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Critical Philosophy of Education: An Analysis of Paulo Freire's Thoughts on Modern Educational Practices

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A B S T R A C T

This study analyzes Paulo Freire's philosophy of critical education and its relevance to modern educational practices, especially within the Indonesian context, by integrating it with Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's concept of ta'dīb. The background of this research is the dominance of traditional and neoliberal educational systems that often marginalize critical awareness, ethics, and spirituality in learning. The purpose of this research is to reinterpret Freire's pedagogical framework to construct a more humanistic, dialogical, and spiritually grounded educational paradigm. Using a qualitative library research method, this study collects and analyzes primary sources from Freire's works (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Education for Critical Consciousness) and secondary literature from 2019–2025. The findings reveal that Freire's key ideas, conscientização (critical consciousness), dialogue, and praxis, remain highly relevant in transforming education into a process of humanization and liberation. However, structural rigidity, exam-oriented curricula, and digital inequality still hinder its practical implementation. The synthesis of Freire's praxis and al-Attas's ta'dīb concept offers a holistic vision: education as both liberation from social oppression and purification of the self. The study concludes that integrating ethical and spiritual dimensions into critical pedagogy can reorient education toward forming reflective, responsible, and spiritually aware individuals, making it a transformative force for both personal and societal change.

1. Introduction

Education is seen as one of the main foundations in the process of human formation and civilization development. From a philosophical perspective, the essence of education does not only function as a means of knowledge transfer, but also as a medium for the formation of self-awareness, the strengthening of ethical values, and the cultivation of social responsibility. Within this framework, the philosophy of critical education as formulated by Paulo Freire emerged as a paradigm that opposed the dominance of traditional education systems that were repressive and non-dialogical (Corbett & Guilherme, 2021). Paulo Freire (1921–1997), through

his monumental work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), proposed a conception of education oriented towards the liberation of human beings from oppressive social structures. Freire rejected the idea that education was merely an instrument for the preservation of social inequality. On the contrary, he asserts that education must be a praxis of liberation (*praxis of freedom*) that allows learners to think critically, act reflectively, and play an active role in changing their social reality (Freire, 2019).

The philosophy of critical education has its roots in the tradition of social philosophy that examines the relationship between knowledge, power, and human emancipation. Freire emphasized that education is never neutral it can function as a reproductive mechanism of oppression through educational models of *Banking education*, or conversely, become a means of liberation through dialogue and critical reflection (*Awareness*) (Govender, 2020). The two main pillars in Freire's theoretical framework are:

a. Criticism of the banking model: education that positions the teacher as the sole authority and the student as the passive recipient is considered to dullify critical power and make the student an object, not a subject, in the learning process (Freire, 2019).
b. *Dialogue* and *Awareness*: The educational process must be dialogical, where teachers and students are involved in the learning process together to build a critical awareness of social conditions, thus enabling collective action towards transformative social change (*Praxis*) (Freire, 2021).

In the Indonesian context, Freire's thinking has a strong relevance to the "Freedom of Learning" (Merdeka Belajar) paradigm launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. The concept of Freedom of Learning emphasizes freedom of thought, creativity, and active participation of students in line with the spirit of liberation education carried out by Freire (Madhakomala et al., 2022). Education is supposed to function as a humanization process that frees human beings from ignorance, dependence, and structural domination. Islamic education, in this case, can take inspiration from Freire's humanistic principles to foster a spiritual consciousness that is social and progressive (Fadli, 2020).

However, the implementation of Freire’s ideas in contemporary education faces a number of structural and cultural challenges. Critical pedagogy remains difficult to apply within education systems that are still hierarchical and result-oriented (Sholikhah, 2025). This condition is further complicated by the pressures of neoliberalism, where education is often subordinated to market logic and employability demands. In vocational education, for instance, the dominance of industrial-oriented curricula tends to reduce the function of education to mere technical training, neglecting its emancipatory and reflective dimensions (Jaya et al., 2025). Such tendencies highlight the urgent need to reinterpret Freirean praxis in order to balance the requirements of the labor market with the development of critical and ethical human capacities.

In addition, the digital transformation of education introduces new challenges for the realization of conscientização. Unequal access to digital resources, algorithmic

control, and the dominance of instrumental approaches to learning risk reinforcing the very "*banking*" tendencies that Freire criticized. Teachers and students are now required to adapt to new roles as facilitators and critical participants within digital spaces that are often shaped by commercial interests (Widiasanti et al., 2025). Therefore, rethinking critical pedagogy in the digital age requires transforming technology from a tool of passive consumption into a medium of dialogue, reflection, and liberation.

To enrich the Freirean framework, this study also draws upon the thought of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, particularly his concept of *ta'dīb*, which integrates knowledge, faith, and adab (ethical conduct) as the essence of true education. While Freire emphasizes liberation through critical praxis, al-Attas situates education as the cultivation of spiritual awareness and moral order (*tazkiyah al-nafs*). The synthesis of both thinkers provides a holistic vision of education, one that liberates humans from both structural oppression and spiritual alienation. Therefore, this research explores how Freire's critical pedagogy and al-Attas's concept of ta'dīb can be integrated to construct a more humanistic and spiritually grounded educational philosophy.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative library research approach. This method was chosen to enable a comprehensive interpretation and synthesis of Freire's and al-Attas's philosophical ideas, supported by recent studies (2019-2025) that discuss their relevance to modern educational challenges. Through this approach, the study aims to articulate the essence of Freire's thought, assess its relevance to contemporary educational practices, integrate ethical and spiritual dimensions from al-Attas's perspective, and formulate implementable recommendations for a more critical and humanizing education in the 21st century.

2. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach with the method of library research. This approach was chosen because the aim of the research is to deeply understand the concept, ideas, and relevance of Paulo Freire's thoughts in the context of modern education, not to test empirical hypotheses. Library research is a method focusing on the analysis of various scientific literature sources relevant to obtaining a theoretical and conceptual understanding of an educational phenomenon (Fadli, 2020). This research is a literature review analyzing a total of 21 reference sources, consisting of journal articles and other sources. Specifically, these sources include4 articles published in Scopus-indexed journals, 15 articles from non-Scopus journals (national/other journals), and 2 sources from other publication types (books).

3. Results and Discussion

Thoughts of Paulo Feire

a. Banking Versus Education Dialogue Model

Paulo Freire rejects the paradigm *Banking model* Because it is considered to hinder students in developing critical awareness of social reality. On the other hand, the dialogical educational approach places learners as active subjects who play a role in the process of constructing meaning and knowledge. In contemporary educational practice, the *Banking* It is still often found, especially when the evaluation system emphasizes more on cognitive mastery of the material without considering the social context such as in the use of standardized exams that eliminate the space for critical reflection. Recent research has shown that efforts to replace conventional instructional approaches with dialogical models require a profound transformation of institutional culture, accompanied by pedagogical capacity building through teacher training oriented towards reflective and participatory learning (Freire, 2019).

b. *Conscientização* as the Essence of Liberation Education

Concept *Awareness* or critical awareness is understood as an ongoing process in which learners develop the ability to recognize oppressive social structures and are encouraged to undertake transformational actions. The results of empirical research show that education that fosters critical awareness is able to strengthen citizen participation in public life, increase social awareness, and expand democratic capacity. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the implementation of *Awareness* relies heavily on curriculum design, socio-cultural context, and educational policy support that encourages social reflection and community engagement (Jones, 2023).

c. Praxis: Integration of Reflection and Action

Freire asserts that reflection that is not followed by action is simply empty discourse, while action without reflection is an activity that is meaningless. Therefore, *Praxis* is an important element that bridges theory and practice in critical education. In the context of modern education, the application of the principles of *Praxis* is seen in activities such as community-based projects, service learning (*Service-learning*), as well as the application of critical pedagogy that links learning materials to actual social issues. However, research in vocational education institutions and *Technical and Vocational Education and Training* (TVET) reveals structural challenges, especially when educational institutions are tied to job market orientation (*Employability*), which is narrow. Therefore, it is necessary to adapt the Freirean approach that is able to balance the needs of the world of work with efforts to maintain the critical and humanistic dimensions of education (Majola et al., 2025).

A. Analysis of Modern Education Practices

a. Implications of the Banking Model in the Contemporary Curriculum

Freire's model of banking education, in which teachers act as depositors of knowledge and students as passive recipients, is still seen in a curriculum system oriented towards standardized exam results and cognitive mastery of the material. A study on assessment development in Indonesia shows that "assessment systems that emphasize multiple-choice exams and memorization of materials tend to

reinforce pedagogical practices that are one-way *(one-way instruction),* thus limiting the space for students to develop critical and reflective thinking" (Nurazizah et al., 2024). This makes it clear that the dominance of narrow cognitive-based evaluation in modern education effectively places learners as objects, not subjects, in the learning process. Therefore, it appears that the modern curriculum, although claimed to be progressive, often unwittingly preserves the essence of the banking model that Freire opposed.

Therefore, it is important to highlight how a more humanistic evaluation paradigm began to be introduced in the discourse of education reform in Indonesia. As conveyed by (Levrano et al., 2024) Authentic project-based assessments have been shown to improve students' reflective abilities and active involvement in the learning process. These findings show that the paradigm shift in assessment from simply testing memorization to understanding and real application can be a concrete step towards a more dialogical and emancipatory education. Thus, the application of authentic assessment is an important way to transform pedagogical practices from a banking model to learning that humanizes students

b. The Challenges of Implementing *Conscientização* in the Digital Era

The application of *conscientização* or critical awareness in the digital age faces various serious challenges. A national study said that inequality of internet access between provinces and gender is one of the factors that has the potential to affect the overall level of digital literacy (Widiasanti et al., 2025). This shows that when learners do not have equal access to digital devices and networks, it is difficult for them to play an active role as active subjects who are able to reflect their social reality. Therefore, the success of conscientização in the digital era does not only depend on the provision of access to technology, but also on equal opportunities and the empowerment of students to be able to think critically and act consciously.

In addition, the shift towards digital learning also requires new roles and competencies from educators and students which increasingly complicates educational practices. A study shows that teachers have an important role as facilitators, innovators, and developers of digital learning media, but the challenges they face include limited infrastructure, low digital literacy, and a lack of continuous training (Fitri Hartati, 2025). If teachers continue to play the role of depositors of information and students only as passive recipients, then technology actually strengthens the banking education model criticized by Paulo Freire. Thus, the transformation of digital education towards true consciousness requires a paradigm shift, where technology is used as a space of dialogue and liberation, not just a means of material delivery.

c. Praxis Reduction in Vocational Education (TVET) and Market Orientation

Vocational education today often undergoes a reduction in praxis when market orientation becomes dominant in the curriculum and implementation. A study shows that vocational education in Indonesia is largely directed to meet the needs

of the industrial/logistics world and is focused on work-ready output, so that the meaning of education as liberation and development of critical skills is compromised (Jaya et al., 2025). This shows that when vocational programs place too much emphasis on market readiness (job readiness) and technical competencies that are directly used by industry, the space for the development of reflection, creativity, and social transformation of students narrows. As a result, vocational education is turning more into a market tool than as a learning environment that allows participants to become active subjects in the formation of skills and job meaning.

The dominance of market orientation in vocational education has also shifted the function of education to a mere image of job readiness without considering the development of broader skills. A study states that vocational education is oriented towards job skills according to market needs so that the critical skills and adaptive abilities of graduates are often overlooked (Sugiyantoro & Irham, 2025). It can be seen that when the measurement of the success of vocational education is only seen from the immediate absorption of graduates into the world of work, the aspect of capacity formation of students as agents of change and lifelong learners takes less space. Therefore, a strong market orientation in vocational education should be realigned so that it still provides opportunities for the development of students' subjectivity, not just making them work-ready objects.

B. Implementation of Freire's Thinking on Education in Indonesia

Paulo Freire's thoughts on education had a great influence on the formation of a humanistic and liberating educational paradigm in Indonesia. According to Susanti (Susanti et al., 2024) The concept of liberation education put forward by Freire is relevant and applicable in the context of modern education because it places learners as active subjects who are able to understand their social reality critically. Education is no longer seen as a one-way process between teachers and students, but rather as a dialogue that encourages awareness and empowerment. Thus, Freire's thinking became an important foundation for the development of more participatory and reflective educational practices in Indonesia. Here are some of the implementations;

a. Education as a Process of Liberation

Education as a process of liberation emphasizes that the main goal of education is not only to transfer knowledge but to liberate students from a passive position. According to Amin et al (Amin et al., 2022) Education must be able to make students aware of the conditions they are facing and abandon the banking model where teachers only transfer and students only receive. The article shows that through the process of reflection, dialogue, and action, students become active subjects in changing their social reality. Thus, education as a process of liberation is an important foundation in building independent, critical, and socially responsible human beings.

b. Dialogical and Participatory Learning

Dialogical and participatory learning emphasizes the importance of an equal relationship between teachers and students in the teaching and learning process. According to Astutik (Astutik, 2024), Paulo Freire's approach to critical pedagogy encourages the creation of a dialogue space where teachers and students exchange ideas to build mutual understanding, rather than just passively accepting knowledge. This shows that a dialogical learning process is able to foster confidence, critical thinking skills, and active participation of students in solving real problems in their environment. Therefore, dialogical and participatory learning is a strategic step in creating a liberating and humanitarian-centered education.

c. Contextual and Experiential Education

Contextual and experiential education emphasizes that the learning process must be rooted in the reality of students' lives in order to be more meaningful. According to Ashar and Nursikin (Ashar & Nursikin, 2023), learning linked to real experience allows students to understand knowledge deeply and develop social awareness as emphasized in Paulo Freire's thought. The article shows that contextual education helps students not only master academic concepts, but also be able to apply them in daily life through reflection and critical action. Thus, experiential-based education is an important means to form students who are adaptive, reflective, and able to face real social challenges.

d. Implementation in Community Education Programs

The implementation of Paulo Freire's thinking in community education programs emphasizes the importance of the active participation of learners in understanding and transforming their social reality. According to Susanti (Susanti et al., 2024) A liberating educational approach is effectively applied in non-formal education because it encourages people to recognize their potential and play a role in solving social problems through the process of dialogue and critical reflection. This shows that empowerment-oriented community education programs are able to create collective awareness and increase the independence of learning residents. Thus, the application of Freire's principles in public education is a strategic means to build a conscious, empowered, and socially just society.

C. Dimensions of Ethics and Spirituality in Critical Education

Paulo Freire in Pedagogy of the Oppressed asserts that the essence of true education is rooted in the values of love (*amor*), hope, and moral responsibility. For Freire, liberation through education cannot be realized without an ethical and spiritual dimension that recognizes humans as dignified subjects, conscious, and empowered to transform their social reality. He rejects the view that reduces education to merely a technical or mechanistic activity. Instead, Freire views education as an "ethical act" aimed at restoring the essence of humanity that has been diminished by oppression. In this framework, educational dialogue must be based on compassion, solidarity, and respect for human dignity. Without love and empathy, the

educational process risks becoming an instrument of domination and indoctrination rather than a means of liberation (Freire, 2019).

Freire's ideas of ethics and human love closely relate to the concept of ta'dīb in the thought of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. According to al-Attas, ta'dīb is not merely a process of knowledge transfer but also the formation of adab, the ability to place something in its proper position based on recognition of Divine truth. In this framework, the ethics of ta'dīb unites elements of knowledge, faith, and action harmoniously, making education a medium for self-purification (tazkiyah al-nafs) and strengthening the spiritual relationship with Allah. Therefore, ethics and spirituality are not additional elements but the main foundation of education. The loss of the dimension of adab and spirituality, as criticized by al-Attas towards the secular-modern paradigm, will produce humans who are technically capable but lack life orientation (Jamil & Fadhilah, 2025). Both Freire and al-Attas see education as a process of humanization. Freire emphasizes the concept of praxis, the synthesis of reflection and action to change social reality, while al-Attas asserts that ta'dīb is the path to human perfection as a servant and vicegerent of Allah. Both reject forms of dehumanization born from educational systems trapped in the logic of capitalism and instrumental rationality. In the context of contemporary Islamic education, the convergence of Freire's dialogical ethics and al-Attas's spiritual ta'dīb can form a more holistic critical educational paradigm: liberating humans from social shackles and spiritual alienation.

Therefore, the dimensions of ethics and spirituality should be the primary basis in the praxis of critical education in Indonesia. Education should not only focus on achieving intellectual competence but also on strengthening moral awareness, social responsibility, and spiritual devotion. The integration of the values of love (*amor*), adab, and social responsibility will revive the function of education as a means of forming knowledgeable, moral, and well-mannered human beings. In this way, education becomes a dialectical space between critical reflection and self-purification, between social liberation and spiritual worship, a creative synthesis between Freirean praxis and the concept of ta'dīb according to al-Attas.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that Paulo Freire’s philosophy of critical education remains highly relevant and transformative for modern educational practices, particularly in Indonesia. The analysis reveals that Freire’s central ideas conscientização (critical awareness), dialogue, and praxis offer a strong framework for humanizing education and liberating learners from the constraints of the “banking model.” Through a dialogical and participatory process, education should function not as a deposit of knowledge but as a means of social transformation, enabling students to become reflective and active agents of change. The integration of Freire’s critical pedagogy with Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas’s concept of ta’dīb enriches this framework by grounding education not only in ethical reflection and social justice but also in spiritual awareness. Both thinkers converge on the idea that education must humanize and dignify the learner, Freire through critical praxis, and al-Attas

through adab and spiritual purification. This synthesis offers a holistic vision for contemporary Islamic and general education that balances intellectual, ethical, and spiritual dimensions.

However, the study also identifies challenges that limit the full realization of these ideals. Structural rigidity in curricula, the dominance of neoliberal and market-oriented policies, and digital inequalities have hindered the successful implementation of Freirean pedagogy. Many educational institutions still reproduce hierarchical, exam-oriented systems that contradict the principles of liberation and dialogue. Therefore, while the study succeeds in conceptually linking Freire and al-Attas within a coherent philosophical framework, it also acknowledges the failure of practical application at the systemic level. In essence, the success of this research lies in articulating a critical-spiritual educational paradigm that redefines learning as both liberation and moral cultivation. Its limitation lies in the gap between theory and practice, highlighting that realizing Freire's and al-Attas's visions requires not only pedagogical reform but also a profound cultural transformation within education itself.

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