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The Potential of Critical Pedagogy in Overcoming Stigma: Journey with Paulo Freire

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Abstract: Although stigma is primarily produced and reinforced through structural social processes, educational responses to its transformation remain limited. This article examines how Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy can serve as a transformative approach to addressing deeply ingrained stigmas in academic settings. Drawing on Freire's concepts of critical consciousness (conscientização), dialogue, and praxis, the article highlights how these principles help educators critically engage with the structural foundations of stigma. The study focuses on the classroom practices of three educators inspired by Freirean pedagogy, who aim to create dialogic, democratic, and inclusive learning environments. These educators employ critical dialogue and participatory practices to increase students' awareness of socio-political realities and cultural diversity. Their efforts demonstrate how pedagogy can act as a tool to foster anti-stigma awareness and transformation. The findings offer meaningful insights for educators committed to social justice and inclusive education, encouraging them to recognise, question, and transform stigma in their classrooms.

Keywords: Freire, critical pedagogy, problem-posing model, stigma, dialogue

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INTRODUCTION

Often associated with discrimination or deviance (Goffman, 1963), stigma refers to prejudicial attitudes and negative treatment toward individuals or social identities that possess characteristics considered dangerous, undesirable, antisocial, or worthless (Dovidio et al., 2000; Thornicroft et al., 2007). Viewed by Goffman (1963) as a 'spoiled identity' that leads to social discredit, stigma operates at both individual and structural levels. It constructs certain groups as socially labeled, excluded, and marginalized, mainly through the judgments of others. Education, which is not a neutral process in this construction process (Freire, 1970), plays a fundamental role in shaping individual identities, reinforcing social norms, and creating and maintaining systems of oppression (Apple, 2013; Giroux, 2013; Kincheloe, 2018).

Traditional educational structures that prioritize conformity and reinforce hierarchies (Freire, 1970; Shor & Freire, 1987) often label and exclude those who do not conform to narrow and defined norms, resulting in stigmatization (Reay, 2017). Emphasizing standardized understandings of learning and achievement, this structure not only limits students' academic potential by defining success through standardized patterns (Reay, 2017) but also creates and perpetuates stigmatizing narratives around marginalized identities such as disability, race, and gender (Cologon, 2019; Fergus, 2016; hooks, 2000; Robinson, 2013). These stigmatizing narratives, created in educational environments, become a structural problem that directly affects individuals' self-confidence and self-esteem (Thomson, 2017), their sense of social belonging, social integration, and position within the social structure (Cologon, 2019; Robinson, 2013; Shifrer, 2013; Marsh & Noguera, 2018). This situation often creates negative social labels in students that limit their potential (Noguera, 2003).

Stigma often positions marginalized students as lacking, inadequate, or unsuccessful by comparing them to an idealized norm (Brown, 2011; Cologon, 2019; Reay, 2017). For instance, a student with a learning disability might be labeled as 'slow' or 'unintelligent,' reinforcing a narrative of deficit and marginality. Therefore, stigmatization emphasizes the limitations of marginalized students rather than recognizing their potential and experiences (Cologon, 2019; Marsh & Noguera, 2018). A potent instrument for addressing these complex and interrelated forms of oppression is Freire's critical pedagogical approach. It fosters critical awareness of the social, political, and economic forces that shape one's reality and pedagogy through critical consciousness, praxis, and dialogue. They can help students identify the roots of stigma and develop strategies for collective resistance and transformation by creating spaces for dialogue and reflection. In this way, education becomes a space of challenge and liberation, where educators, as agents of change, can create more inclusive and equitable learning environments that directly challenge and transform stigma.

In this context, this article draws on Freire's critical pedagogy to humanize educational environments where oppressive narratives perpetuate themselves through intersectional means. It aims to contribute to the literature on social justice-oriented education by examining the dialogic practices employed by three educators inspired by Freire in their classrooms to

challenge stigma and address the broader social and structural forces that produce and perpetuate oppression in educational settings.

Literature review: Stigma in education as a structural and systemic problem

Systemic policies that prioritize conformity and standardization over individuals who do not meet strict standards of achievement and attainment are frequently the cause of persistent stigmas in educational settings (Giroux, 2013; Smythe et al., 2020). The literature on stigma shows that marginalized students are often perceived within the educational system as 'incompetent' (Reay, 2017), 'underachievers' (Brown, 2011; Cologon, 2019), Shifrer, 2013), 'outsiders' (Marsh & Noguera, 2018; Smythe et al., 2020), 'threat' (Howard, 2013), and 'deviant' (Marsh & Noguera, 2018), 'criminals' (Neal, 2013, p. 5), and that these students are often evaluated through a 'deficiency' perspective (Cologon, 2019). These stigmas emerge intersectionally due to racism, ableist discrimination, sexism, and class-based forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). As Freire (1970) emphasized, oppression in education is perpetuated through dominant ideologies that systematically exclude certain groups. In this context, stigma emerges not only as an individual labeling process but also as a structural phenomenon embedded in norms, policies, and practices that reinforce inequality (Robinson, 2013).

This situation has led some social scientists to approach the phenomenon of stigma in education from an intersectional perspective. The intersectional approach examines how students possess multiple forms of social identities that they must interact with and how these identities influence their educational experiences (Annamma et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1991). In particular, the overlapping of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and other forms of social identities causes students to encounter multiple and layered forms of stigmatization (marginalization, stereotyping, etc.) (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2000; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cologon, 2019; Fielding, 2007; Spyrou & Spyrou, 2018; Taft, 2019). This problem causes the personal and cultural identities of stigmatized groups to be devalued (Reay, 2017; Smythe et al., 2020).

Research suggests that students with disabilities and students from ethnic or racial minorities experience intersectional stigma that is not adequately addressed in traditional educational practices. For example, students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds often experience stigma in the form of low expectations, microaggressions, and discriminatory disciplinary practices (Smythe et al., 2020). Students with disabilities are often limited in their participation in educational settings and their access to inclusive educational opportunities (Cologon, 2019). These forms of stigma occur not only as parallel processes of discrimination but also as a result of intersectional forms of oppression, such as inequality, discrimination, and racism, that reinforce each other and create complex barriers to educational equity (Dochania, 2024; Nieto, 1999). For example, Annamma, Ferri, and Connor's (2018) framework suggests that students often face intersecting forms of stigma based on race, disability, gender, and class. Nieto (1999) reported that 80% of students at a local high school experienced racism and consequent stigma, which devalued and stigmatized individuals. A recent study of Afghan male students at universities in Delhi found that these

students were subjected to implicit microaggressions and prejudice by Indian students. The same research shows that Afghan students were associated with terrorism by Indian students and that stigmatized individuals were perceived as threats (Dochania, 2024).

On the other hand, curricula, discriminatory practices, and exclusionary policies that are deeply influenced by dominant ideologies around race, gender, ability, and socioeconomic status lead to stigma (Cologon, 2019; Fielding, 2007; Reay, 2017). In particular, students who do not meet the dominant standards of success, as reflected in standardized test scores or behavioral expectations, are often labeled as failures (Brown, 2011) or identified as problematic individuals (Reay, 2017). Thus, students internalize the standards imposed on them. Instead of recognizing the problem as a systemic injustice, students begin to see it as a personal deficiency. This reinforces the stigma associated with their identities, causing the stigma to become a systemic problem that reflects and perpetuates broader social injustices (hooks, 2000). Instead, neoliberal education policies that emphasize competition, standardization, and accountability (Apple, 2018) tend to view systemic barriers affecting students from marginalized communities as individual deficiencies.

Apple argues that neoliberal ideology, which is based on competition, individualism, and market-oriented policies, reinforces social inequalities by framing success and failure as individual responsibility (Apple, 2018). This ideology undermines collective approaches to addressing students' stigmatization and hinders solidarity in combating structural barriers related to race, disability, or socioeconomic status (Giroux, 2017). Within the neoliberal structure, standardization and the emphasis on specific criteria for success increase the potential for stigmatizing students (Smythe et al., 2020). Especially students with disabilities and non-dominant cultural backgrounds; when evaluated according to one-dimensional success criteria such as standardized tests, stigma becomes inevitable (Cologon, 2019; Fergus, 2016; Fielding, 2007; Marsh & Noguera, 2018; Reay, 2017; Steele, 1997; Smythe et al., 2020). On the other hand, the global spread of Western educational models and the norms imposed by these models devalue local knowledge systems and cultural practices in non-Western contexts, thus opening up space for stigma (Spyrou & Spyrou, 2018).

Sociopsychological Interventions: Addressing Stigma through Participatory and Democratic Education

In addition to expanding theoretical perspectives on stigma, it is important to consider practical interventions that have been proven effective in reducing stigmatizing attitudes and behaviors in educational contexts. One notable example is the sociopsychological intervention tested by Cohen and colleagues (2006) that aimed to improve the academic performance of African American students by addressing stereotyping threat, a psychological phenomenon in which individuals fear confirming negative stereotypes about their group, thereby negatively affecting their performance. The intervention included a short writing exercise designed to help students reflect on their strengths and values. This approach, known as a 'values-affirming intervention,' protected students from stereotypes and stigmatizing threats. The intervention was found to lead to significant improvements in both academic performance and a sense of belonging within the school environment. The success of Cohen and colleagues'

(2006) intervention highlights the importance of addressing the structural dimensions of stigma and the psychological processes that maintain it.

The growing literature on Participatory Action Research (PAR) and democratic schools provides concrete examples of how educational environments can be transformed to address stigma and promote social justice (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Fielding, 2007). Participatory research methods, based on Freire's concepts, position students as active individuals and peer researchers contributing to knowledge creation. This approach challenges traditional power dynamics in the classroom and empowers marginalized students to speak out and counter stigmas. Cammarota and Fine's (2008) study demonstrates that engaging students as active participants in research and problem-solving enhances their critical consciousness and helps them identify and resist systemic factors that contribute to their stigma.

In democratic schools, Fielding (2007) advocates for 'radical collegiality,' where students and teachers collaborate to create curriculum and learning experiences that reflect the diverse identities and experiences of all members of the school community. Democratic school practices, such as student-led initiatives, peer mentoring, and collaborative decision-making, can serve as powerful counter-narratives to the stigmatizing dynamics prevalent in traditional educational settings. These approaches foster a more inclusive academic environment that enhances students' capacity to contribute meaningfully to the school community.

Taft (2019) offers an alternative perspective on how students cope with and resist stigma. Taft's research on youth movements shows that when young people are not passive recipients of stigmatizing narratives, they are more likely to define their identities. Nevertheless, educational institutions often fail to recognize or support this activism, limiting the transformative capacity of education. In this context, the Freirean approach, which views students as agents of change, has significant potential to integrate youth activism more effectively into educational practice.

Studies of student voice and democratic schools provide fundamental insights into the power dynamics that exist in educational settings. Freire (1970) and other social scientists have argued that traditional school structures often silence marginalized voices and encourage hierarchical knowledge production (Apple, 2013; Fielding, 2007; Kincheloe, 2018). Taft's (2019) youth activism, Cammarota and Fine's (2008) Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), Fielding's concept of 'radical collegiality' (2007), and Reay's (2017) emphasis on class-based inequalities all highlight the importance of student initiative and participation in challenging these power imbalances.

These important studies on student voice, activism, and democratic schools provide compelling evidence for transforming power dynamics in educational institutions. However, there are still limitations in addressing the nuanced issues created by stigma mechanisms that prevent students from fully participating in educational processes. Cammarota and Fine's (2008) participatory action research, which positions students as co-researchers in the research process and disrupts traditional power hierarchies in educational settings,

demonstrates the capacity of Freirean pedagogy to transcend stigma. Despite these potentials, a significant gap exists in the literature regarding the application of a Freirean lens to explore how stigmas can be disrupted through a conscious and liberatory pedagogy.

Freirean Perspective: Banking education versus problem-posing education

Freirean's (1970) critical pedagogy provides a robust theoretical framework for reconceptualizing stigma as a structural and ideological phenomenon. In his work 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed,' Freire (1970) argues that oppression is perpetuated through ideologies that position marginalized groups as inherently inadequate, incompetent, or less than human. In educational contexts, these ideologies are often enacted through what Freire describes as the 'banking model of education.' In banking education, knowledge is instilled in students without recognition of their agency or lived experiences. Banking education marginalizes students who do not conform to dominant norms, thus reinforcing stigma by positioning them as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active contributors to its production. Paulo Freire argues that 'banking education,' where students are seen as passive recipients of knowledge, creates and perpetuates various inequalities (exclusion, othering, alienation, ignorance, marginalization). In banking education, marginalized students, especially those labeled as disabled or disadvantaged, are defined as outsiders who need to be corrected or assimilated into a narrow definition of success. Banking education reinforces deficit-based perspectives by making students passive recipients of education. Therefore, devaluing students' strengths and potential and preventing their unique voices from being heard leads to inequalities (Freire, 1970).

According to Freire, education is not only a process of knowledge transfer but also a practice of liberation, empowerment, and humanization that broadens individuals' perspectives on the world. He advocates a 'problem-diagnostic' model of education that critically engages students with their social realities and empowers them (Freire, 1970). Based on the fundamental principles of critical pedagogy, this model challenges the traditional 'banking education' paradigm, which positions students as passive recipients of knowledge. It is a transformative and liberating critical pedagogy that has the potential to dismantle oppressive structures and create positive change (Freire, 1970). This pedagogy makes oppression visible by drawing attention to the reality of unjust practices and discriminatory actions. This visibility creates a dialogic and collective learning and experiencing space. This space fosters critical consciousness, liberating praxis, and humanizing dialogue, enabling collective action to challenge stigmatization and understand the sociopolitical forces that shape the experiences of marginalized individuals.

Anti-Stigma resources of Freirean pedagogy

Freirean critical pedagogy in the process of overcoming stigma lies in the value it places on crucial elements such as critical consciousness development, liberating practice (praxis), and humanizing dialogue, and in its capacity to create transformative learning environments that challenge oppressive narratives and foster a culture of inclusiveness and respect (Freire, 1970). This approach enables students to understand stigmatization processes through critical thinking and develop strategies to resist these narratives (Freire, 1970). In this

context, the anti-stigmatization resources of Freire's pedagogy can be summarized under three key headings.

Humanizing dialogue: Love and hope

Freire (1970) does not see dialogue as a simple exchange of ideas, or a technique consumed between individuals. Freire rejects dialogue as a mechanical tactic to engage students in a specific task that prioritises individual pleasure or experience (Freire & Macedo, 1995). On the contrary, Freire (1970) sees dialogue as an existential necessity and an indispensable 'epistemological relation' (pp. 102) (curiosity, encounter, confrontation, creation) that 'deciphers the truth' in a humanistic sense. Freire expresses this as the product of a deep love for the world and humanity: Love is both the basis of dialogue and itself. Therefore, it is necessarily the task of responsible subjects and cannot exist in a relationship of domination (Freire, 1970). Freire's understanding of dialogue is nourished primarily by love and hope (hooks, 2000; Darder, 2017; Weiler, 2003). Love is the only way to liberation (Freire, 1970). 'Love is not just an emotional transfer of feeling; it is a combination of trust, belief, [hope], and admiration for students, and an appreciation for the strengths they bring' (Nieto, 2003, pp. 37–38). Love enables participation, connection, belonging, and learning in everyday life and school. Love is also a political, collective, powerful, and transformative force based on justice and change. Because it reveals who we all are (hooks, 2000). 'Learning based on love 'activates our human capacity to experience ourselves as subjects in our world' (Darder, 2017, pp. 81).

Hope, like Love, is an act that initiates dialogue. 'Hope is not about folding your arms and waiting', hope initiates action and struggle. Therefore, initiating a dialogue in an atmosphere of despair is impossible. If those in dialogue expect nothing from their efforts, their confrontation will be empty, sterile, bureaucratic and boring (Freire, 1970). Defining Love and hope as the essential characteristics of both dialogue and dialogue, Feire states that a dialogue devoid of Love, hope, humility, dialectics, and criticism cannot exist (Freire, 1970).

The dialogue process, which is an inclusive, participatory, transformative, liberating, and, most importantly, a humanizing process characterized by Love and hope (Freire, 1970), is based not on the duality of winning and losing the game (Shor & Freire, 1987), but on the enrichment of the parties (Darder, 2017; Luke, 1996; Mayo, 2014; Weiler, 2003). Freire (1970) argues that a truly liberating education should include the active and intellectual participation of the oppressed. In this direction, the dialogic horizontal relations established between students and teachers encourage the joint production of knowledge and humanize the acquisition of knowledge by purifying it from power relations.

Liberating praxis

Praxis is an indispensable resource for Paulo Freire's pedagogical approach (Allman, 2001). In line with the Marxist tradition, Freire believes that humans create an objective world through their practical activity. Marx wrote, 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; what is important is to change it' (Marx, 2008, pp. 106). This statement by Marx emphasizes the importance of changing the world rather than merely interpreting it and

is an example of Freire providing the theoretical background for the concept of praxis. Praxis emphasizes the ability of humans to change the world through their actions. Freire argues that the concept of praxis demonstrates that humans are conscious when they create an objective world through their practical activities (Freire, 1970).

Praxis is a dialectical process that feeds off each other without distinguishing between action and reflection (Allman, 2001). Praxis includes the critical complementary components of epistemological knowledge, curiosity, reflection, and action. The concept of praxis emerges as a practice that liberates individuals by combining thought and action in the problem-posing processes of education (Mayo, 2014). Freire believes that students can liberate themselves from an oppressive situation only by deliberate intention, not by chance (Freire, 1970). In this context, praxis aims to provide students with a purposeful learning experience by combining theoretical thinking in education with practical action. It also enables individuals to liberate themselves through action and develop their ability to intervene in and transform social realities.

Critical consciousness

Another concept at the center of Freire's social transformation is critical consciousness (conscienceização). Critical consciousness is the crucial understanding and positioning of the socio-political and economic realities that shape students' lives and capacities as knowing subjects rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Freire, 1970). Critical consciousness enables individuals to perceive the systemic nature of oppression and to take collective action to transform it through a dialogic approach (Freire, 1970). According to Freire, cultural environments are transformative environments where individuals learn together, become conscious, and are forced to question (Freire, 1970). Therefore, for Freire, creating a critical consciousness about the reality around us is about acting in the way one chooses, that is, in a way that represents one's subjectivity. Education, as a valuable and meaningful activity, should develop critical consciousness.

Freire claims that banking education passively presents accumulated knowledge about the reality of the outside world, making people spectators of themselves and external conditions, thus rendering them lifeless (Freire, 1970). On the other hand, critical consciousness enables people to become free by connecting with themselves and the objects and events around them (Freire, 1970). Therefore, knowledge should be accepted by students and teachers only after it has been subjected to critical thinking. When this critical consciousness is developed through dialogue between teachers and students in education and training (Shih, 2018), students transform their indifference into a more human perspective (Shor & Freire, 1987). In this way, students can question traditional hierarchical educational structures and experience learning as a process based on cooperation and conscious participation. According to Freire (1970), critical consciousness empowers students to become aware of their belonging by enabling them to recognize and challenge the sociopolitical contradictions that shape the reality of education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study examines the transformative potential of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy in combating stigma in educational settings. The research adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design. Thus, the study seeks to understand how social phenomena are constructed, experienced, and negotiated within specific historical, cultural, and political contexts (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Based on Freire's (1970) critical pedagogical framework, this study attempts to understand how the concepts of critical consciousness, dialogue, and praxis are reflected in educators' pedagogical experiences and practices.

Therefore, this study, rather than generating new empirical data, draws upon existing qualitative narratives produced by educators who practice Freirean pedagogy in their classrooms. Methodologically, the research is positioned within a secondary qualitative data analysis approach using interpretive document analysis. This approach has allowed for the re-examination and reinterpretation of existing qualitative materials in light of new theoretical areas of interest and research questions, while also highlighting contextual meanings embedded in the documents (Heaton, 2013; Johnston, 2014; Bowen, 2009).

However, the purpose of this study is not to conduct a reanalysis to create new categories or themes. Instead, existing narratives are interpreted from a Freirean perspective to understand how critical pedagogy operates as a pedagogical tool that combats stigma and promotes more inclusive educational practices in different social, cultural, and institutional contexts. In line with the interpretative tradition in qualitative research, the study focuses on the meanings contained in educators' narratives and how these narratives reveal how critical pedagogy is applied in different educational settings. Through this interpretive engagement with previously published narratives, the research aims to explain how educators translate Freire's principles into inclusive pedagogical practices that recognize diversity, challenge structural inequalities, and create spaces for dialogue, participation, and social justice (Freire, 1970; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

Data Sources and Sampling Strategy

The data consists of written narratives about the classroom practices and pedagogical experiences of three educators (Pınar, Burcu and Tuba) who were influenced by Freire's pedagogy. These narratives are taken from articles published in the special issue of Critical Pedagogy [2] commemorating the 100th anniversary of Paulo Freire's birth. Because the study draws on previously published narratives rather than producing new empirical material through interviews or observations, articles were treated as secondary qualitative data sources (Heaton, 2013). Materials have examined texts as meaningful social artifacts rather than neutral representations of reality ((Bowen, 2009; Creswell and Poth, 2016). Following Bowen (2009), documents have been approached not only as repositories of information but also as

[2] The practices of the three lecturers whose experiences are presented in this article are compiled from the articles written by these three lecturers in the 2021 (September-December) issue of the journal 'Critical Pedagogy,' prepared to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Freire's birth in 2021.

socially situated texts that reflect particular pedagogical experiences, interpretations and contexts.

Case selection followed a purposive sampling strategy based on three criteria (Patton, 2015): (i) explicit engagement with Freire's pedagogical principles, (ii) addressing stigma; confronting inequalities such as language, race, disability and gender, and (iii) applying these in various institutional and socio-political contexts. The three cases examined in the study cover different educational levels (university preparatory programs and public schools) and socio-political environments (Northern Cyprus, Ankara and socio-economically disadvantaged public schools).

Theoretical Framework and Analytical Structure

The analytical framework of the research is based on the theoretical distinction between the banking education model criticized by Freire (1970) and critical pedagogy, which he defines as liberating. This contrast offers a critical perspective on understanding how educators' pedagogical practices can normalize stigma and how spaces for liberation and social transformation can be created in opposition to it. Within this framework, Freire's concepts of dialogue, critical consciousness, and praxis are used not as predetermined coding categories, but as sensitizing analytical lenses that guide interpretation. These concepts have guided the interpretation of educators' narratives and directed the examination of how anti-stigma pedagogical practices are implemented in different educational contexts (Freire, 1970; Bowen, 2009).

Freire's (1970) concept of dialogue, which he defines as an epistemological relationship based on hope and mutual recognition, transforming hierarchical relationships between teacher and student and enabling the collaborative production of knowledge, and the concept of critical consciousness, which develops students' capacity to intervene in and transform their social realities, have been used as fundamental reference points in the interpretation of the texts.

Rather than aiming to inductively identify new themes, the study focuses on understanding how these Freirean principles are expressed, reinterpreted, and implemented in educators' narratives. In line with a secondary qualitative data analysis approach, the research did not aim to develop a new coding system; instead, it aimed to develop theoretical implications for inclusive education practices by reinterpreting published narratives from a Freirean anti-stigma pedagogy perspective (Johnston, 2014; Heaton, 2013). The interpretation process focused on how three educators made visible structural sources of stigma, such as racism, discrimination based on disability, gender inequality, and linguistic exclusion, in their classroom practices.

Methodological Rigor and Trustworthiness

Methodological rigor throughout the analysis process was ensured in line with the principles of theoretical consistency, analytical traceability and contextual transparency, and this process was based on reliability criteria recommended in qualitative research (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). In this regard, an attempt was made to establish consistency between the theoretical framework, analytical lenses that guide interpretation, and data sources (Patton, 2015). By using detailed explanations and contextualized direct quotations, it is intended that readers can follow the interpretation process and evaluate the validity of analytical inferences (Bowen, 2009). Additionally, since the study is based on secondary qualitative data, special attention was paid to preserving the contextual integrity of the original narratives and transparently revealing how new interpretations were developed from published texts (Heaton, 2013; Johnston, 2014).

Bringing Freire's Pedagogy to Life

This section presents good practices that demonstrate the feasibility and practicality of integrating Freire's critical pedagogy into the educational system. These practices include specific examples from three educators and student communities who use critical pedagogy in their courses. These examples can provide essential guidance for educators considering the anti-stigmatizing potential of critical pedagogy in educational settings. Teachers considering adopting critical pedagogy can examine these examples for inspiration and guidance on implementing it in their academic settings. These examples also demonstrate that the core pedagogical resources discussed in the previous section can be effectively integrated into the educational system and that this pedagogical approach can be applied across a variety of contexts.

Pınar: Critical conscientization against the culture of silence

The first example is the practice of Pınar, an academician at the Middle East Technical University (METU) Northern Cyprus Campus School of Foreign Languages. In her early years as a lecturer, Pınar observed that students were dissatisfied with the materials used in both in-class and out-of-class assignments. She realized that students had fallen into a culture of silence due to certain sociopolitical reasons. While students desired critical content that reflected themselves, they discovered that discussing, writing about, and thinking about these topics was taboo. Pınar sees the root causes of this situation as a lack of trust, dialogue, and empathy. Recognizing that students were not yet ready to directly question certain things, Pınar chose films and other media as tools. Thus, she focused on using films and other media to enable students to participate more effectively in in-class and out-of-class activities, develop their critical thinking skills, and gain the courage to discuss taboo subjects.

Every week, students were shown a movie that dealt with critical, controversial, or taboo topics and were given questions to consider. She discussed the questions with the whole class at the end of the week. In this way, she enabled students to learn from each other. She brought up issues that students might encounter in class daily. She tried to bring students closer to each other's lives by learning from each other's experiences. Pınar used movies in her classes to help students ask questions, gain awareness, and develop empathy. The film 'The Lobster' discussed the power of society over individuals; the films 'The Stanford Prison Experiment' and 'Dogville' discussed the concepts of power and civilization; the film 'Captain' discussed what the education system brought to people and what it took from them; the film 'Fantastik' discussed what the education system brought to people and what it took

from them, the film 'Requiem for a dream' discussed what the education system brought to people and what it took from them, discussed the effects of drugs on young people in society and aimed to generate ideas for solutions. Thus, it encouraged students to develop critical consciousness. It also taught students that taking sides was expected and encouraged them to consider their classroom context and conditions. It provided students with the opportunity to listen to one another and develop empathy by discussing taboo topics, such as politics, drugs, and religion, in a school setting (pp.44).

After the news that four academics were shot dead at a university in Türkiye, the film 'We Need to Talk About Kevin' was shown. Thus, it ensured that both the victims and the person who killed them were discussed. It opened the lesson to discuss why the killer did this and what could be done about it. Thus, it began to select curriculum topics from daily life and attempted to incorporate students' realities into the lessons. She tried to show that the teacher in front of the students was someone who expressed their ideas and encouraged others to share theirs rather than being an authority figure who decided what could and could not be said in class.

In the early stages of the pandemic (COVID-19), she established closer contact with students and tried to focus on their needs. She conducted activities that fostered a sense of solidarity and unity among her students. Thus, she focused on the needs of the students and looked for ways to establish communication and dialogue with them. Inspired by Freire's teachings, she organized workshops and seminars on digital and critical media literacy for students. During the pandemic, she adopted a dialogical approach by organizing interactive content, chat rooms, and discussion events (online discussions) where students could interact and engage in dialogue while learning.

Pınar helped students develop their academic skills, think critically, and empathize with social and cultural issues. Pınar's approach served as a good example of how teachers could reduce stigma and increase student engagement and interaction by implementing critical pedagogy resources in their classrooms. These practices had offered valuable insights into what could be reduced (Critical Pedagogy, 2021, pp. 43-45).

Burcu: Dialogical language education with Freire

The second good example was the practice of Burcu, an academic working in the English Preparatory Program of a prestigious university (Bilkent University). Burcu went beyond traditional teaching methods in her classes and put the principles of critical pedagogy into practice. This good practice was related to the effects of alternative teaching methods that Burcu had implemented throughout the academic year on student participation, learning processes, and social awareness.

Burcu was introduced to Paulo Freire and critical pedagogy through an educator during her university years and had placed this approach at the center of her personal and professional life. Burcu, who emphasized the importance of dialogue in the educational process, viewed this communication not only as a simple exchange but also as an open, learning-oriented process, evaluated in a political context, and challenging the participants. Although it was described as a waste of time by her colleagues, Burcu took care to get to

know her students closely and allowed her students to observe her every semester (each semester lasted two months). She viewed language teaching as a field that included speaking and writing. Burcu frequently organized discussion events.

Therefore, she could easily integrate critical pedagogy topics. Since Burcu did not find rigid assessment methods, such as traditional multiple-choice exams, suitable for every situation, she attempted to incorporate content that encouraged students to think critically and discuss issues related to daily life that were open to interpretation in her courses. In addition, with the feedback she received from students at the end of each semester, she aimed to make students active participants in the course content and practices.

Burcu addressed social justice, inequalities, gender, and marginalization in her courses and encouraged her students to participate actively in discussions about these issues. In this context, she discussed the education system, holiday and work regulations, work ethics, prisons, and penal systems in the documentary 'Where Should We Occupy Now.' The documentary section addressed the issue of men being granted maternity leave, particularly in the context of gender, and facilitated in-depth discussions with students. The short film 'Zero' aimed to increase students' awareness of their socioeconomic status. 'The Red Balloon' (Le Ballon rouge) encouraged students to engage in critical thinking through visual images and subtextual readings, addressing the theme of marginalization. The discussions presented in the film 'The Platform' and the documentary 'The Social Dilemma' addressed social justice issues sincerely, enabling students to better understand their positions and the realities of their environment. Burcu allowed students to freely determine their course materials by offering a wide range of options, including movies, songs, books, or specific events.

For her students not to lose touch with current events, Burcu spent the first five minutes of each lesson discussing national and global news and asked questions such as 'What is happening?', 'What can we do?', 'To what extent can we contribute?' She approached current events with a critical approach. In this way, she attempted to connect students to their experiences in a manner that fostered critical consciousness without alienating them from their daily lives. She addressed forest fires and femicides, discussing their causes and possible solutions. She aimed to raise awareness of these elements in language and culture by directing her students to prepare poster presentations that would enable them to recognize and criticize sexist and discriminatory language and practices. By investigating the origins and meanings of concepts such as tolerance, self-awareness, luck, opportunity, empathy, and common sense, she tried to disrupt the hegemonic structure of language and encourage its conscious use.

Inspired by Paulo Freire, Burcu strived to instill trust, honesty, and Love in her lessons. She used dialogue and praxis as the focus of her lessons to empathize with her students. She demonstrated Freire's understanding of social praxis by waiting in the lunch line with her students during lunch breaks, being present with them, creating equal conditions, and, in short, sharing basic human experiences such as hunger, fatigue, and the need for time. Burcu's efforts to integrate critical pedagogy into language education enabled students to become aware of social problems and develop critical thinking skills while learning a

language. This was a good example of the success of an approach that extended beyond teaching methodologies to develop students' academic and social skills (Critical Pedagogy, 2021, pp. 45-49).

Tuba: Cultural representation and dialogue versus monologue

The third beautiful example was Tuba's attempt to put dialogic pedagogy into practice by teaching English in private and public schools. Tuba had a fascinating story of putting dialogic pedagogy into practice, teaching English both in a private school and later in a public school. Influenced by Paulo Freire's pedagogical approach, Tuba encouraged her students to question issues such as gender equality, freedom of belief, and scientific thought in her lessons. However, when she started working in a public school in an underdeveloped area, she faced significant challenges. The way she handled issues often led to warnings from the school administration. Therefore, when she started working in a school where the majority of Kurdish, Zaza, and refugee children lived, she had to deal with both the challenges she faced and the uncertainty of how to approach this group of students, as well as the school administration.

Tuba noticed the difference in opportunities between the private school she worked in before and the public school she was currently in, and this worried her. Although most of her students did not speak Turkish, she realized that it was unfair to hold them responsible for everything and expect them to know everything. Inspired by Freirean pedagogical principles, she decided to address these inequalities as the subject of her lessons. In this context, Tuba's academic efforts focused on developing sensitivity to inequalities within the education system by adopting Freire's critical pedagogy approach and encouraging her students to question these issues. Tuba's decision to continue with these pedagogical principles despite the warning she received from the administration strengthened her belief in adopting a justice and equality-based approach to teaching practice.

Tuba applied dialogic pedagogy to encourage students to express their cultural identities and mother tongues. In this context, the question posed to first-year students was: 'Does anyone in this class speak a language other than Turkish?' (pp.54). This question was intended to allow students to express their identities in the classroom. However, according to Tuba's observations, it was determined that only refugee students usually answered this question, while other students remained silent. While evaluating this situation, Tuba realized that the fact that students did not find their mother tongues important and valuable caused them to feel that their identities were being neglected and devalued. When students questioned this situation, she observed that they used expressions such as 'Isn't it an important language?' or 'It is useless to us' (pp.54). Tuba evaluated this situation critically and observed that students became objects alienated from their identities due to the restrictions imposed on their right to express themselves.

Tuba initiated a dialogic process with her students by adopting Freire's pedagogical principles. She regularly asked her students for their opinions and emphasized the value of their language and identity. She also attempted to foster a dialogue with her students by emphasizing equality and openness in the teacher-student relationship and by approaching

issues from various perspectives. In this way, she encouraged students to express themselves and respect their identities. She discussed various topics and generated mutual ideas while interacting with her students. She questioned why the textbooks in English classes were prepared with a British accent and emphasized the diversity of the language by listening to people from different countries speaking.

In terms of celebrations (religious, cultural, and historical), she organized dialogues and talks that covered both festivals in her city and celebrations in the countries from which refugee students came in order to encourage students to understand the different cultures they came from. In this way, she strived to offer English lessons that incorporated cultural diversity and promoted understanding of different cultures. Since textbooks usually focused on specific cultural identities, Tuba used the cultures, history, and tourist elements of Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. In this way, she aimed to foster intercultural dialogue and understanding by enabling students to learn about and appreciate different cultures. Some students, coming from diverse cultures and backgrounds, spoke different ethnic languages. She knew some words in the students' languages. When she saw students, she tried to greet them in their language. This practice helped strengthen the representation of culture and identity by allowing students to learn words from their mother tongue and encouraging them to greet each other in their native language. Tuba's pedagogical approach enabled students to learn in-depth and strengthen their identities by associating language education with concepts such as dialogue, Love, salvation, awareness, and cultural diversity (Critical Pedagogy, 2021, pp. 52-54).)

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Freirean pedagogy aims to use education as a social and educational tool to contribute to the construction of social justice, rather than simply transferring knowledge (Freire, 1970; Kinkloheo, 2018; Shor & Freire, 1987). In this context, Freirean pedagogy has the potential to transform stigmatising situations. In the examples of Pınar, Burcu, and Tuba, students were encouraged to explore their own experiences through dialogue, practice, and critical thinking to solve social problems. Students were not merely passive recipients of the educational process but active participants constructing their knowledge and language, thus creating an authentic space against stigma. Pınar, Burcu, and Tuba invited students to explore their experiences through various questions (How did we become what we are? How can we change the circumstances? What do we possess?). This process created significant potential in encouraging students to generate ideas with their peers and teachers and to transform these ideas into shared learning topics. In this process of discovery, students not only took action based on knowledge but also for the purpose of social change.

In Burcu's classes, students were able to critically evaluate their sociocultural contexts by drawing on their own experiences and questioning traditional power relations at her school. This contributed to the students' development of deeper self-awareness and critical examination of social structures. Like Cammarota and Fine's (2008) Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), Burcu also empowered students to apply their knowledge in pursuit of social justice and encouraged them to take an active role in social transformation. This type

of pedagogy allowed students to understand social problems through their own experiences and sensitised them to social stigma.

Camarota and Fine (2008) concluded that students experienced a deeper learning experience by interacting with oppressive processes they encountered in daily life and learning how these processes affected their classroom situation. Pınar and Burcu's discussions of films with their students support these findings. This conclusion demonstrates how dialogic pedagogy can create a broader, anti-stigmatising learning environment. Pınar and Burcu's classroom discussions with their students created an open space for students to bring their voices to the classroom, hear the voices of others (especially those of individuals who have been silenced or ignored), share their ideas, and initiate dialogues based on empathy and equality. This process, as Freire (1970) described, allowed students to discover themselves as social actors and to question the power dynamics they hold in society.

The dialogic approaches in Tuba's class enabled students to discover themselves as social subjects. Tuba encouraged her students to question and understand their own identities and values within social and cultural contexts. The "humanisation process", a fundamental goal of Freirean pedagogy, facilitated students' active participation in constructing social justice based on their social circumstances (Freire, 1970). This process aims to create a dialogic learning environment by reducing students' alienation in education. Freire's dialogic approach appears to have fostered a liberating process in the classrooms of Pınar, Tuba, and Burcu. This process opened a liberating space for students by acknowledging their unique experiences and perspectives.

Freire's pedagogy, through its process of humanization, not only respects differences but also embraces them as a means of promoting human development. This approach enables students to engage in dialogues based on their understanding of their cultural diversity and socioeconomic backgrounds (Freire, 1970). Burcu and Tuba's teaching practices encouraged students to integrate their micro and macro-cultural richness into the learning process. This integration challenged stigma by allowing students to make sense of their life experiences through dialogues interwoven with love and hope. Thus, Burcu and Tuba's dialogical practice transcended mere communication, becoming a source of liberation, humanization, and social transformation.

Pınar, Burcu, and Tuba's classroom attitudes and practices regarding social justice and cultural identities empowered students to address societal issues that directly impacted their lives, encouraging them to confront these issues and discover their strengths. This finding is consistent with Taft's (2019) research, which shows that children take an active role in social change only by defending their rights and raising their voices in the face of social problems. The dialogic practices of the three educators enabled students to become socially aware, socially, and politically engaged individuals, rather than focusing solely on academic success. In these three classrooms, Freire's pedagogy was implemented, enabling students to challenge the stigmatizing narratives they often encounter. The dialogic approach adopted by these three educators initiated a dialogue that valued students' social and cultural diversity, life experiences, individual characteristics, and preferences. This understanding allowed students

to exist as equal agents, constructing knowledge and experiences within their natural environments, rather than as passive recipients of information.

In this context, Freirean pedagogy encouraged students to develop a critical awareness of social issues by drawing on their own experiences and cultural backgrounds rather than pursuing rote and dogmatic instruction. This conclusion demonstrates the impact of Freirean pedagogy and its potential to mobilise students for social change. These practices fostered anti-stigma actions by transforming power relations within the classroom, enabling students to recognise their impact on broader social structures and to engage in critical dialogue with these structures.

While critical pedagogy alone cannot transform the oppressive social conditions that surround students' lives, it does provide students with the opportunity to develop an awareness of the sources of stigma and their systemic nature. This process unlocks the liberating potential of education, transforming students into agents who actively resist stigmatising narratives (hooks, 2000). While critical pedagogy alone cannot transform the oppressive social conditions surrounding students' lives, it does offer students the opportunity to develop awareness of the sources of stigma and its systemic nature (Freire, 1970). This process unlocks the liberating potential of education, transforming students into agents who actively resist stigmatizing narratives (hooks, 2000). By encouraging their students to share their cultural backgrounds, identities, and experiences, and to understand, accept, and appreciate differences, Pınar, Burcu, and Tuba have effectively strived to eliminate stigma and discrimination in education and provided students with opportunities to question social structures and power relations.

Final words and suggestions

This study makes significant contributions to social justice education by revealing the potential of Freirean pedagogy to transform stigma in educational environments. Findings show that the dialogue, critical consciousness, and praxis-based approach of Freirean pedagogy enable students to recognize stigmatizing discourses and practices, question them, and develop more sensitive attitudes towards inequalities. In this respect, Freirean pedagogy supports the development of students as individuals who go beyond being mere recipients of information and who critically evaluate social realities, taking responsibility for transforming them.

However, the research also reveals some important limitations regarding the application of Freirean pedagogy. The effectiveness of this pedagogical approach largely depends on the structural features of the education system, the social and cultural context, the critical pedagogical competence of educators, and the existing institutional conditions. Especially in traditional, hierarchical, and exam-oriented education systems, implementing dialogue and critical participation-based practices poses significant difficulties (Freire, 1970).

In addition, the social transformation targeted by Freirean pedagogy is a long-term process that often encounters resistance due to existing power relations and structural inequalities. Since social institutions and dominant ideologies tend to maintain the existing order, the transformations attempted to be achieved through education may not always yield

results as expected (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Although this approach, based on the principles of dialogue and liberation, aims to develop students' critical thinking skills and question social conditions, structural obstacles in educational environments can limit this process. On the other hand, the fact that Freirean pedagogy is largely based on Western-centered theoretical foundations indicates that it may not have the same level of impact in different cultural and social contexts (Weiler, 2003). This situation requires the reinterpretation of critical pedagogical practices in line with local conditions, cultural dynamics and social needs. In addition, to support social transformation through education, individual efforts alone are not sufficient; institutional arrangements, political determination and sustainable leadership support are also important.

As a result, although the complete transformation of oppressive structures in education does not seem possible in the short term, Freirean pedagogy offers a strong theoretical and pedagogical framework for students to develop critical consciousness, make stigmatizing practices visible and become active subjects of social justice. Therefore, it is of great importance that educators continue their efforts to create inclusive and equitable learning environments that recognize students' cultural diversity, experiences, and social identities.

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