

## **From the Guest Editor's desk: Education as the practice of freedom**

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### **Freire's life and work**

It is the centenary of Paulo Freire's birth and over fifty years since the publication of his most famous work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in English. In this Special Edition of the Australian Journal of Adult Learning (AJAL) we want to mark his extraordinary contribution as an educator, thinker and activist and to celebrate and critically reflect on his work and his legacy.

We imagine many readers will be familiar with Freire and his main ideas but possibly not all. For that reason we want to say something very briefly about the main contours of his life and work before we discuss his impact, his relevance today and describe the contents of this Special Edition.

Born in 1921, in the northeast of Brazil in the city of Recife, Freire trained in law but was drawn into adult education in the late 1940s working for the employers' organisation SESI (Serviço Social da Indústria). Here he was tasked with addressing educational inequality, school exclusion and designing adult literacy programmes. He worked for the University of Recife's cultural extension service (Gadotti, 1994) and became a professor in

the early 1960s. By this time, Freire had become well-known in Brazil for his design, planning and theorising of ground-breaking adult literacy initiatives in Angicos and elsewhere (see Freire, 1970), and this led to his appointment as director of the national literacy programme (Torres, 2019). This work was cut short by a military coup and Freire was subsequently imprisoned. Exiled, Freire settled in Chile where he held a position in the government Social Development Division and the Research and Training Institute for Agrarian Reform (ICIRA) as well as collaborating with UNESCO. He honed and refined his ideas in Chile through his work in non-formal adult education, literacy, and popular education (Gadotti, 1994; Schugurensky, 2011; Torres, 2019). Freire's brief sojourn in Harvard University in 1970 was followed by almost a decade with the World Council of Churches based in Geneva<sup>1</sup> (Freire and Faundez, 1989). This period of his life was marked by an extraordinary level of engagement with emancipatory social movements and popular educators across the world, including involvement with major post-colonial educational and literacy initiatives.

When Freire returned to Brazil in 1980 he began working at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC) as well as working with the Centre for the Study of Education and Society, one of the many such research collectives he established intending to support educators (Gadotti, 1994). He was also involved in founding the left-wing political party the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers Party) and in the late eighties he became the Municipal Educational Secretary of Sao Paulo (see Freire's book *Pedagogy of the City* (1993) for his own reflections on this experience as well as Apple, (2013) and O'Cadiz et al (1998) for assessments of these initiatives). After three years he resigned from this post. In his last few remaining years he went through a particularly intense period of writing in which he reflected on his past work and explored the challenges for education in a neoliberal era (Freire, 1994, 1998, 2004 *inter alia*).

Freire's life and work were shaped by his profound commitment to social justice (Torres, 2019; see all Freire's work but this is especially clear in the biographical reflections in *Pedagogy of Hope*). It is impossible, according to Freire (1972), to be neutral in the face of unnecessary suffering and he repeatedly argued that education needed to be reimagined as part of a wider struggle for a more equal society. Freire's radical political commitment was nourished by a deep moral conviction about the inherent value and capability of human beings

and horror at the way the capacity for freedom, curiosity and agency is denied, and even destroyed, by inequality. This moral sensibility, or perhaps more accurately moral vision, animates all his work.

Intellectually, Freire drew heavily on the radical humanist tradition and was particularly indebted to the revolutionary readings of Hegel offered by Marx, Lukacs, Fromm, and Fanon, supplemented by a wider interest in educational theory, phenomenology, existentialism and liberation theology. This conceptual synthesis was very heterodox and creative, even though this is harder to discern now as his ideas have become so familiar. Freire was neither a Marxist nor an existentialist in any typical or traditional sense. His Christian faith - a version of liberation theology - was equally distinct and was based on the idea that Jesus stood with the poor and that oppression and domination are mortal sins. Taken as a whole, Freire's theory - as this list of thinkers and themes named above suggest - is above all a dialectical philosophy of education and all his books seek, using different registers and formats, to do justice to the processual, complex, mediated, relational nature of social and educational experience and action. His writing is also permeated by a sense of possibility. Freire's philosophy is finely attuned to processes of becoming and to the flow and pulse of life as well as what deadens and kills the human spirit. To use a concept of Fromm's (1964) that was important to Freire, a 'biophilic' philosophy, a restless, curious way of thinking attuned to our necessary incompleteness as individual and social beings, and to the radical openness of history.

Much of the texture and value of Freire's work is based on reflecting sensitively and carefully on the importance of exploring the specific culture and socio-historical context in which any educational encounter is situated. According to Freire, we cannot develop an emancipatory education without open dialogue between students and between students and the educator. Thus one of Freire's key insights is, to paraphrase Marx (1888), the educator has to constantly educate themselves by tapping into the rich lived experience and everyday knowledge of students. Freire never tired of reminding us that people carry into the classroom invaluable insights into their own lives and society. Respect, and active interest, in this knowledge are fundamental for 'humanising education'. Critical dialogue builds from this through a double movement: the affirmation and exploration of the importance of everyday knowledge whilst also creating distance from the self-evident

and given quality of the world as it appears and is experienced. This move into experience and critical reframing happens through problem posing which allows us to ‘to read the world’ (Freire and Macedo, 1987) and deepen our understanding of the powers and structures that shape us. This is what Freire (1972) termed ‘conscientisation’ and establishes the basis for emancipatory praxis, that is reflexive agency on various scales, with the aim of dismantling or weakening oppressive relations and practices. Freire proposes that this can only be cultivated by educators holding fast to the political and moral certainty that progressive change is possible, combined with sincere humility and care in assessing what this might mean for individuals and communities in specific historical and social contexts. This acute and subtle sensitivity to the dialectical movement between particular material and cultural circumstances and general historical possibilities has given Freire’s work an intellectual and political suppleness which has meant it has ‘travelled’ easily in time and space.

### **The impact of Freire on adult education and beyond**

Without doubt, Freire is the most renowned figure in modern adult education who has influenced, orientated and even defined our field in profound and remarkable ways. By necessity and custom, this fact is mentioned frequently in adult education courses, at conferences and in publications and has become so familiar a proposition that its true significance barely registers. A simple thought experiment might serve to make this a little less banal: pause for a moment and imagine adult education practice and research, whether in historical or everyday terms, without the figure of Freire, without his concepts and arguments, without his practical experiments and collaborations.

Freire has inspired projects and initiatives in Australia, Africa, Asia, Europe and across the Americas. As Martin Carnoy (2006, p.8) has noted Freire is “an anomaly among educators because he is truly international” his “ideas are in the world and of the world”. We know that in traditional academic terms Freire is one of the most cited authors within adult education. This is true both historically and in recent years. For example, he is by far the most prominent author in the 2018 *Palgrave Handbook on Adult and Lifelong Education and Learning* (Milani et al, 2018) and continues to be widely cited in key journals. Of course, Freire’s books remain the main wellspring for radical popular

education, many forms of community education and critical pedagogy, as well as providing one of the key reference points in transformative learning theory. There are eleven Freire institutes internationally and numerous academic networks, such as the Popular Education Network (Crowther, 2013) and ESREA's Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning network, where his ideas remain vital and central.

Significantly, Freire has made what is distinct and important in adult education relevant to other disciplines and areas of scholarship, ranging from international development to sociology. In fact, Freire has been cited almost half a million times and remarkably *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is one of the three most frequently referenced texts in social science (Green, 2016) and it is also worth noting he is the only author of the twenty five most influential texts in social science who comes from the Global South.

As we have noted already *dialogue with people in context* is fundamental to Freire's approach to education. The strong emphasis Freire put on understanding the historical and cultural formation of communities led to new ways of thinking about curriculum and also foregrounded, in a new way, the importance of research for adult educators. The use of codifications based on extensive preliminary research with a community naturally led to other ways of approaching this research, such as the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1995) and, more indirectly, the use of cultural studies in critical pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Giroux and McLaren, 1994; Shor, 1992) and other arts-based pedagogies (Clover and Stalker, 2007). Freire's insights paved the way for the development of participatory action research (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991) and fed into the collective work that led to the establishment of the International Participatory Research Network under the auspices of the International Council of Adult Education (Hall, 2005). This focus on the importance of participatory research has been very generative methodologically (see Grummell and Finnegan, 2020 for a number of recent examples of researchers building on this tradition).

Judged in Freire's own terms citation patterns and methodological innovation are relatively unimportant in and of themselves. The key issue is whether these ideas and practices contribute to emancipatory change. Without doubt, Freire's work as an educator, his writing, and his meetings and many collaborations, have emboldened and inspired activists and

practitioners for sixty years across the world, in diverse settings and on a range of scales. It has been especially significant for popular education, mass literacy campaigns (Archer and Costello, 1990; Kane, 2013; Torres et al, 2015) and in community and international development education (Hope and Timmell, 1984). Assessing the full scale of this is impossible but we do know, as some of the articles in this Special Edition indicate, this led to initiatives that involved millions of people.

Much of Freire's (1970, 1978) work in places such as Guinea-Bissau, Grenada and Brazil on educational reform and mass literacy campaigns is well-known because of the scale and ambition of these projects, but it is important to also remember that his work has directly informed innumerable local initiatives which have been sustained and highly impactful. For example, the Adult Learning Project in Edinburgh or the work of Highlander in Appalachia. Freire continues to be drawn upon by contemporary social movements, ranging from the Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil (Kane, 2013), to recent anti-capitalist and ecological campaigns (Hall et al, 2013). In this context, it is worth noting that Freire is still seen as a threat to the status quo and before his election the current President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro promised to "enter the Education Ministry with a flamethrower to remove Paulo Freire" (Telesur, 2019) and has gone to great lengths to undo reforms initiated or inspired by Freire in Brazil.

### **Popular democratic ferment and the rise of neoliberalism: Historicising and critiquing Freire in a changing field**

It would be against the spirit of Freire to treat a Special Edition about Freire as an occasion for hagiography or toothless nostalgia. When we read Freire's early work in the light of second wave feminism, we are reminded, as Freire notes, that each of us is the product of the culture and circumstances of our times, including the relative absence in his writing of women's experiences and voices. Whilst he made strides to engage with feminist critiques after the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in the 1970s, the glaring absence of gender awareness reminds us of the situated, incomplete and partial nature of his theory of emancipation.

There are other blind spots and weaknesses in Freire's theory of course, such as his relative disregard in theoretical terms for questions of political economy and a tendency to underplay the complexities of social and educational institutions and knowledge production.

More generally one also needs to consider on the centenary of his birth whether rapid social change has made Freire less relevant. Reading Freire today it is striking the extent to which his work expresses and codifies what was learnt by democratic and egalitarian social movements during a particularly intense period of history. Freire's pedagogy emerged, and was profoundly shaped, by a global democratic ferment between the late 1950s and mid 1970s linked to decolonisation, 'third world' liberation struggles and an upsurge in the emancipatory movements of students, workers and women (for a useful framing see Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1989). In the popular imagination, this is often linked to a single year -1968 (Marker, 1978). In many ways, we can see Freire as an educator and epistemologist of, and from, the movements of 68. These movements were varied but were marked by commitment to equality, a keen interest in extending democracy and a desire to rethink how we approach knowledge (Wainwright, 2009). It is worth recalling that Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki (1975, p 127) in a report for the Trilateral Commission viewed these mobilisations as a major threat to the status quo, linked, in their telling phrase, to "an excess of democracy". Freire's radicalism, his militant hopefulness, his trust in the good sense of people, can be traced back to the energy and activity of these emancipatory counter-publics.

Naturally, this ferment also shaped the field of adult education - which has historically had a strong relationship with democratic movements - and interest in radical educational proposals (Hake, 2021). For example, in decolonising societies such as Tanzania and Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde islands, there was a strong interest in developing adult education to overcome the educational neglect and miseducation of colonisation. In wealthy states, especially social democratic ones, radical educators, could often find space to advance radical education within established adult education structures alongside what was happening within movements. In this sense even when Freire's ideas were institutionally marginal they were buoyed by their wider visibility in society<sup>2</sup>.

As we know, the socio-political landscape today is very different. The wave of anti-colonial independence movements did not lead to the type of autonomous national development that was hoped for in most cases. If we consider Cabral's inspiring vision of Guinea-Bissau in the 1970s and then think about governance in this country today we get some inkling of the distance we have travelled and the disenchantment this has involved.

The hopes for a renewal of democratic politics sparked by the collapse of authoritarian socialist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe in the late 1980s and 1990s also fizzled out during difficult, and in many places, traumatic social changes in this region. Perhaps most significant of all, and these things are obviously connected, has been the rise of neoliberalism. The policy measures taken in Chile after the military coup against Allende marked the first chapter in the adoption of neoliberal ideas at a state level (Harvey, 2005) but these were still very ‘marginal’ ideas in international terms. However, by the mid 1990s these ideas had global purchase. Achieving this involved direct conflict with organised labour and a wider assault against collectivist and egalitarian ideals in culture and politics. Political conflict, combined with shifts in technology, finance and the international division of labour, has altered in dramatic ways the international architecture of power, weakening the movements of grassroots democracy which inspired Freire. Alongside this, the neoliberalisation of formal adult education in many states resulted in changes in funding and management which have shrunk the space for educators to develop situated, open forms of adult education with emancipatory goals (Bowl, 2017; Tett and Hamilton, 2019). Over time this, alongside the ambiguous impact of the professionalisation of adult education, has rendered much of the field deaf, or at the very least incapable of responding to, emancipatory social movements.

Freire (1994, 1998, 2004) repeatedly and forcefully rejected the fatalism of neoliberalism. The idea that history was finished seemed an absurd, patently ideological, proposition to him. He also discussed how this can be responded to in a generative and active way through hopefulness, avoiding dogmatism on the left and by building broad alliances between diverse, progressive movements. In many respects, these emphases anticipated the main aspects of contemporary ‘grassroots’ democratic thinking (Sitrin and Azzellini, 2014). Nevertheless, when we read Freire today it is clear how much ground has been ceded, and how much the ground has been transformed since *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire’s ideas need to be engaged with this historical passage of time in mind, with a type of double consciousness that allows for the recovery of lost histories and repressed hopes whilst grasping how and why these ideas are now ‘out of joint’. From this perspective, we think Freire can then be adapted and critiqued so that it can better speak to the complexities of financialised capitalism, the rise of fundamentalisms, the proliferation of social media and issues of ecology, climate justice and climate change.



## **Looking backward, looking forward**

Freire's writing on the 'banking system of education' which rejected didactic or 'front end' loading approaches to learning is foundational to what we now know about how adults learn (Freire 1972). Freire knew that learning was embodied, that learners had agency, he argued they were able to think carefully and critically about their own learning needs and had the capacity to disrupt, critique and challenge their teachers. What he proposed to challenge traditional rationalist and behaviourist approaches to learning was to argue for 'problem posing' dialogue in which both teachers and learners engage in ongoing dialectical and dialogic conversations about education and learning, but also through conversations about the world around them. For Freire, education was an inherently political process, education was and could never be politically neutral. It is inextricably connected to the political and economic conditions of our time. Importantly, it is the social justice intent of Freire's writing, believing education should be connected to a struggle against inequality in society, which remains important. These ideas about education and learning remain vital to adult education. The Australian Journal of Adult Learning (AJAL) is very pleased to celebrate this with articles that reflect on the legacy of Freire and on the way his ideas are still being used.

It is hoped this Special Edition of the journal will help record the effect Freire has had on research in adult education and learning, and also, perhaps, to spark interest in readers, academics and scholars new to his work. We see his ideas in contemporary struggles for education justice for adult learners and how through education lives are profoundly transformed through access to literacy and numeracy education, improving learners' lives by providing opportunities for work, income and housing, enabling them to participate more fully in a living democracy.

## **The articles in the Special Edition**

The Special Edition begins with a poetic tribute to Freire from Budd L. Hall who was one of the facilitators involved in Freire's visit to Tanzania and went on to play a central role in participatory and popular education research in adult education. Entitled 'Surf On Pauliño' it recalls a 70th birthday celebration held for Freire in New York which Freire attended and whose presence there, says Hall, allowed the gathered activists and adult educators to also 'celebrate ourselves through him'. It deftly and

simply captures some of the qualities and charisma of Freire as a person and how he appeared to bring ‘a warm breeze of historical possibility’ with him. We can think of no more fitting way to begin this collection.

The first two articles explore Freire, literacy and liberation in South Africa, Australia and Timor-Leste. The articles are fascinating in terms of the historical detail they offer but also argue for a particular way of approaching Freire. As the author of the second article Bob Boughton puts it, ‘re-reading and re-writing Freire must be done, not in university seminars or academic journals, but in the practice of teaching literacy on a mass scale’.

John Aitcheson and Veronica McKay’s reflection on the impact of Freire’s thinking on literacy programmes in South Africa, (and in particular on the ongoing Kha Ri Gude campaign), addresses this challenge in vibrant and compelling ways. Fittingly this article is the result of a reflective dialogue. Aitcheson and McKay present what they call a ‘duoethnographical’ approach, situating their work in the context of their different initial encounters with Freire’s thinking in apartheid era South Africa when Freire’s books were banned by the state and circulated clandestinely. It reflects on the different routes they took to arrive as joint leaders of the Kha Ri Gude campaign. Aitcheson, as a scholar activist, fresh from five years of restriction without trial, encountered Freire’s work in the context of the struggle against the state. He saw Freire’s work, and in particular his commitment to praxis, as reflection in action, alongside that of Marx, Fanon and the post-war hermeneutic philosophers influencing civil society literacy work, the black consciousness movement, and the creation of the United Democratic Front. He maps the impact of Freire’s thought on popular and political movements and the rise, and post-apartheid fall of a wider commitment to literacy as a tool of empowerment. The article recounts how after the end of apartheid “Freireanism went downhill fast”. Interestingly, this is linked by the author to the desire of even the most alternative and radical educators to see the development of a state supported and funded adult education system. The second author, McKay, also engaged in the struggles against the injustices of apartheid as a student, when she also volunteered as a literacy tutor. In that context, she encountered Freire’s thoughts through Ann Hope’s and Hilary Timmel’s *Training for Transformation* (1984) and then through a clandestine copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. She describes her experiences in developing programmes grounded in problem posing

and problem solving dialogue, action-reflection programmes, and in founding the Institute for Basic Education.

One of the fascinating aspects of this article is the way earlier experiments in radical education which were neutralised or disappeared in a period of defeat were later reactivated. In the latter part of this article the authors discuss how the experience developing adult education programmes focused on 'anti-banking education' led to a new coming together. Finally, after years of false starts, the State committed to a major literacy initiative to run the impressive Kha Ri Gude programme which successfully reached four million adults. A key element of the materials produced was the production of generative codes designed to generate dialogue, problem posing and solving among learner groups. The programme was designed to stimulate campaigns to mobilise communities to action and reflection, and to 'help shape the trajectory of living'.

The second article by Boughton and Durnan is an account of the adaptation of the Cuban *Yo Sí Puedo* literacy programme in the very different political contexts of newly liberated Timor Leste and to Aboriginal communities in Australia over the past twenty years. The Cuban model has, as Boughton and Durnan claim, been exported widely and reached more than ten million people internationally. Boughton and Durnan's paper notes how this approach is both similar and distinct from Freire. In particular, Boughton recognises that the methods, materials and lesson plans differ from Freire's focus on the central role of dialogue in the shaping and development of programmes, but argues that the approaches share in a common belief that 'before you read the text you have to read the context', and that time is spent in adapting the approach to local circumstances. Reflecting on the lessons of the campaigns, Boughton argues first that the Cuban programme is grounded in an analysis that sees the social and economic inequality produced by an imperialist world system as the root cause of the problem of mass literacy on a global scale. Secondly, he stresses the importance in any mass literacy campaign of structure, organisation, disciplined coordination and training, and points to the strength of the model in engaging volunteer tutors, often not substantially more literate than the students in the development together of their programmes (this is different from the Freirean approach). Thirdly, he argues any mass programme needs to be contextualised, and to have inbuilt processes for reflection and adaptation, not least to ensure that first world educators recognise their own ignorance when working to

understand the communities they partner in such programmes. Reading Freire in the light of another radical approach to literacy reminds us that Freire is only one, albeit unusually influential, figure within a wider and longer history of popular education. This also makes his distinct contribution to educational thinking clearer.

The first two articles alert us to the various ways Freire has been deployed in literacy campaigns and liberation struggles. The third article by Griff Foley is similar to the poem and two preceding articles in that it deals with memory but is approached from a different angle. It is an account of Foley's own professional formation and learning in the form of a montage of memories, a type of bricolage. It moves over a lifetime of work and activism in the author's home country of Australia as well as his experiences of teaching in Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya. Woven into this biographical montage is a discussion of a number of educational and political science concepts framed within a dialectical theory of power and learning. Central to this is Foley's belief in the continuing relevance of Freire, especially the ideas of generative codes and themes, for critical education and engaged citizenship. As part of this, Foley draws on extensive research he has done in the past which points to the centrality of learning in human life, especially informal and incidental learning. These give rise Foley says, *pace Gramsci*, to a type of 'common sense' and distinct forms of rationality. Each social configuration has its own common sense and generative themes. This adaption of Freire's concept as a type of socio-historical sense-making that can be progressive or reactionary is thought-provoking. The piece is underpinned by a strong sense of the everyday capacity for solidarity and critical thought but also a deep awareness of pathologies in the present era, most notably the fact that "ecosystems and social bonds that sustain life on earth [are] under immense pressure". Foley finishes the article with a call for a new form of critical rationality, linked to ecological sustainability, capable of dealing with the mystifications of neoliberalism, the scapegoating of migrants and the climate crisis.

The fourth text is by Helen Underhill and is entitled '*Pedagogy of the Oppressed and discomfort in activist-scholarship: an autoethnographic account of engaging with Freire as teacher, adult educator and researcher*'. In it the author critically reflects on her own embodied journey of learning, drawing on anthropology and critical educational research combined with Boler's writing of 'learning as discomfort'. The paper is a series of reflective 'moments' about her own adult learning which is

reflexively weaved through an encounter with Freire's philosophy. She commences by noting that schools are spaces of schooling 'docile bodies', or spaces of rationalist performativity, which assess, rank and categorise students according to their 'abilities'. She moves on to analyse learning in social action (largely informally), through the relational engagement with other activists and how Freire's ideas were foundational in learning with others about how to critique, disrupt and challenge power. As she claims, 'A central tenet of Freirean pedagogy is the commitment to revolutionary praxis - to 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1970, p. 33) that is distinct from activism as 'action for action's sake' (p. 69)'. Her final reflective 'moment' outlines the importance of engaged research which conflicts with an objectivist approach to research. Underhill describes education as a space of tension and contradictions where grasping the limits of your own practice and the structural and institutional constraints you are working within you can be useful and generative. The paper outlines how an experience of discomfort in a workshop she attended in South Africa led her to understand how research should be engaged 'with' rather than 'on' marginalised communities. This form of research moves beyond research that privileges the researcher or the academy, highlighting the significant difference between producing knowledge for the university and conducting research that can work with and for communities. The article concludes by acknowledging that her story of adult education, activism and research positioned with Freire's writing, demonstrates how adult education is 'critical to understanding the possibilities for transformative education and research'.

In *Annunciation and denunciation in Paulo Freire's dialogical popular education*, the fifth article in this issue, Linden West invites us to reflect on the role religion plays in Freire's work. He argues that to see Freire's words without understanding Freire's Christian view of the world is to see only half the picture. It is a powerful, and perhaps for some, even an unsettling argument. West suggests that Freire's beliefs are at the heart of his work. They can be found in Catholic Social Action programmes, in liberation theology and in solidarity with the poor. As West reminds us, Freire himself said that his Christian upbringing partly explains his pedagogical beliefs. Christ 'is the light that led me to Marx' Freire said in one of his letters, '...My relationship with Marx never suggested that I abandon Christ'. West coherently argues that Freire's vision of the new order 'is a mix of Marxism and liberation theology: a place where

no man or woman or group exploits the work of others.’ Further, that in a critical spirit, understanding self and others through hope and love, is a means of humanising the world. West also discusses the inspiring work of Colin Kirkwood. The article thus, somewhat indirectly, brings Freire in dialogue with a long and interesting tradition in Britain of exploring the role of religion in radical thought, which has been especially powerful in some strands of adult education, not least the Workers’ Educational Association, from R.H. Tawney to E.P. Thompson. The article concludes with evocative stories from a workshop intended to develop active citizenship in Israeli teacher education. Here, West details the humanising effect of narrative storytelling which can reveal new life, new hope and new learning through dialogue. A powerful end to a stimulating article which, above all, turns on the possibility of redemption.

The sixth article by Vicky Duckworth and Marie McNamara deals with class inequalities and education based on life history and biographical research. Two aspects of Freire are foregrounded in it. First, Duckworth and McNamara stress the importance of using participatory research methods in educational research. Amongst other things, this means attending carefully to power relations and seeking to eliminate, or at least minimise, the traditional hierarchies of academic research. As feminists have long maintained, this has implications for both the doing and the presentation of research. The traditional academic mode of ‘neutral’ presentation is directly challenged here by the authors by offering an account of education and inequality which is grounded, contextual and personal. They explore their educational and life histories alongside each other to make sense of power and possibility in a classed society. Duckworth first met McNamara as her tutor on an adult literacy course and they became friends. Their shared community and class background – they grew up fifteen minutes from each other in similar housing – means this is a type of ‘insider research’. They discuss the power of thinking across their lives and why and how they had similar experiences in schooling and also traces their different post-school trajectories. They say that this process meant that issues that had been “kept hidden were suddenly exposed. Everything we felt, including shame, was being challenged as we realised that we were not alone in our experiences that had made us feel like outsiders to the educational system”.

Second, the paper acknowledges and critiques the role of education in the reproduction of class inequalities but at the same time makes a case for the

transformative possibilities of education on various scales. For both authors, education and learning has been empowering. Duckworth says of her friend:

*'Marie is still the same person; it is her financial and economic security and her perspective on the world that has changed. In Marie's case it also enhances social cohesion within her community: through enhancing the agency of the individual, it benefits the family and, beyond that of the home community.'*

In telling these stories Duckworth and McNamara pose questions to us about the various, overlapping and conflicting, ways adult educators understand change and transformation.

### **Letters to those who dare teach: Another world is possible**

In preparing for this Special Edition we were conscious of the way Freire chose to communicate with other educators in creative and often novel ways and formats such as the 'talking books' (Escobar et al, 1994; Horton et al, 1990; Freire and Faundez, 1990; Shor and Freire, 1987) and books of letters (Freire, 1978, 1996, 2004). This was of course deeply rooted in his way of viewing knowledge. Like so many readers we have gained a great deal from the form and content of these publications but it does raise useful, possibly uncomfortable questions, in preparing a journal on Freire. Would much of Freire's most valuable work get through contemporary peer review processes? Are we speaking and listening to practitioners in our academic fora and in publications? Are we leaving enough freedom for grounded, reflexive research which cannot fully follow established conventions? We think and hope we have done so with the articles that are featured in this Special Edition but we also very much wanted there to be space for other ways of communication and this brings us to the final part of this Special Edition: four letters.

Paulo Freire spent over ten years in exile from his native country. His letters are full of reflections and advice to modern readers and were a way to share his ideas about the unity between theory and practice. They are a chance to look over his shoulder and to hear his voice, whether in the 'report letters' to Guinea-Bissau in *Pedagogy in Process* or the more personal *Letters to Cristina*. 'My experience in exile,' he wrote, 'was enriched by the letters I wrote to friends'. Writing, for Freire, was not an option but a 'deep pleasure ... [and a] '... political project that must be met'.



This is why we have invited readers to contribute 'letters to a teacher': not to emulate one of Freire's last publications, *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*, but to help bring his thinking to life. It is appropriate that the letters here are from teacher educators.

The first of these is by Sergio Haddad who has led the Sao Paulo NGO Acao Activo for many years and played a leading and inspiring role in Latin American and wider international popular education. He worked alongside Freire and is one of, if not the, leading Brazilian authorities on his work. He uses his letter to say that Paulo Freire's voice is a necessary one for today. Haddad reviews his life and concludes that Paulo's contribution was primarily based on dialogue. 'Effective, critical, respectful dialogue was at the centre of his pedagogical thinking' Haddad concludes, in a masterful summarising of why Freire's words are important right now, at this time when repression, inequality and poverty are evident everywhere. In short, we need Paulo Freire because we need social transformation in a damaged and threatened world.

In the second missive, 'The critical power of Freire's work', Licínio Lima, the well-known Portuguese Freirean, addresses teacher educators and reflects on why Freire's legacy remains current, namely that education is not 'value-neutral'. Licínio argues with passion that we need a critique of 'traditional, bureaucratic, dehumanised education that reproduces social inequalities'. The author reminds us that Freire's work is also more than this. It is about alternatives '... and a world of possibilities for transformation'. This is a plea to see Freire's work as full of doubts and questions, encouraging debate and a critical understanding of education. Licínio concludes with a reminder of the violence and oppression Freire would have fought against in the new environment of, '... physical and symbolic violence, restrictions on freedom and democracy, environmental disaster ... access to vaccines and oxygen by the current 'ragged from the world'...'

Our third letter 'Dear Carmen' is to someone on the threshold of a career in teaching. In it the author of the letter, Paul Gurton, suggests that he could have done more to allay Carmen's fears. He reminds her of an inspiring teacher who encouraged cooperative learning in her school and urged her not to be disheartened by the narrowness of the current primary curriculum in England. Gurton offers a living example of how dialogic teaching is thriving in some primary schools where Freire's principles can be seen in practice. It is a letter full of hope and encouragement. 'These



children,' Gurton suggests, are developing an agency of their own, '... and beginning to use language to interpret the world'. The letter ends with a critical moment that remains with the writer and the reader.

In 'A RED-letter day' Tony Davis, another teacher educator, describes to a Technical and Further Education teacher how they might have more agency in changing the way that teaching is assessed in their college. He suggests turning the observation of teaching sessions into a research project in which risks are taken and colleagues peer-review one another's work in a supportive way. Tony argues that it is necessary to take risks when you teach if we are all to improve what we do for adult students. His letter suggests engaging with 'accountability' and turning our teaching into a transformational activity in which we learn. 'Our job as teachers' he says, 'is to help adult learners to be curious, excited about the learning they do, to grow as individuals, and to care'.

In reading these letters, in listening to the voices, you may find that you are stirred to write such a letter yourself. It is a way to continue a dialogue about contemporary issues. In one of Freire's last letters (*Letters to Cristina: Eighteenth Letter*), he speaks of making the dream of a better world a reality, and that accepting the dream means accepting the process of building it. In education we have much to do. Now that we have started, or rather recalled, reflected and restarted, we look forward to more letters from you and further critical dialogue.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> He combined this with the work of Instituto de Ação Cultural (IDAC) which he established with other colleagues to support the educational work of groups in the global south struggling for independence.

<sup>2</sup> The reconfiguration of adult education and the state form in the neoliberal era was a major theme of the last Triennial conference of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) held in Belgrade in 2018 and the discussion there informs these comments.

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