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Searching Meaning in a Rough Place of Education System

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Abstract

Education involves more than the transfer of knowledge; it also requires the experience of knowledge as a transformative process. Paulo Freire, in his critique of modern educational systems, challenged the "banking education" model - an approach in which teachers act as authoritative knowledge-holders and students are treated as passive recipients. As an alternative, Freire proposed two essential components for meaningful education: *praxis* and *dialogue*. This study aims to explore the relevance of these components in the formation of students, particularly within the context of personal accompaniment and developmental education. Employing a qualitative-reflective methodology, the research integrates Freire's pedagogical insights with the author's practical experience in mentoring students. The findings suggest that true education is a journey toward becoming fully human, which involves naming the world, discovering opportunities, and engaging in transformative action. To achieve this, three dimensions are essential: *praxis*, as the dynamic interplay of action and reflection; *dialogue*, as the foundation of communal and critical engagement; and the cultivation of self-identity, which enables students to grow into their authentic selves.

Keywords: Paulo Freire; banking education; formation; praxis; dialogue

1. Introduction

In Indonesia, education has been changing over the last few years in terms of its methods and contents. Sometimes the system itself looks very confusing, since a change of Minister of Education means that the system will follow his or her ideas. In my experience, for instance, when I was in senior high school for three years, our curriculum was changed twice. However, one thing that I find remains the same is that education is believed to be the transfer of ideas and knowledge. They have failed to see that education is not merely about transferring knowledge but also about experiencing knowledge.

Nevertheless, the learning system has undergone significant transformation in recent years, particularly with the introduction of new policies aimed at making education more student-centered and flexible. Traditionally, the system was heavily based on rote memorization and standardized testing, which often limited students' critical thinking and creativity. However, recent reforms—such as the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) initiative launched by the Ministry of Education—seek to change this. Under this approach, schools and teachers are given greater autonomy to design their own curricula, tailor learning to the needs of their students, and focus on building character, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. The future of Indonesia's learning system depends largely on how these reforms are implemented on the ground and how effectively they address the country's vast geographic and socioeconomic diversity.

In this study, I would like to present some insight from my experience working on the formation of the Congregation of the Mission. Beforehand, I will frame my experience in the educational perspective proposed by Paulo Freire.

2. Research Method

This study will apply a qualitative research approach. There are at least three components that define qualitative research. Firstly, the relationship between theory and research is determined by an inductive process, in which research generates theory. Secondly, ontologically, the social world is in direct contact with social actors. In contrast to phenomena that exist 'out there' and are separate from their observers in quantitative research, qualitative research views society as a product of the minds of social actors. As Denscombe observes, "human activity is seen as a product of symbols and meanings that are used by members of the social group to make sense of things." Thirdly, as a result of ontological position, the understanding of the reality must be done through the examination of the interpretation of the social actors. Thus, its epistemological position is interpretivist.²

The qualitative method used in this study includes literature review, text analysis, and critical reading of selected texts. The theoretical framework is based on the work of Paulo Freire, who criticized the top-down education system that views teachers as the main subjects holding packages of knowledge and students as mere recipients. In response, Freire proposed two fundamental components of education: *praxis* and *dialogue*, which he considered essential tools for a transformative educational system. By exploring Freire's work, this study aims to apply these principles to the formation process of candidates for the Vincentian priesthood.

3. Research Results and Discussion

3.1. Paulo Freire and his Education

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and philosopher whose ideas on education have had a lasting impact on how we think about teaching and learning. His theories, rooted in the belief

¹ Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide: For Small-scale Social Research Projects* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1998), 267.

² Alan Bryman, Social Research Methods (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 266.

that education should serve as an instrument of liberation, have been adopted and adapted worldwide, influencing progressive education systems and social justice movements. His most famous work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*³, continues to resonate with educators, activists, and policymakers alike.

3.1.1. Early Life and Influences

Born in 1921 in Recife, Brazil, Freire grew up during a period of severe social inequality. The Great Depression and the political and economic turmoil of the time deeply affected Brazil's impoverished population. Freire himself came from a working-class family and experienced hunger and poverty firsthand, which had a profound influence on his educational philosophy.

His early education was conventional, but Freire's true immersion into the field of pedagogy began after he worked with illiterate adults in Brazil's rural northeast during the 1960s. This experience shaped his later ideas about how education can be a tool for both personal and collective transformation. He found that traditional teaching methods, which relied on rote memorization and hierarchical relationships between teacher and student, were not effective in addressing the real-life needs of the people he worked with.

In his most renowned work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire critiques the "banking model" of education. In this model, students are seen as passive recipients of knowledge, and teachers are the sole authorities who deposit information into students' minds. Freire argued that this method reinforces the power dynamics of society, where the oppressed remain powerless and disconnected from their ability to critically engage with the world.

According to Freire, the banking model stifles creativity, critical thinking, and the development of a transformative consciousness. It views students as empty vessels to be filled rather than active participants in the learning process. This concept of education reflects a larger social structure, one that prioritizes conformity and obedience over freedom and critical engagement.

3.1.2. The Dialogical Model: Education as Liberation

In response to the banking model, Freire proposed a dialogical model of education, which emphasizes communication, critical thinking, and mutual respect between teacher and student. This model is rooted in the belief that learning should be a collaborative process in which both teacher and student learn from each other through ongoing dialogue. Central to Freire's pedagogy is the concept of *conscientização* (critical consciousness).⁴ He believed that education should help individuals become aware of the social, political, and economic forces that shape their lives. Through critical reflection on their own experiences and contexts, students could become agents of change within their communities. Freire viewed the

³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970).

⁴ Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (London: Continuum, 2010).

development of critical consciousness as essential to the liberation of oppressed people from systemic inequality.

In Freire's model, the teacher is no longer an authoritarian figure but a facilitator who engages with students in a mutual process of uncovering knowledge. The goal is not merely to impart information, but to create a learning environment where students are encouraged to question, challenge, and transform their world. This approach invites students to engage with their lived experiences and critically reflect on the structures of power and domination that shape their lives.

3.1.3. Pedagogy and Politics: Education as a Tool for Social Change

Freire's educational philosophy was deeply political. He believed that education should not be neutral or apolitical but should be explicitly aligned with the struggle for social justice. His work aimed to empower marginalized groups to challenge the status quo and transform society. Freire argued that in a world marked by oppression, education must serve as a force for liberation rather than a tool for maintaining existing power structures.

For Freire, education had the potential to be a revolutionary act - a means of raising consciousness that could help individuals understand the root causes of their oppression and take collective action to change their circumstances. By encouraging students to see themselves as active participants in the world, Freire sought to inspire a new generation of thinkers and activists who could contribute to building a more just and equitable society.

3.1.4. Freire's Legacy

Freire's work has been transformative in both theoretical and practical terms. His ideas have influenced educators, community organizers, and social movements around the world, particularly in Latin America, Africa, and the United States. His approach to literacy, for instance, has been widely applied in adult education programs, where the emphasis is on fostering critical thinking alongside basic reading and writing skills. Freire's philosophy has also shaped the development of popular education, which connects learning to community development and social transformation.

Perhaps Freire's most enduring legacy is his insistence that education is not merely about acquiring knowledge, but about becoming conscious of the world and one's capacity to change it. In an age of increasing inequality, social unrest, and political polarization, his vision of education as a transformative and liberating force remains more relevant than ever.

3.1.5. Criticism and Challenges

While Freire's ideas have been widely praised, they have also faced criticism. Some critics argue that his pedagogy is too idealistic and impractical in real-world classrooms. Others claim that his focus on political consciousness risks overshadowing the need for more traditional educational goals, such as academic achievement and intellectual rigor.

Additionally, Freire's emphasis on dialogue and collective action may not be suitable for all educational contexts, especially in more hierarchical or structured settings. However,

despite these criticisms, Freire's influence on the field of education remains profound, with his ideas continuing to challenge educators to rethink their teaching practices and the broader role of education in society.

Education, thus, becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. If I want to describe what students would be doing, they might be sitting down, shutting their mouths up, receiving knowledge, memorizing and repeating. It conveys a non-reflective process of learning. As a result, the student becomes object rather than subject of the process. In response to that matter, he, then, proposed several basic components of education; I will discuss in this essay two of those important components which are praxis and dialogue.

3.2. Praxis

In Paulo Freire's educational theory, *praxis* is a central concept that refers to the process of reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. It is the integration of theory and practice—the idea that individuals should not only critically reflect on their reality but also take action to change it. For Freire, education is not simply about absorbing knowledge or facts; it is about using that knowledge to engage with and challenge the social, political, and economic conditions that shape people's lives.

Freire's concept of *praxis* is rooted in his belief that education should be a tool for liberation, not oppression. In traditional "banking" models of education, students are passive recipients of information. In contrast, Freire's pedagogy advocates for an active, dialogical, and participatory process, where both students and teachers engage in a continuous cycle of reflection and action.

This cycle of praxis involves the following key elements:

- 1. Reflection: This is the process of critically analyzing one's own experiences, particularly how people are oppressed or marginalized in society. Reflection involves questioning the status quo and understanding the forces that shape one's reality. Freire often referred to this critical awareness as *conscientização* (critical consciousness), where individuals begin to see themselves not as passive victims but as active agents capable of shaping their world.
- 2. Action: After reflecting on their reality, individuals must act to change it. This action is not just theoretical or abstract; it is practical and aimed at transforming the oppressive conditions people face. In Freire's view, action without reflection is blind, and reflection without action is empty. Therefore, praxis involves taking concrete steps to challenge and dismantle systems of inequality, exploitation, and oppression.

3.2.1. The Role of Praxis in Education

In Freire's view, education should empower students to engage in *praxis* by becoming critical thinkers who actively question, analyze, and transform the world around them. Teachers, rather than serving as authoritarian figures who simply deliver knowledge, take on

the role of facilitators who help students critically reflect on their social realities and take meaningful action to change them.

For example, in a classroom grounded in Freire's principles, students would participate in discussions rooted in their lived experiences, identifying and examining the social forces that shape their lives. The teacher would guide them toward a deeper understanding of these forces, fostering critical thinking and encouraging collective efforts to enact change.

3.2.2. Praxis and Social Change

Freire's idea of *praxis* extends beyond the individual classroom. He saw education as inherently political and deeply connected to the struggle for social justice. Thus, *praxis* is not only about personal transformation but also about collective action to transform society. Through *praxis*, individuals and communities can challenge oppressive structures and work toward building a more just and equitable world.

For Freire, the ultimate goal of education is not to prepare students to fit into an unjust system but to empower them to question and dismantle it. In this sense, *praxis* becomes a revolutionary act - an act of empowerment that enables individuals to reclaim their humanity and agency.

In conclusion, teachers cannot remain solely as thinkers while students become mere doers. Likewise, teachers must not treat students as activists without offering opportunities for reflection. Therefore, coming into consciousness becomes a vital part of learning. Students must have and know their own words for the realities they experience; and from those words, they will act and respond on their own behalf.

Imagine a group of adult learners in a literacy class within a marginalized community. Using Freire's approach, the teacher would not simply teach reading and writing as isolated skills. Instead, learning would begin with reflection on the students' lived experiences and the social issues they face—such as poverty, discrimination, or lack of access to resources. Literacy lessons would be grounded in these realities. For instance, students might read and analyze texts related to labor rights, healthcare, or political participation. Through dialogue and critical reflection, they would develop the tools to understand their oppression and take collective action—whether through community organizing, political engagement, or policy advocacy.

Action and reflection occur simultaneously. Moreover, this process fosters critical consciousness, which can reveal that a particular course of action may be inappropriate in a given context. *Praxis* lies at the heart of transforming the world - and, through that transformation, of becoming fully human.⁵

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⁵ Justin Hudalla, *Transforming My Curriculum*, *Transforming My Classroom: Paulo Freire, James Banks, and Social Justice in a Middle School Classroom*, http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/papers/hudalla.pdf, 8.

3.3. Dialogue

Educators and students have the same roles, which are learning and teaching. In other words, the roles can become interchangeable⁶. That means educators must provide circumstances in which they and their students can learn together. Unlike in the banking education system, which drives the teacher-student contradiction, libertarian education proposes reconciliation of the poles of the contradiction by offering a 'teachers *and* students' relationship. The reason why this relationship becomes so important is that the more student work, the more knowledge is transferred to them, the less they build up critical awareness, which will follow their involvement in the world as transformers of that world⁷. Thus, dialogue is necessary. "Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education".

"Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, to name it." Dialogue will impose itself as a way by which people can fulfill themselves as fully human being, if teachers and students have the rights to speak their words to transform the world. Freire underlined that to conduct a good dialogue, teachers and students must have certain values. Dialogue cannot exist in the absence of love. "Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself." Love is an act of courage and commitment to others; so it cannot, at the same breath, produce fear; as a result, it will liberate others to be wholly human. Besides, dialogue requires humility, faith, hope, and critical thinking. Those values are not secondary ones, but they are certain qualities with which teachers and students can conduct a good dialogue. Freire believes that by having and applying such values, dialogue will be established in a better and healthier way.

3.4. Formation in the Congregation of the Mission

Before looking more deeply into the formation of the Congregation of the Mission, we must first understand St. Vincent de Paul, the founder. Vincent de Paul was born in Pouy in 1581. As a child, he lived among the poor and experienced their harsh living conditions. He was ordained a priest in 1600. For some time, he sought to escape the poverty of his family. However, with the guidance of his spiritual mentors, he gradually felt called to a deeper holiness. Through the unfolding events of his life, Divine Providence eventually led him to make a firm decision to dedicate himself to the salvation of the poor. This transformation of his motives did not happen suddenly. He faced many struggles, particularly during the early years of his priesthood, including several failures in his attempts to gain personal advantage from his clerical status.

After seventeen years of priesthood, while serving in Gannes and Folleville, Vincent de Paul experienced a pivotal moment. On January 25, 1617, he realized the urgent need to preach

⁶ Peter Mayo, Gramsci, Freire, and Adult Education (New York: St Martin' Press,1999), 65.

⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970), 54.

⁸ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 74.

⁹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 69.

¹⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 70.

the Gospel to the poor. According to his testimony, this experience marked the beginning of his vocation and the birth of the Congregation of the Mission (CM). Later that same year, in August, in Châtillon-les-Dombes, he founded *La Charité* to serve the sick who were completely neglected. In doing so, he recognized—and showed others—the deep connection between proclaiming the Gospel and serving the poor.

Gradually, Vincent's spiritual journey led him to contemplate and devote himself to Christ in the poor. His image of Christ as the Father's messenger to the poor became the center of his life and ministry. Vincent was deeply attentive to the needs of his time, interpreting them in the light of his growing love for God and for the suffering poor. He felt called to alleviate all forms of human misery.

To respond to these needs, Vincent mobilized people from all walks of life—rich and poor, humble and powerful—awakening in them an appreciation for the poor as the living image of Christ. He encouraged direct and indirect service to the poor. Many responded wholeheartedly and joined communities such as the Daughters of Charity, the Works of Charity, and other associations inspired by his vision. Even today, individuals continue to embrace and live out this same spirit.

Concerning the Vincentian vocation and mission and the way to achieve it, Vincent explains: "In the Scriptures we read that our Lord Jesus Christ, who was sent into the world to save humanity, did not begin his work by teaching; He began by working. And what He did was to fully integrate every kind of virtue into His life. Then He continued to teach, explaining the Good News of salvation to the poor, and leaving to His apostles and disciples what they needed to know to be a guide for others. Now we want, by the grace of God, to imitate Christ the Lord as far as possible. We try to imitate His virtues and what He did for the salvation of others. This is true if we carry out the same work and also carry it out in the same way as He did. This means that our goal is: 1° to be determined to grow in holiness, imitating as far as possible the virtues that the great Teacher so generously taught us; 2° to proclaim the Good News of salvation to the poor." (RC I, 1)

Through these words, St. Vincent entrusts to us, his followers in the Lord, a unique vocation, a new fraternal life, and a specific destiny, which must always be wisely adapted to each new era. When he established the Congregation, St. Vincent de Paul chose "Evangelizare pauperibus misit me" as its core spirituality. Since then, this phrase has not only served as a spirituality but also as the Congregation's mission. Hence, this spirit and mission have become the heart of the entire community, including all its candidates. Our Constitution states: "Our formation, in a continuous process, should have as its purpose that the member, animated by the spirit of St. Vincent, become suitable to carry on the mission of the Congregation."¹¹

The students must be helped and encouraged to grow in the Vincentian identity, spirit, and charism. "... [A]ll candidates are expected to take special care for a suitable and concrete

¹¹ Congregation of the Mission, *Constitution and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission*, (Rome: General Curia of the Congregation of the Mission, 1984), art.77, no 1.

understanding of people, especially the poor, of their needs, their desires, and their problems¹². To achieve this goal, each student should be given opportunities that allow them, firstly, to have a clear and expressed preference working among and with the poor and, secondly, to have a critical awareness of the causes of poverty and the obstacles of evangelization¹³.

3.5. One Piece of learning in Formation

There are two important elements in the learning process according to Paulo Freire; he referred to this twofold method of education as *praxis*, consisting of action and reflection. This educational breakthrough has greatly supported us in accompanying all of our candidates. I believe that formation cannot be carried out solely in the classroom by merely transferring information—such as who the poor are, what characterizes poverty, or how we can help those in need. That approach would lack meaningful reflection and, ultimately, have little impact. Therefore, *praxis* is the best way to enable our candidates to both see and reflect on their experiences. Hopefully, through this process, they will internalize what they learn and embrace the values embedded in those experiences.

3.5.1. Action

One good question I want to begin with is: What kind of experience? In practice, formatores used to give formandi the opportunity, once a week, to observe situations of poverty in the areas where they were assigned. These activities included visiting the elderly, busking for money, collecting recyclable garbage, or selling newspapers. In addition to this, we periodically held a program called immersion, during which the formandi had to live outside the house and earn their living for three days to a week. I, during my time as a formandus, had to undergo such experiences.

One rule of this activity was that we were not allowed to disclose our true identity—in other words, we were to pretend to be poor. The idea behind this was that by *becoming* poor, we could more fully experience the reality of poverty: its facts, emotions, daily struggles, hopes, desires, and difficulties. This meant that we truly immersed ourselves in the condition of poverty, not as outsiders observing, but as participants. Often, we had to make up stories about who we were to be accepted as one of them.

There were believed to be many positive outcomes from this kind of experiential learning. The *formandi* could see and feel poverty from an insider's point of view. It became easier to approach the poor because they saw us as one of them. However, a significant issue arose: the *formandi* themselves often did not truly understand or reflect on their own identity during the experience. Their presence, in hindsight, could seem dishonest—they weren't fully themselves, nor fully poor. There was a conflict of values. The experience risked becoming just another

¹² Congregation of the Mission, Constitution and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission, Art. 85, No. 1.

¹³ Congregation of the Mission, "Ratio Formationis Vincentianae," *Vincentiana*, no. 2, (March-April, 1988): 32.

activity. Once they returned home, it felt like everything returned to normal—they were no longer "poor." Consequently, the poor were again seen as mere objects of observation.

Formatores began to express concern over this threat of losing the genuineness of the experience and the lack of honesty in engaging with the poor. This critique—coming from my generation, who now serve as formatores—emphasizes the importance of maintaining one's authentic identity while serving and evangelizing the poor, and also being evangelized by them. We cannot gain one insight at the cost of another essential value. Still, one benefit of the earlier approach was that it revealed the formandi's real struggle to be with the poor as they truly are. Therefore, in recent years, formatores have shifted the approach: instead of asking formandi to become poor themselves, we now invite them to be good and honest companions of the poor.

3.5.2. Reflection

Reflection is a process of interiority. It includes intellectual, spiritual, and emotional development. It affirms that the love of the poor, which is seen and experienced, has to be a source of vital energies that lead everybody in the process to construct a life for themselves with the degree of intensity that will ensure personal integrity.¹⁴ There are two stages in this process: the first is personal reflection, which is an internal activity and carried out in solitude; and the second is communal reflection in which *formandi* can listen to and learn from each other. The latter becomes important because "reflection is most profound when it is done aloud with the aware attention of another person."¹⁵

In the process of reflection, all formandi are asked to look back at their own experiences; to consider what's happening during their experiential learning. Some questions are provided to help them reflect on their experiences, what they learn from the objective situation, and how they build new understanding and awareness of the situation and themselves. After self-reflection, they usually come together in a group to share their insights. Every reflection is respected and appreciated as part of self-development. In this process, dialogue occurs, embodying what Freire called the "teacher-student" dynamic. I must emphasize that this involves not only the teacher-student learning process but also student-student learning. However, during this process, a formator who is more experienced still takes on the role of a guide to assist formandi in seeing their experiences from a deeper perspective. "...[E]ducation is not simply the same as learning...[but] a process of assisted or guided learning."

The process of dialogue is based on good reasons for the learning process. Hopefully, this process can develop 'critical consciousness' that "represents things and facts as they exist empirically, in their causal and circumstantial correlations" ¹⁷. Critical understanding will lead

¹⁴ Guiseppe Toscany, *The Mystique of the Poor* (Malang: Widya Sasana Publication, 2012), 118.

¹⁵ Susan Knights, "Reflection and Learning: the Importance of a Listener", in *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning*, David Boud, Rosemary Keogh, and David Walker (eds.) (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 1985): 85-90.

¹⁶ Alan Rogers and Naomi Horrocks, *Teaching Adult* (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2010), 50.

¹⁷ Freire, Education for Critical Consciousness, 39.

to critical action; this is the way of learning that the nature of critical understanding will sooner or later correspond to the nature of actions. However, one of the important issues in our context of learning is the attitude of superiority. We cannot deny that in the priestly formation, the use of power over candidates sometimes still becomes an issue, not in the sense of physical or emotional abuse, but in the sense of anti-democratic ideas or a top-down point of view. In this context, humility becomes more important than anything else for formators to create a more conducive circumstance.¹⁸

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, adult education is about learning to be fully human by naming the world, discovering opportunities, and transforming it into a better place. There are three main points to achieve this goal. First, praxis involves twofold activities: action and reflection. It is not enough for people to come together in dialogue simply to gain knowledge of their social reality. They must also act together upon their environment, critically reflecting on their reality and transforming it through further action and reflection. Second, dialogue occurs within the context of communal reflection. Last but not least, adult education must nurture self-identity, helping students become who they truly are.

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