

Humanization of Education in Pakistan through Freire's Concept of Literacy

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Pakistan is an underdeveloped country, full of socio-economic problems where a few oppress and exploit many. One of the most significant reasons, in this context, is the high illiteracy rate in the country. However, can high literacy rates guarantee peace, prosperity, and justice in any society? Clearly, not. There are several countries where the literacy rate is very high yet it remains relatively under-developed. However, it is also a fact that the countries where the literacy rate is high have been able to emerge as economic powers. In this regard, Freire's concept of literacy education is very helpful in that it is essentially hopeful in nature and it is this optimism which gives it the potential to transform oppressive situations.

Key Words: Exploitation, Critical literacy, Dialogue, Humanization, Liberation.

Pakistan is one of the countries where the literacy rate is very low. The reasons for having such a low literacy rate in the country are numerous, such as individual disabilities, personal problems, persistent feudalism, corruption in politics, a crippled economy, and corruption in the Department of Education. Moreover, one of the most significant reasons is the weakness of the teaching-learning process and without improving the teaching-learning process, literacy rates in the country cannot be improved.

In fact, after independence from Britain and separation from India in 1947, Pakistan's education system has gone through a variety of crises so that it has no time to improve itself in reality. In spite of different claims from the different ruling political parties, it is a fact that the education system continues to suffer. A poor education system in the country is one of the reasons that the whole nation is undergoing political, economical, ethnic, religious, and cultural crises.

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However, there is no doubt that a high literacy rate is no guarantee for ensuring peace, prosperity, and justice in any society.

There are several countries where in spite of having a high literacy rate, there is neither peace nor do the majority of people have the opportunities to fulfill their most basic needs. There are many such countries but I will mention just a limited sample. According to statistics on the web, the literacy rates for the following countries are as follows: "Brazil 81%, Myanmar 81%, Turkey 81%, Indonesia 84%, Mexico 87%, Sri Lanka 88%, Thailand 93%, Philippines 94%, Vietnam 94%, Kyrgyz Tan 97%, Azerbaijan 97%, Kazakhstan 98%, and North Korea 100%." In spite of this, people in these countries are suffering and facing many economical, social, and political problems. This means that literacy alone cannot be guaranteed to solve all human problems. However, at the same time, we must not forget that in the countries which are so called developed countries, literacy rates are almost 100 percent. For example, Italy 97%, Poland 98%, South Korea 98%, Japan 99%, New Zealand 99%, Norway 99%, Switzerland 99%, France 99%, Denmark 99%, The UK 99%, Germany 99%, Australia 100%, and Austria 100%" (www.factmonster.com)

So in the light of the literacy census shown above, we can conclude that education is no guarantee in solving all the problems in any particular country or society, but at the same time, without education, there is no way any country can be called a truly developed country. Of course, there are some exceptional countries where the literacy rate is not so high compared to developed countries, yet they are economically better off because of having inherited high value natural resources, such as oil producing countries where the literacy rate is not 100 percent. Among such countries, there are, "Saudi Arabia 62%, Kuwait 73%, and the United Arab Emirates 68%." Note: according to the web site, www.factmonster.com, all "literacy rates are supplied by the U.S. Census Bureau" (www.factmonster.com)

In spite of having various problems in many highly literate countries, I would argue that improving the literacy rate in any country is a kind of first step towards a better life. Subsequent steps can be taken to transform any sort of dehumanized situation into a humanized one. The reasons and causes by which dehumanized situations are created are many, and need to be overcome by opening several fronts to fight against those oppressive factors. However, the front to fight against illiteracy is the most important front in this context.

In particular, in underdeveloped countries, Freire's concept of literacy education has been popular because of its hopeful nature. Freire's hope is "not just a question of grit or courage. It's an ontological dimension of our human condition (1998, p, 47). Therefore, even in the most oppressive social circumstances in Brazil, Freire envisioned beams of light through the growth of literacy in his country. Throughout his experience as an educator in Brazil, Chile, Guinea-Bissau, and Nicaragua, he always retained what he refers to as a 'utopian dream,' that is, a hope for a "less unjust, less cruel, more democratic, less discriminatory, less racist, [and] less sexist" society (Freire, 1993, p. 115). In order to work for the oppressed, he closely associated himself with the Basic Church Communities that had, as indicated by Taylor, "grown to accept the need for a clearer identification with the poor, and for a theology of liberation relevant to ordinary people" (Taylor, 1993, p. 22).

Freire talks about the importance of literacy not merely for the small, oppressed communities in Brazil but everywhere in the world and particularly in the Third World. From his perspective, "The Third World is in the last analysis the world of silence, of oppression, of dependence, of exploitation, of the violence exercised by the ruling classes on the oppressed" (1985, p. 140). The situation that Freire observed in Brazil is quite similar as that which prevails in

most underdeveloped countries such as Pakistan. A description of the political and oppressive situation in Brazil, especially during the 1950s to 1980s and early 1990s, reflects present day Pakistan. Almost every aspect of society-religious fundamentalism, politics, economy, feudalism, and education-is similar to the situation in Brazil a few decades ago. At that time, Brazil was a deeply distorted, confused, and oppressed society. Describing the situation Freire faced as Secretary of Education, Torres tells how Freire faced "seemingly insurmountable problems of abandoned children living in the streets, growing poverty and urban violence, fiscal constraints, particularly due to Brazil's growing external debt, and the peculiarities of post-dictatorship Brazilian politics and electoral struggle." Freire himself describes the corruption and violence perpetrated by the so-called elite class in Brazil: "they steal, they kill, they violate, they kidnap, and nothing or almost nothing happens" (1996, p. 46). All these problems mentioned in Brazil can be seen and experienced in Pakistan everyday. Democracy is always hijacked by military coups (the current president of Pakistan is an army general who came to power in a coup d'etat.), almost all politicians are condemned for corruption, rigid bureaucracy, bribery, and various other serious problems are part of daily life in Pakistan.

Contrary to the situation of Pakistan, as the literacy rate grew in Brazil, gradually the society began to be transformed. As a result, today the newly elected president of Brazil is Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva who was a former trade union leader and factory worker. Lula grew up in extreme poverty. He became Brazil's first working class president and took office in January 2003. However, up to now, there is no hope for a common person to reach such a high level in Pakistan's government. However, it will be possible (or can be expected) that if the majority of the population in Pakistan becomes literate and humanized

In fact, in the present dynamic world, literacy has been so crucial for human beings that in the societies where the literacy rate is low, various kinds of social, political, economical, religious, gender, and race problems are much more prevalent than in societies where the literacy rate is higher. The benefits of literacy accrue not only to individuals; rather they benefit the entire society. In this context, the educational system in Pakistan and the social environment can benefit from Freire's theoretical assumptions and practical experience concerning the value of literacy.

Freire criticizes the "digestive" concept of knowledge embedded in the traditional teaching-learning process that asserts that illiterates are just 'undernourished,' 'poisoned,' or

diseased' beings, in need of the 'cure' of literacy. Therefore, a mere depositing of written words where none existed before supposedly provides the 'bread of the spirit' to be 'eaten' and 'digested' by illiterates. This conception of illiteracy fuels the humanitarianism in literacy campaigns: the words of the lettered coordinators of teachers are to be brought and gifted to those in need to save them from the deprivation of wordlessness. In contrast, Freire believes that, "[m]erely teaching men to read and write does not work miracles; if there are not enough jobs for men able to work, teaching more men to read and write will not create them" (1970b, 24).

From Freire's point of view, illiteracy is a reflection or a manifestation--but not the *cause*--of wider structural inequalities. Keeping significant sections of the population in a state of illiteracy, while granting full access to the written word for a privileged few, can be seen as an act of violence. Moreover, Freire observed that adult illiterates are as 'beings for another'-dominated people within an oppressive social order. The solution to this situation does not lie in more deeply immersing illiterates within the structures that oppress them, but in transformation of the conditions of oppression. Therefore, Freire maintains that literacy is the most important element in the struggle to overcome oppressive social conditions.

In fact, literacy is a political phenomenon. This is seen in the fact that governments require compulsory reading classes in school. For example, in South Korea, elementary education is compulsory; therefore, all parents are compelled to send their children to school but education is optional in Pakistan. Therefore, poor parents try to get financial remuneration by making their children work rather than sending them to the school. Thus, the decision to encourage people to become literate is a political one, just as the denial of literacy is also a political decision. But for Freire, more important is the way that people become literate and the way that they practice the reading and writing skills that they have acquired. This is undeniably a question of politics. Freire suggests that the wrong way is to institute a form of literacy pedagogy that aims to domesticate and adapt people to accept an oppressive set of social circumstances. The way to liberation is to foster forms of reading and writing that seek to challenge these conditions.

The passages above in which you attempt to draw causal connections between literacy levels and socio-economic status should be discarded. Such claims are difficult if not impossible to substantiate.

Freire suggests that the words which form the beginning

of any literacy program must be based on the experience(s)--the lived reality--of participants. A series of generative words corresponding to aspects of everyday life can be the foundation of the teaching-learning process. This principle can be applied at all levels in the education spectrum, whether it is adults or children with whom one is working. The first words for any person learning to read and write must be their words, words from their world.

However, this does not mean that personal experience should represent the endpoint of a literacy program. Education ought to challenge people to go beyond their current understanding of the world, whether this is through reading and writing, or through any other form of social intercourse. An educator can do it by challenging students, by demanding something more of them in their thinking than they have been accustomed to, and by expanding their existing critical capacities. Freire believes that each person has unique access to at least one domain of knowledge--the reality of their own lived experience. A literacy program cannot succeed if learners are unable to relate in some way to what educators are saying. The stronger the connection with existing knowledge and experience, the better learners will be able to proceed with further learning by building on this base. In other words, Freire believes in a teaching-learning process that proceeds 'from known to unknown, from general to abstract, and from easy to difficult.'

In the teaching-learning process, dialogue is a bridge between existing realities and new forms of knowledge or experience in any educational endeavor. Dialogue provides a 'way into' the world of the illiterate for teachers. Indeed, there is no other way of properly 'tapping' the unique world of each learner's knowledge and experience apart from dialogue. The purpose of dialogue in a literacy program not only is to facilitate the acquisition of reading and writing abilities, but also to promote a critical comprehension and transformation of the participants' social world. In fact, dialogue is intrinsic to the teaching-learning process.

One of the most important Freirian literacy practices is his emphasis on the importance of being critical in reading and writing. In both his practical work with illiterate adults and his numerous theoretical statements on literacy, Freire always upheld the worth of a critical approach toward both the word and the world. This not only applies to adults but also to children: "No matter the level or the age of the students we teach, from preschool to graduate school, reading critically is absolutely important and fundamental (Dillon, 1985, 19). Freire talks about the aesthetic moment in reading, the beauty of books, or the emotions involved in literate activity. In fact,

reading is joyous to the extent that it becomes an active, dialogical critical process and books become beautiful when critically engaged. In other words, reading becomes an act of knowing, when it is critical.

Freire defines the critical aspect of literacy as the concept of conscientization. In the literacy programs with which he was involved, the aim was for illiterate adults to move from a state of either semi-intransitive or naïve-transitive (passive) consciousness to toward critical consciousness (active). More specifically, Freire's goal was "to make it possible for illiterates to learn quickly how to read and to write, and simultaneously to also learn the reasons why the society works in this way or that way" (Horton and Freire, 1990, 84). Therefore, the learners are supposed to get involved in a literacy program through a searching, questioning, curious, and restless approach. This is the way they can acquire quality in reading skills rather than reading a large quantity of books.

Becoming and being critically literate in the Freirean sense implies the development of a particular orientation toward the world. Reading texts critically, from a Freirean point of view, necessitates, and is only possible through, a critical reading of a given context. Word and world become dynamically intertwined in the Freirean concept of critical literacy. Critical reading involves a constant interplay between text and context. The aim is to develop a more critical understanding of text and context through interrogating one in relation to the other.

Freire's view of critical literacy, however, goes beyond the notion of merely critically analyzing and evaluating books. He suggests that critical literacy should be seen as a mode of discursive practice--a way of being in and with the world. Thus, to read and write critically is to engage in a form of dialogical praxis. It is to enter history as a critically conscious Subject, naming and transforming both the word and the world. Therefore, critical literacy is an important element in the struggle for liberation from oppression. Learning to read and write does not in itself bring about the overthrow of oppressive attitudes, practices, and structures but critical literacy can contribute a lot in this context.

Furthermore, critical literacy is concerned with the development of a particular mode of being and acting--not simply a way of dealing with books. Critical literacy has to do with much more than reading and writing in the conventional sense. There is no doubt that texts are not humanizing; people humanize themselves--in part, through engaging books and other written texts, but, more profoundly, through reading, that is, interpreting, reflecting on, interrogating, theorizing, investigating, exploring, probing, questioning, etc., and

writing, that is, acting on and dialogically transforming the social world. To think critically in education is the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained. However, this endeavor requires the physical and mental activities of teachers and the students. As defined by Pintrich, "Physical activity entails effort, persistence, and other overt actions. Mental activity includes such cognitive actions as planning, rehearsing, organizing, monitoring, making decisions, solving problems, and assessing progress. The activities that students engage in are geared toward attaining their goals" (Pintrich, 1998, 4-5).

It should be kept in mind that a student can be an active participant in the teaching-learning process if he understands the value of learning. Harry Schofield said that if "he has no understanding, he lacks the motivation to learn, without which no learning can take place" (1972, p. 162). Besides that understanding, in order to encourage students to be active participants, a teacher has to prove that there is some kind of relationship between real life and education, and that there is an aim that can help him/her to quench a thirst, to achieve some goal, or to get some benefit. Therefore, there should be a very clear purpose, goal, target, and aim of education that is related to the needs of human beings. Such educational aims can be, according to Herman Harrell Horne, "physical, moral, esthetic, intellectual, social vocational, and spiritual" (Horne, 1982, p. 28).

As it has been discussed, the illiteracy in Pakistan is caused by several factors and it is because a significant number of teachers and students do not perceive their very basic human vocation to be 'more fully human' and to be critical of the existential realities. There is no doubt that if our teachers and students actively participate in the teaching-learning process and understand the importance of critical thinking in life and in education, literacy rates can improve in the country in terms of quality and quantity as well.

Yet, lack of 'critical literacy,' in Pakistan's educational system is promoting and perpetuating dehumanizing social behavior. The worst thing which hurts 'critical literacy' is a way of thinking which has no concept of tolerance. And unfortunately, in Pakistani society, intolerance has increased on a very dangerous level. In particular, religious sectarian intolerance in the society is a very common and a destructive influence upon the society.

The people who are involved in sectarian terrorism are indoctrinated religiously and depend on God for every matter of their lives, and cannot perceive the reality beyond what they are taught to believe by some religious sect or cult. Therefore, Freire criticizes the act of religious sectarianism

and considers it 'necrophilic.' According to Freire, "(s)ectarianism mythicizes and thereby alienates; radicalization criticizes and thereby liberates. . . . sectarianism . . . is mythicizing and irrational, turns reality into a false (and therefore unchangeable) 'reality'" (1970a, p. 22). Now the question arises: did Freire advocate that believing in God drags people away from being involved in constructive, imaginative, creative, and re-creative activities of life? Or, did he mean that believing in God turns people into passive personalities, like objects that can be manipulated by others? Of course, Freire did not mean to criticize the "mythicalizing" issue in that context. Even though, at first glance, it seems that he was merely a Marxist puppet, an anti-theistic person who denied God, by studying his books and articles carefully, one can discern his faith in God, a faith that is neither blind nor necrophilic, that is, passive. Rather, Freire believed in an active faith that should be applied 'to be free and free others,' a faith which can restore life and true humanity in the oppressed and the oppressors at the same time.

God neither creates the semi-intransitive conscious nor are human beings born with passive behavior or a semi-intransitive consciousness. Rather, the existence of such dehumanized consciousness is the result of an unjust system in the society, a philosophy that serves the oppressors and supports rotten cultural values, magic, and mythicization, factors that are usually the defenses of religious sectarianism. The latter, mythicization, is always advocated by some religious sect or cult that submerges people in unfair situations and persuades them to be increasingly passive rather than active. Religious sectarianism is something that Freire has condemned very strongly. He believes that religious "sectarianism in any quarter is an obstacle to the emancipation of mankind. . . . [Furthermore, sectarianism, he asserts,] is mythicizing and irrational, turns reality into a false (and therefore unchangeable) reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 22).

In cultivating and perpetuating oppression against the poor, a lethal combination of poverty and religious sectarianism is playing a very significant role in Pakistan. Today, the large majority of Pakistanis have a semi-intransitive consciousness and consequently do not want to or cannot or are forced not to pay attention to their oppressive realities. According to the understanding of such people, to submit to their god, is more precious than anything else on earth. Therefore, seeking eternity in a sensual paradise (the version presented to them by their oppressors) is more valuable than to struggle for a better life here on earth. Furthermore, some members of some religious sects are so indoctrinated that they will do anything in order to impose

their beliefs on society. Such religious sectarianism is so destructive that Freire has called it necrophilic, and moreover, more possessors of semi-intransitive consciousness can be found in religious sects than in any other area of life.

Recently, Dr. Mirza Ahmad, who belongs to the Pakistan Medical Association, lamented that "over 80 doctors had been murdered in the city [Karachi: the most populated city of Pakistan] in the past two years and it was pity that doctors were being murdered on the basis of their belief" (*Daily Dawn*, 2002, April 13). Usually, these killers have no sense of regret for their destructive activities, but instead they justify themselves as obeying the voice of God. For example, on July 1, 2002, the Pakistani police arrested a terrorist named Akram Lahor, who belongs to a religious sect. According to an article in a newspaper, "Akram Lahori, who was produced before the press, admitted his involvement in sectarian killings and said: 'I have no regrets about what I have done'" (*Daily Dawn*, 2002, July 2). In fact, such a statement reveals the state of the consciousness of many religious sectarian people in Pakistan and there are so many examples. Therefore, it is urgent to educate them to think critically about themselves, about others, and about their life situation. Sectarianism has become so destructive that if it is not controlled Pakistan will lose any semblance of civilized life and will deteriorate further into chaos and catastrophe.

Besides the sectarian problem in Pakistan, there are certain other cultural and social values which hinder the promotion of literacy in the society. Freire is right in saying that "the first basic condition that makes the success of literacy campaigns possible: [is] the revolutionary transformation of society" (1987, p. 108). Literacy cannot flourish among the masses in a society where dehumanizing practices such as child labor and bonded labor are very common. In Pakistan, sadly, both child and bonded labor are practiced and perpetuated because the oppressed have no proper legal redress against such dehumanizing exploitation.

In fact, because government policies have sown and nurtured the weeds of hatred and intolerance against other religious sects, only government policies and education have the power to root them out. Of course, changing people's behavior from intolerance to tolerance requires time, legal power, policies, and education. In this context, the government of Pakistan needs to restructure the school curriculum so that human rights and ethical values including tolerance of other religious beliefs are accepted and tolerated in the society. Moreover, the government should send its students and educators to other societies where religious sectarian tolerance is practiced so that they may observe,

research, learn, and find out the ways to spread those beautiful humanistic values in Pakistan. For example, Korea is one society where people live together as a family regardless of their beliefs or religious affiliation. In spite of having different religions in Korean society, there is no sectarian terrorism.

Child and bonded labor in Pakistan are such oppressive cultural practices which need a thorough inquiry in order to terminate them from Pakistani society. Of course, child and bonded labor have a long history there so that it is not easy to eliminate. This is partially because the majority of those who are in the government belong to the powerful elite who benefit from such labor. Therefore, on the one hand, leaders of the oppressed people need to stand up and lead the struggle against oppressive situations, and on the other hand, people of 'good intention' in the government need to legislate policies that will discourage child and bonded labor. In this context, the Pakistani government should strictly ban child and bonded labor and prohibit children under the age of sixteen from being employed in factories, bricks kilns, agriculture, etc. In addition, if primary education is made compulsory for all children under fourteen (even though legally it has become compulsory for the parents to send their children to the school despite there being no implementation of this law), and the adult literacy programs are launched in a better way, within a few decades, the literacy rate in Pakistan will grow very rapidly. Similarly, the government should introduce some policies (which are attractive and meaningful to adults) and a budget for adult literacy projects in Pakistan. Those who are expert in adult literacy, can assist the government in this context. This is a way that literacy in Pakistan can flourish and people can have hope to live in a better society.

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Received November 7, 2003
Revision received April 15, 2005
Accepted May 20, 2005