school this principle may appear in dialogue circles, interdisciplinary projects, analysis of local problems, guided debates, and assessment practices that value students' trajectories. Souza, Soares, and Lima (2021) show that pedagogical workshops and reflective practices can connect work, education, and critical formation, especially when subjects relate school knowledge to their own experiences. Learning then ceases to be the accumulation of information and becomes a process of awareness.

Critical reflection is therefore an essential principle of liberating education because it promotes autonomy, participation, and social responsibility. Freire (2022a) states that reading involves understanding, interpretation, and positioning oneself before the world, strengthening a pedagogy that encourages students to think beyond ready-made answers. Silva and Campos (2021) note that critical pedagogy remains necessary when democratic debate is weakened, since schools may reproduce silencing or open paths toward emancipation. Critical reflection is thus consolidated as a formative practice that connects knowledge, life, and social transformation.

2.2 Dialogue and praxis as paths to the construction of knowledge

Freire (2021b) understands dialogue as the foundation of liberating education, because through it subjects recognize themselves as participants in the construction of knowledge. Dialogue is not merely informal conversation, but an ethical, political, and pedagogical attitude grounded in listening, respect, and problematizing reality. Silva and Campos (2021) state that critical pedagogy grows stronger when education commits to democratizing school relations. A dialogical classroom does not eliminate the teacher's role; it reorganizes power relations so that speech circulates and different experiences take part in education.

For Freire (2021a), praxis is the articulation of action and reflection, preventing pedagogical practice from becoming mechanical repetition or discourse detached from reality.

Educators experience praxis when they plan, act, listen, assess, and reorganize their action. Gomes (2021) connects Freirean methods to the need to consider contemporary learning problems through concrete social demands. Knowledge therefore arises not only from presented content, but from the relationship among content, students' experience, and collective reflection on the world.

Freire (2021f) criticizes educational practices that confuse communication with mere information transfer, because communication requires reciprocity and participation. This matters especially where teaching still relies on rigid lectures and memorization-centered assessments. Zuin and Mello (2021) observe that digital culture changed access to knowledge but also brought information overload, distraction, and weak argumentation. Dialogue becomes even more necessary because it helps students interpret critically what they access, share, and produce.

Freire (2021d) states that teaching demands courage, responsibility, and commitment to human formation, which means welcoming learners' questions, doubts, and experiences. Cassiani and Pereira (2021) show that dialogicity can also foster intercultural teacher education by allowing different histories, cultures, and ways of life into the pedagogical process. Knowledge construction becomes broader when school recognizes that learning involves both formal content and students' lived experiences.

Praxis also strengthens autonomy by bringing thought and action together. Freire (2022b) relates hope and indignation to the ability not to accept reality as immutable, a stance connected to pedagogical practices that encourage analysis, positioning, and intervention. Souza, Soares, and Lima (2021) present workshops as ways to connect reflection and practice in Integrated Secondary Education, showing that participatory experiences deepen students' understanding of work, education, and society. Praxis is not abstract; it occurs when school enables subjects to think about and seek to transform their reality.

2.3 The educator's role in forming critical and autonomous subjects

Freire (2021a) understands that teaching requires rigor, ethics, respect for learners' knowledge, and commitment to autonomy. Educators therefore have a decisive role in forming critical subjects because their practice may stimulate participation or reinforce passivity. Silva and Campos (2021) argue that critical pedagogy democratizes education by questioning authoritarian and exclusionary models. Teachers should be seen not only as transmitters of content, but as mediators of formative experiences that broaden students' reading of the world.

The formation of autonomous subjects depends on teaching that recognizes students as active participants. Freire (2021d) advocates a pedagogical relationship marked by seriousness, listening, and appreciation of teacher responsibility. Gomes (2021) notes that Freirean thought helps confront current teaching-learning challenges, especially when schools consider learners' social and cultural conditions. Educators must create situations in which students can ask, argue, disagree, revise ideas, and develop their own positions.

Freire (2021c) shows that reading involves understanding reality, extending the educator's responsibility in organizing pedagogical work. It is insufficient to teach content disconnected from life; relationships must be fostered among school knowledge, personal experiences, and social problems. Zuin and Mello (2021) observe that in digital culture the teacher remains essential, not as the sole holder of information, but as a guide for critical analysis, source selection, and meaning making. Educators thus help students not only access data but interpret it responsibly.

Freire (2021b) understands liberating education as being built through recognition of subjects and the overcoming of practices that silence experience. Cassiani and Pereira (2021) affirm that Freirean dialogicity supports intercultural formation by valuing different voices and realities. Educators who seek to form critical subjects must combat prejudice, make room for diverse narratives, and build an environment in which students feel respected in their identities, trajectories, and forms of expression.

Freire (2021e) links educational commitment to social responsibility, meaning that teachers do not act neutrally before inequality: their practices reveal choices, values, and worldviews. Souza, Soares, and Lima (2021) indicate that workshop- and reflection-based experiences connect students with debates about work, citizenship, and social reality. Educators strengthen autonomy when they propose activities requiring analysis, participation, and taking a position rather than reproducing ready-made answers.

The educator's role is therefore to create conditions for students to develop critical awareness, intellectual autonomy, and social sensitivity. Freire (2022b) links indignation to refusing injustice and seeking alternatives, while Freire (2022c) values possible dreams as horizons for transformation. Silva and Campos (2021) relate critical pedagogy and democracy. Freirean educators educate not only for school performance, but for conscious social participation, recognizing that every pedagogical practice may expand or restrict possibilities for emancipation.

From a Freirean perspective, educators must recognize that each student arrives with experiences, knowledge, values, and distinct ways of understanding the world. Freire (2021b)

argues that liberating education is built when subjects are recognized in their historicity, requiring teaching sensitive to the social realities affecting learners. Gomes (2021) notes that Freire-inspired methods bring teaching closer to students' concrete experiences, making learning more meaningful. Forming critical, autonomous subjects therefore means enabling students to relate school content to reality, identify problems, formulate arguments, and develop their own positions.

Freire (2021d) states that teaching requires respect, listening, and responsibility, preventing teaching from becoming mechanical or authoritarian. When educators welcome questions, encourage doubts, and value different forms of expression, they create an environment favorable to participation and critical thought. Cassiani and Pereira (2021) connect Freirean dialogicity to intercultural formation and show that recognizing differences is essential to emancipatory education. Educators contribute to autonomy not by imposing ready-made truths, but by encouraging well-founded, respectful, and socially conscious understandings.

Zuin and Mello (2021) observe that digital culture has profoundly changed how subjects access content, interact, and form opinions, but access alone does not guarantee critical formation. Freire (2021f) distinguishes true communication from mere transmission, because communication requires dialogue, reciprocity, and construction of meaning. The teacher therefore guides critical reading of the digital world, helping students analyze sources, identify manipulative discourse, and act responsibly toward what they consume and share.

Freire (2021a) emphasizes that teaching cannot be committed to autonomy when educators demand critical thinking from students while maintaining authoritarian attitudes. Souza, Soares, and Lima (2021) show that reflective practices, such as workshops and participatory activities, can connect knowledge, work, and social reality. Autonomy develops not only through verbal guidance, but through concrete experiences in which students participate, express opinions, analyze problems, and see that their contributions matter.

2.4 Challenges of critical reflection in everyday school life

Freire (2021a) understands that educational practice requires coherence between discourse and action, revealing one of the greatest challenges of critical reflection at school. Many institutions defend citizenship education in their pedagogical projects while maintaining routines centered on repetition, rigid discipline, and standardized assessment. Silva and Campos (2021) emphasize that critical pedagogy becomes even more necessary when education risks

being reduced to indicators and results. Implementing critical reflection therefore requires real changes in teaching, assessment, planning, and coexistence.

Freire (2021b) criticizes practices that treat learners as passive because they obstruct autonomy and critical awareness. Gomes (2021) observes that contemporary teaching-learning problems require methods capable of engaging with social transformations. Yet many educators face large classes, scarce resources, excessive content, and institutional pressures that hinder dialogue. Even so, small changes, such as problem-posing questions, guided debates, and analysis of real situations, can open paths toward more reflective practices.

Zuin and Mello (2021) state that constant access to information has profoundly altered the relationship among teacher, student, and knowledge. Freire (2021f) helps explain that communication is not merely transmission but the relational construction of meaning. Schools must confront misinformation, superficial reading, and uncritical uses of technology. Critical reflection is essential so students learn to evaluate sources, recognize interests within discourse, and understand that rapid information is not the same as consistent knowledge.

Freire (2021d) advocates respectful and ethically responsible teaching, while Cassiani and Pereira (2021) show that dialogicity helps confront coloniality and exclusion in teacher education. In everyday school life, this challenge appears when the voices of poor, Black, Indigenous, rural, peripheral, or historically marginalized students are disregarded. Critical reflection makes it possible to question these exclusions and build inclusive practices in which different experiences are recognized as legitimate parts of education.

Freire (2022b) relates indignation to refusing accommodation before injustice, showing that critical reflection must not be confused with mere opinion. It requires analysis, listening, argumentation, and commitment to transformation. Souza, Soares, and Lima (2021) show that reflective practices can connect school, work, and social reality, especially when activities link knowledge to concrete life. Despite institutional, pedagogical, and cultural difficulties, critical reflection offers an opportunity to make school more democratic, meaningful, and socially committed.

Table 1 - Challenges and possibilities of critical reflection in everyday school life

Challenges in everyday school life	Pedagogical possibilities	Contributions to student formation
Predominance of lectures and memorization	Dialogue circles, debates, and problematization of real situations	Greater participation, argumentation, and autonomy
Pressure for standardized results	Process-based assessment, self-assessment, and analysis of the formative path	Valuing learning as continuous construction
Limited recognition of cultural diversity	Inclusion of students' experiences, narratives, and contexts	Strengthening identity, respect, and democratic coexistence
Uncritical use of digital technologies	Critical reading of media, sources, and discourse in digital environments	Development of responsibility, analysis, and critical thinking

Source: Prepared by the author based on Freire (2021a), Freire (2021b), Zuin and Mello (2021), Cassiani and Pereira (2021), and Souza, Soares, and Lima (2021).

Table 1 presents recurring challenges to consolidating critical reflection in school and possibilities for addressing them through dialogical pedagogical practices. The obstacles involve not only teachers' individual action but also institutional, cultural, and social conditions. Nevertheless, the proposed possibilities show that critical reflection can be incorporated through viable strategies such as dialogue circles, analysis of real situations, process-based assessment, and critical reading of technologies. Schools can thus transform apparently simple practices into more democratic and inclusive formative experiences committed to students' autonomy.

3 Final considerations

Critical reflection, analyzed in light of Paulo Freire's thought, is essential to constructing a more humane, democratic, and transformative pedagogical practice. Education must not be limited to transmitting content, because it involves concrete subjects marked by histories, cultures, challenges, and possibilities. When school values dialogue and participation, learning becomes more meaningful and favors the formation of students capable of interpreting reality with greater awareness.

Educators also play a fundamental role in forming critical and autonomous subjects. Their work is not limited to organizing content; it involves pedagogical, ethical, and social choices that can expand or restrict student participation. Teaching committed to critical reflection recognizes learners' knowledge, encourages listening, welcomes different viewpoints, and creates conditions for collective learning.

Many challenges remain in implementing critical reflection in everyday school life. Traditional models, pressure for standardized results, lack of time for dialogue, and superficial uses of technology hinder participatory practices. Yet these obstacles do not eliminate

possibilities for transformation. Small changes in planning, assessment, and classroom relationships can strengthen more reflective and inclusive pedagogical experiences.

It is concluded that critical reflection is a necessary path toward education committed to autonomy, dignity, and social transformation. Inspired by Freirean thought, school can become a space for questioning, listening, and collectively constructing knowledge. Educating critically thus means helping subjects better understand their world and recognize themselves as active participants in its transformation.

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