



EDUCATION BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND INSTRUCTION: REASSESSING FREIREAN PEDAGOGY THROUGH THEORY, EVIDENCE, AND COMPARISON

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ABSTRACT

Paulo Freire's work occupies a hegemonic position in Brazilian educational thought and has increasingly functioned not only as a theoretical reference, but as a normative framework shaping public policy and teacher education. This article offers a critical reappraisal of that dominance, explicitly distinguishing academic analysis from political or ideological polemic. It argues that Freirean pedagogy entails a structural subordination of pedagogy to politics, weakening the epistemic status of accumulated knowledge, displacing systematic instruction, and producing adverse learning outcomes—particularly for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Employing a threefold methodology that integrates theoretical analysis, empirical evidence, and international comparison, the study examines the epistemological foundations of Freirean pedagogy, the pedagogical role attributed to dialogue, Brazilian educational performance indicators, and contrasts with high-performing educational systems. The article concludes that the sacralization of Freire's work constrains pedagogical debate, shields instructional practices from empirical evaluation, and risks reproducing the very cognitive inequalities that critical pedagogy seeks to overcome.

Keywords: Paulo Freire; educational theory; epistemology of education; instructional effectiveness; educational inequality.

INTRODUCTION: PEDAGOGICAL HEGEMONY AND CRITICAL SILENCE

Over recent decades, Paulo Freire has come to occupy a hegemonic position in Brazilian educational thought. His work is no longer treated merely as one theoretical contribution among others, but increasingly functions as an institutional and normative reference embedded in teacher education, curricular guidelines, and public educational discourse. In this process,

Freirean pedagogy has been transformed from a historically situated critical theory into a symbolic framework that defines ethical legitimacy within the field of education.

This symbolic elevation has produced a significant intellectual consequence: Freirean pedagogy has become partially insulated from the ordinary standards of academic scrutiny that govern scholarly debate in other domains. Critical engagement with its epistemological assumptions, instructional implications, or empirical effects is frequently interpreted not as a legitimate scholarly exercise, but as an ideological or moral deviation. As a result, disagreement is often reframed as political hostility or ethical insensitivity rather than addressed through theoretical comparison or empirical evaluation. In such contexts, reverence tends to replace analysis, and symbolic allegiance substitutes for argumentative rigor.

The central concern of this article is therefore not Paulo Freire's historical relevance, nor the legitimacy of critical pedagogy as one tradition within educational thought. Rather, it is the transformation of Freirean pedagogy into a *de facto* doctrinal framework that shapes institutional practices while remaining largely shielded from systematic critique. When a pedagogical theory acquires this status, it ceases to function as a hypothesis about how learning occurs and becomes instead a prescriptive moral narrative, increasingly detached from evidence and comparative evaluation.

This article advances the hypothesis that the sacralization of Freirean pedagogy has contributed to an intellectual blockage in Brazilian educational debate, with significant theoretical, institutional, and empirical consequences. By subordinating pedagogy to political conscientization, Freirean thought weakens the epistemic status of accumulated knowledge, displaces the centrality of instruction, and undermines the conditions necessary for effective learning—especially among students who depend most on public education for access to structured knowledge.

The argument developed here rests on the premise that pedagogical theories must be evaluated not primarily by their moral intentions or emancipatory rhetoric, but by their cognitive, instructional, and distributive effects. When educational frameworks inform curriculum design, teacher training, and public policy, they acquire normative force and generate concrete consequences for learning outcomes and social mobility. Shielding such frameworks from evaluation undermines both scientific integrity and democratic accountability.

Methodologically, the article adopts a threefold approach. First, it undertakes a theoretical analysis of the epistemological and pedagogical foundations of Freirean thought, situating it within broader traditions of critical theory and examining its treatment of knowledge, authority, and instruction. Second, it confronts pedagogical discourse with empirical evidence drawn from large-scale educational indicators, including literacy data, IDEB scores, and PISA results in reading, mathematics, and science. While not claiming a simple causal attribution, the analysis evaluates the plausibility of Freirean dominance in light of persistent patterns of low cognitive performance. Third, the article employs international comparison, examining high-performing educational systems to identify instructional principles consistently associated with both effectiveness and equity.

By integrating theoretical critique, empirical scrutiny, and comparative reasoning, this article seeks to restore a foundational academic principle to educational research: no pedagogical theory—regardless of its symbolic authority or moral appeal—can legitimately claim immunity from critical evaluation. In contexts of deep social inequality, preserving pedagogical dogmas insulated from evidence is not a neutral stance, but a failure of academic and institutional responsibility. Reopening critical debate about dominant educational paradigms is therefore not an act of ideological hostility, but a necessary condition for ensuring that education fulfills its most emancipatory function: the universal right to knowledge.

1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: IDEOLOGY, KNOWLEDGE, AND INSTRUCTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The critique developed in this article is grounded in a convergent body of scholarship that has questioned the consequences of subordinating pedagogy to ideological or moral imperatives. Across distinct intellectual traditions—sociology of education, curriculum theory, Marxist structural analysis, and cognitive science—there is broad agreement on a central point: when education relinquishes its core function of systematic knowledge transmission, its capacity to promote cognitive development and social mobility is compromised, particularly for students who rely most heavily on schooling as their primary source of access to structured knowledge.

From the perspective of the sociology of education, Pierre Bourdieu provides a foundational framework for understanding this dynamic. In *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Bourdieu demonstrates that schools play a decisive role in mediating access to *legitimate culture*—abstract, codified, and socially valued forms of knowledge that underpin academic success and social mobility. Crucially, such knowledge does not emerge spontaneously from lived experience or dialogical interaction; it requires deliberate pedagogical mediation, sequencing, and explicit instruction. When schools abandon this function in favor of expressive participation or symbolic recognition, they do not emancipate disadvantaged students. Instead, they deprive them of the cultural capital necessary to navigate academic and professional fields, thereby reproducing inequality under the guise of inclusion. Symbolic affirmation substitutes for cognitive acquisition, resulting in what Bourdieu characterizes as a subtle but effective form of symbolic violence.

A complementary critique emerges from curriculum theory, particularly in the work of E. D. Hirsch Jr. Hirsch's research on literacy and educational equity challenges pedagogical approaches that prioritize generic skills, dialogue, or discovery over the cumulative transmission of shared knowledge. His central claim is that cognitive equity depends on universal access to a structured body of content knowledge, without which reading comprehension, critical reasoning, and civic participation cannot be sustained. Cognitive skills are not context-free or transferable in isolation; they presuppose knowledge. From this standpoint, pedagogies that de-emphasize explicit instruction disproportionately disadvantage students who lack access to cultural capital outside

school, thereby widening cognitive gaps rather than reducing them. What is often presented as democratization thus functions, in practice, as educational regression.

Within Marxist theory itself, similar reservations appear in the work of Louis Althusser. Althusser's analysis of education as an Ideological State Apparatus challenges the assumption that political awareness or critical consciousness can, by itself, overcome structural inequality. Ideology, in his account, is not primarily a matter of individual awareness but of material practices embedded in institutions. From this perspective, pedagogical models that attribute emancipatory power primarily to *conscientização* overestimate the capacity of education to compensate for structural constraints, while simultaneously displacing responsibility for learning outcomes. When emancipation fails to materialize, failure is attributed to abstract systemic forces rather than to instructional design, shielding pedagogical practices from evaluation and revision.

These sociological and philosophical critiques converge with a substantial body of empirical evidence from cognitive science. Research on learning consistently shows that knowledge acquisition is constrained by the architecture of human cognition, particularly the limitations of working memory and the necessity of schema formation in long-term memory. Studies associated with Cognitive Load Theory demonstrate that minimally guided instructional approaches—often linked to dialogical, discovery-based, or problem-centered pedagogies—are systematically less effective for novice learners than explicit, well-structured instruction. Dialogue, when not grounded in prior knowledge and guided explanation, does not generate understanding but instead produces cognitive overload and superficial engagement. Participation may increase, but learning does not reliably follow.

The convergence of these perspectives supports a common conclusion: pedagogical models that privilege moral intention, political positioning, or expressive participation over structured instruction undermine the school's compensatory role. Instead of expanding access to powerful knowledge, they risk confining students—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds—to the limits of their immediate experience. Expression replaces explanation; recognition substitutes for mastery; and dialogue displaces instruction.

This conceptual framework directly informs the analysis developed in this article. The critique of Freirean pedagogy advanced here is not a rejection of social justice or critical awareness, but a defense of a more demanding and consequential conception of educational responsibility. If education is to function as a genuine instrument of emancipation, it must ensure universal access to accumulated knowledge, effective instruction, and cognitive rigor. When pedagogy is subordinated to ideology, these conditions are weakened, and educational inequality is reproduced rather than reduced.

By situating Freirean pedagogy within this broader analytical landscape, the article establishes the theoretical basis for the empirical and comparative analyses that follow. The question is not whether education should address social inequality, but whether pedagogical models centered on political conscientization are compatible with what is known about learning, knowledge acquisition, and instructional effectiveness. This question, addressed through theory, evidence, and international comparison, lies at the core of the present study.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and comparative research design, combining theoretical critique, empirical examination of educational indicators, and international comparison. The objective is not to establish causal attribution in a narrow experimental sense, but to assess the internal coherence, empirical plausibility, and comparative consistency of the pedagogical assumptions associated with the long-term institutional dominance of Freirean pedagogy in Brazilian education.

The methodological approach is explicitly interdisciplinary, drawing on philosophy of education, sociology of education, cognitive science, and comparative education. This design reflects the central premise of the article: pedagogical frameworks that shape public policy, teacher education, and instructional practice must be evaluated not only by their normative intentions or emancipatory rhetoric, but by their epistemological soundness, cognitive effects, and empirical compatibility with established knowledge about learning and instruction.

2.1 THEORETICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

The first methodological axis consists of a systematic theoretical analysis of the epistemological and pedagogical foundations of Freirean thought. This analysis focuses on core conceptual elements such as *conscientização*, dialogical pedagogy, the rejection of pedagogical neutrality, and the redefinition of the teacher–student relationship. These concepts are examined in relation to established epistemological criteria concerning knowledge transmission, instructional authority, and the conditions necessary for cumulative and durable learning.

Rather than treating Freire's work as a closed or self-referential system, the analysis situates it within broader intellectual traditions, including Marxist humanism, critical theory, and constructivist pedagogy. The aim is not to dispute Freire's historical relevance or cultural influence, but to assess whether the epistemological assumptions underlying his pedagogy are compatible with contemporary understandings of knowledge, cognition, and instructional effectiveness. Particular attention is given to the tension between experiential validation and the systematic transmission of accumulated disciplinary knowledge, as this tension is central to both the theoretical critique and the empirical patterns examined later in the article.

2.2 EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION OF EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

The second methodological axis confronts pedagogical discourse with empirical evidence drawn from large-scale educational indicators. The study analyzes data related to literacy, national assessments (IDEB), and international evaluations (PISA) in reading, mathematics, and science. These indicators are selected because they measure foundational cognitive competencies that are especially sensitive to instructional structure, sequencing, and explicit teaching.

The analysis does not claim a direct or monocausal relationship between Freirean pedagogy and observed educational outcomes. Instead, it adopts a plausibility-oriented approach, examining whether long-term patterns of performance are consistent with the learning mechanisms presupposed by dialogical and minimally guided pedagogical models. Persistent stagnation or weak performance in domains that require cumulative knowledge acquisition—particularly mathematics and advanced literacy—is treated as analytically relevant evidence when evaluating the pedagogical coherence of dominant instructional paradigms.

To avoid reductionism, empirical findings are interpreted in conjunction with insights from cognitive science, particularly research on working memory limitations, schema formation, and instructional effectiveness. This triangulation allows the analysis to distinguish between social, economic, and instructional explanations without collapsing complex educational phenomena into simplistic causal narratives.

2.3 INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The third methodological axis consists of international comparison with consistently high-performing educational systems, including Finland, South Korea, Singapore, and Japan. These systems are selected because they demonstrate sustained effectiveness and relatively high levels of equity across socioeconomic groups, as measured by international assessments.

The comparative analysis focuses on structural and instructional features, rather than cultural specificity. It examines curriculum design, the role of explicit instruction, teacher authority, assessment practices, and the degree of ideological intrusion into classroom pedagogy. The objective is not to idealize or transplant foreign models, but to identify recurring instructional principles that are systematically associated with both effectiveness and equity.

The notable absence, in these systems, of pedagogical models centered on political conscientization or minimally guided dialogue is treated as analytically significant. This absence provides a comparative counterpoint to Freirean assumptions and strengthens the article's central claim that effective and equitable education depends primarily on instructional coherence, rather than on ideological orientation.

2.4 SCOPE, LIMITATIONS, AND ANALYTICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Finally, the study explicitly acknowledges its methodological limits. It does not attempt experimental validation, nor does it claim to isolate pedagogy as the sole determinant of educational outcomes. Educational systems are shaped by multiple interacting factors, including socioeconomic conditions, governance structures, and historical trajectories.

Nevertheless, the article maintains that when a pedagogical framework achieves long-term institutional dominance, it becomes both legitimate and necessary to examine its consistency with

empirical evidence and comparative experience. The absence of perfect causal attribution does not invalidate critical evaluation; on the contrary, it reinforces the importance of triangulation across theory, data, and international practice.

By integrating these methodological axes, the article seeks to ensure analytical balance and intellectual responsibility. The objective is not to discredit Paulo Freire as a historical figure, but to subject Freirean pedagogy—now embedded in institutional practice—to the same standards of scrutiny applied to any educational theory with significant public consequences.

Against this methodological background, the following section examines the theoretical foundations of Freirean pedagogy, focusing on the explicit politicization of education and its implications for knowledge, instruction, and institutional practice.

3. PEDAGOGY AS POLITICS: FOUNDATIONS OF FREIREAN THOUGHT

In Paulo Freire's theoretical framework, education is explicitly redefined as a political practice. This politicization is not a secondary implication but the organizing core of Freirean pedagogy. Freire rejects the possibility of pedagogical neutrality, arguing that all educational activity is inherently embedded in relations of power. As a result, pedagogy is reconceptualized less as a discipline concerned with the systematic transmission of knowledge and more as an instrument for social and political transformation.

Within this paradigm, the traditional aims of schooling—such as literacy, numeracy, conceptual understanding, and cumulative cognitive development—are subordinated to a broader emancipatory mission. Teaching content is no longer treated as an end in itself, but as a means oriented toward political awakening. Knowledge is valued primarily for its capacity to unveil relations of domination rather than for its explanatory structure, internal coherence, or cumulative logic. Learning thus becomes less about acquiring disciplinary competence and more about adopting a particular interpretive stance toward social reality.

The concept of *conscientização* (critical consciousness) plays a central role in this model. Education is expected to guide learners toward awareness of their historical and social positioning within asymmetric power relations. Knowledge is framed predominantly as a tool for political interpretation, and educational success is increasingly measured in terms of critical positioning rather than mastery of disciplinary structures. This shift redefines the purpose of schooling from intellectual formation to political formation.

This reorientation has significant institutional and instructional implications. The school is no longer conceived primarily as a mediator of accumulated human knowledge, but as a site of ideological struggle. Curriculum content is selected less according to disciplinary progression or cognitive sequencing and more according to its relevance to themes of oppression, resistance, and social justice. Similarly, the role of the teacher is transformed: epistemic authority grounded in subject-matter expertise gives way to moral and political alignment with emancipatory objectives. Instruction is displaced by facilitation; explanation by problematization.

3.1 FRAGILE EPISTEMOLOGY: KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCE, AND MORAL VALIDATION

The political orientation of Freirean pedagogy is sustained by a distinctive epistemological move: the systematic elevation of lived experience to privileged epistemic status. By opposing accumulated or formal knowledge to the so-called “knowledge of the oppressed,” Freirean pedagogy collapses the distinction between experience as a starting point for inquiry and knowledge as a critically mediated, structured product. Experience is no longer primarily something to be interrogated and transformed through theory, but a source of epistemic authority in its own right (Freire, 1987).

This shift displaces epistemic criteria of truth, coherence, and explanatory adequacy with moral and political validation. Knowledge becomes legitimate not because it withstands critical scrutiny, but because it emanates from socially valorized positions within a narrative of oppression. Disagreement is thus reconfigured as ethical deviance or political hostility rather than as a normal feature of scholarly inquiry. The result is not the democratization of knowledge, but its moralization and partial insulation from critique.

From the standpoint of modern epistemology, this move is deeply problematic. Scientific and scholarly knowledge depend precisely on the distinction between experience and explanation, between testimony and theory. As emphasized by Popper, Lakatos, and Bachelard, knowledge advances through abstraction, conceptual rupture, and critical testing, not through the validation of immediacy or identity. When experience is treated as epistemically self-sufficient, standards of falsifiability and rational criticism are weakened, and epistemic rigor gives way to rhetorical coherence.

3.2 THE MYTH OF LIBERATING DIALOGUE

A parallel distortion occurs at the instructional level through the elevation of dialogue to a central pedagogical method. In Freirean pedagogy, dialogue is presented not merely as a communicative strategy but as an intrinsically emancipatory mechanism of knowledge construction. Explanation, direct instruction, and structured guidance are frequently portrayed as pedagogically suspect, associated with domination rather than learning.

However, extensive evidence from cognitive science indicates that dialogue, in the absence of explicit instruction and prior knowledge, is not an effective mechanism for acquiring complex or abstract understanding. Learning is constrained by the limited capacity of working memory and depends on the gradual formation of schemas in long-term memory. Minimally guided instructional approaches, including dialogical and discovery-based methods, consistently produce inferior learning outcomes for novice learners when compared to explicit instruction (Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006).

When dialogue replaces instruction rather than complementing it, participation is easily mistaken for learning. Students may appear engaged and articulate without achieving conceptual mastery. Verbal interaction creates an illusion of understanding while masking cognitive fragility. Engagement becomes decoupled from competence, and expression substitutes for knowledge acquisition. Far from being liberating, dialogue absolutized in this way is cognitively inefficient and disproportionately harmful to students who rely on school as their primary source of access to structured knowledge.

4. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE: WHAT THE DATA SHOW

Despite its long-standing discursive hegemony within Brazilian educational policy, teacher education, and academic pedagogy, there is, on the contrary, no robust empirical evidence linking Freirean pedagogy to sustained or significant improvements in national learning outcomes. On the contrary, the available large-scale indicators consistently point to persistent and systemic weaknesses in students' cognitive performance, particularly in foundational domains that depend heavily on structured instruction and cumulative learning.

Brazil continues to display low levels of full literacy, with a substantial proportion of students completing basic education without achieving functional reading comprehension. National assessments reveal that many students are able to decode words but struggle to extract meaning, make inferences, or engage with more complex texts. This pattern is indicative not merely of social disadvantage, but of instructional failures specifically, the absence of systematic teaching of vocabulary, syntax, background knowledge, and reading strategies.

Similarly, performance on the Basic Education Development Index (IDEB – *Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica*) has remained modest and uneven, with improvements often driven more by administrative factors—such as grade progression and reductions in dropout rates—than by genuine gains in learning. In many cases, increases in enrollment and completion rates have not been matched by proportional improvements in measured proficiency, indicating a pattern of formal educational progression without corresponding cognitive advancement.

International assessments reinforce this diagnosis. Brazil's results in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have been persistently weak, particularly in mathematics and science—domains that are especially sensitive to the quality of instruction, sequencing, and cumulative knowledge acquisition. In mathematics, Brazilian students consistently score far below the OECD average, with large proportions unable to perform basic operations, interpret data, or apply elementary problem-solving strategies. In science, difficulties in conceptual understanding, causal reasoning, and abstraction are equally pronounced.

These outcomes are difficult to reconcile with the emancipatory promises of Freirean pedagogy. If dialogical, problematizing, and minimally structured approaches were effective mechanisms for cognitive development, especially among disadvantaged students, one would expect to observe at least gradual convergence in learning outcomes over time. Instead, what the data reveal is stagnation, persistent gaps, and weak mastery of foundational knowledge.

The growing contrast between emancipatory rhetoric and empirical results points to a structural dissociation between pedagogical intention and cognitive effect. While Freirean discourse emphasizes critical consciousness, participation, and social awareness, the educational system struggles to deliver basic competencies in reading, mathematics, and scientific reasoning. Moral

ambition has not translated into instructional effectiveness.

This dissociation suggests that good intentions and progressive language are insufficient substitutes for pedagogical method. When instructional design is guided primarily by ideological commitments rather than by evidence from cognitive science and comparative educational research, the result is often symbolic affirmation without intellectual formation. In this sense, the Brazilian case illustrates a broader problem: a pedagogy that aspires to transform society but fails to equip students with the cognitive tools necessary to understand and navigate it.

Far from being episodic or circumstantial, the mismatch between Freirean dominance and educational outcomes appears structural and persistent. It raises a fundamental question of responsibility: when a pedagogical framework shapes decades of policy and practice without delivering corresponding gains in learning, continued adherence ceases to be a matter of conviction and becomes a matter of accountability.

5. SOCIAL CONTRADICTION: PEDAGOGY FOR THE POOR, INSTRUCTION FOR THE ELITES

While students from elite backgrounds typically benefit from highly structured curricula, explicit and cumulative instruction, and sustained exposure to demanding cognitive tasks, students from lower-income backgrounds are far more likely to be immersed in pedagogical models centered on dialogue, expression, and experiential validation. In these settings, schooling frequently offers little more than a reflective mirror of students' immediate social reality. Their lived experience is repeatedly affirmed, discussed, and problematized, but rarely transcended through systematic access to abstract, codified, and academically powerful knowledge.

This asymmetry is not accidental; it is deliberate and systematically produced. Elite families and institutions implicitly recognize that mastery of structured knowledge—mathematics, formal language, scientific reasoning, historical chronology, and conceptual abstraction—is indispensable for long-term academic success and social mobility. Consequently, even when progressive rhetoric is embraced at the discursive level, elite schools continue to rely on explicit instruction, carefully sequenced curricula, rigorous assessment, and high expectations. Dialogue, when present, is layered on top of solid cognitive foundations rather than substituted for them.

By contrast, in schools serving disadvantaged populations, dialogical pedagogies often function as a pedagogical endpoint rather than a complement to instruction. Students are invited to speak, share, and reflect, but are seldom guided toward mastery of disciplinary structures that lie beyond their everyday experience. What is presented as respect for students' voices frequently masks a lowering of epistemic expectations. The curriculum narrows to what is immediately familiar, and the school abdicates its role as an institution that mediates access to forms of knowledge unavailable in the home or community.

The result is a profound educational paradox. In the name of emancipation, students who most need systematic instruction are denied it. Instead of being equipped with the cultural tools necessary to navigate academic and professional fields, they receive symbolic recognition—affirmation of identity, validation of experience, and rhetorical inclusion—without the corresponding transmission of intellectual resources. Knowledge is redescribed as something students already possess, rather than something they have the right to acquire.

This dynamic exemplifies what Pierre Bourdieu identified as the symbolic reproduction of inequality. Schools appear inclusive and progressive at the level of discourse, yet they silently reproduce existing hierarchies by differentially distributing access to legitimate culture. Discursive participation replaces cognitive accumulation; recognition substitutes for instruction; expression displaces mastery. Students are acknowledged as subjects but not equipped as knowers.

Over time, this pedagogical asymmetry entrenches inequality rather than alleviating it. Elite students continue to accumulate cultural capital through both school and family, while disadvantaged students are confined to a curriculum of immediacy and self-reference. What emerges is a two-tier educational system: one that prepares students for intellectual autonomy and social mobility, and another that offers moral affirmation without intellectual empowerment. Far from challenging inequality, dialogical pedagogies applied asymmetrically help to stabilize it—under the guise of inclusion, participation, and critical awareness.

6. IDEOLOGICAL COLONIZATION AND INSTITUTIONAL DAMAGE

Freirean pedagogy has progressively consolidated itself as the dominant paradigm within teacher education programs, official curricular frameworks, and the broader institutional discourse that shapes educational policy and professional identity in Brazil. In faculties of education, Freire's concepts are frequently presented not as one theoretical tradition among others, but as the ethical and epistemological foundation of teaching itself. As a result, future teachers are often trained within a narrow interpretive horizon, in which alternative pedagogical approaches—particularly those grounded in explicit instruction, cognitive science, or curriculum-centered models—are marginalized, caricatured, or dismissed as intrinsically “authoritarian,” “technicist,” or politically suspect.

This dominance has produced an environment increasingly hostile to pedagogical dissent. Critical engagement with Freirean assumptions is frequently met not with counterarguments or empirical rebuttals, but with moral disqualification. Disagreement is reframed as a lack of social sensitivity, political regression, or ethical deficiency, rather than as a legitimate scholarly position grounded in alternative evidence or theoretical frameworks. In this climate, debate gives way to orthodoxy: pedagogical choices are no longer evaluated by their instructional effectiveness, but by their symbolic alignment with an officially sanctioned discourse of emancipation and social justice.

At the institutional level, this hegemony has important consequences for accountability. When Freirean pedagogy is treated as morally superior by definition, its outcomes become insulated from critical evaluation. Persistent learning deficits, low levels of literacy, and weak performance in mathematics and science are rarely examined as potential consequences of instructional design. Instead, school failure is routinely attributed to external abstractions—“the system,” “social inequality,” “capitalism,” or “structural oppression”—in ways that preclude scrutiny of classroom practices, curricular coherence, or pedagogical effectiveness.

This displacement of responsibility fosters a culture of pedagogical irresponsibility. Because failure is framed as structurally predetermined, instructional methods are absolved in advance of any causal role in poor outcomes. Teachers and institutions are encouraged to interpret underachievement not as a signal for revising methods, strengthening curricula, or increasing instructional clarity, but as confirmation of preexisting social diagnoses. In such a framework, empirical evidence loses its corrective function:

disappointing results do not prompt methodological reconsideration, but rather reinforce the narrative that schools are powerless in the face of systemic injustice.

Over time, this logic erodes the very idea of professional responsibility in education. If no pedagogical approach can be held accountable for results, then effectiveness becomes irrelevant. Teaching is redefined less as skilled practice aimed at producing learning and more as a moral stance or political commitment. The success of educational work is measured by discursive conformity and ethical intention rather than by students' acquisition of knowledge, conceptual mastery, or cognitive growth.

The cumulative effect is an institutional environment in which failure becomes normalized and even morally rationalized. Poor learning outcomes are not treated as problems to be solved through improved instruction, but as evidence of broader social pathologies beyond the reach of pedagogy. This stance not only undermines the possibility of pedagogical improvement, but also disproportionately harms the students who depend most on school as their primary—and often only—source of access to structured knowledge. In the name of critical consciousness, the educational system relinquishes its most basic responsibility: to ensure that teaching actually results in learning.

7. HIGH-PERFORMING EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS: EMPIRICAL CONTRAST AND INSTRUCTIONAL LOGIC

High-performing educational systems—such as those of Finland, South Korea, Singapore, and Japan—provide a robust empirical counterpoint to pedagogical models that subordinate instruction to political conscientization. Despite substantial cultural and institutional differences, these systems converge around a common instructional logic: education is treated primarily as a cognitive enterprise oriented toward the systematic transmission and consolidation of knowledge, rather than as a vehicle for ideological formation (OECD, 2019; Schleicher, 2018).

Across these contexts, schooling is organized around structured, cumulative, and carefully sequenced curricula. Knowledge is not expected to emerge spontaneously from dialogue or lived experience, but is explicitly taught, practiced, and progressively consolidated (Hirsch, 1987; Schmidt et al., 2015). Open-ended dialogue and discovery-based activities play a secondary role and are typically introduced only after students have acquired sufficient background knowledge to benefit from them (Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006).

A defining feature of these systems is the centrality of the teacher as an epistemic authority. Teacher authority derives not from moral positioning or political alignment, but from mastery of subject

matter, instructional expertise, and responsibility for student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2017; OECD, 2019). Explanation, modeling, correction, and guided practice constitute the core of classroom activity, while dialogue is embedded within instruction rather than substituted for it (Rosenshine, 2012).

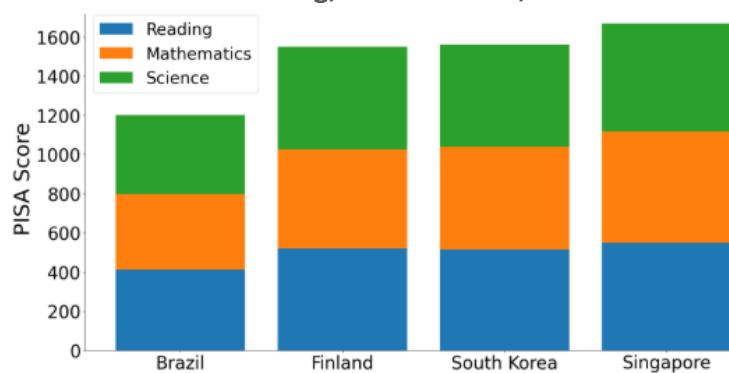
Equally important is the role of assessment. High-performing systems rely on transparent benchmarks and external evaluations to monitor learning and inform instructional adjustment. Assessment functions as a feedback mechanism for pedagogical refinement, not as a symbolic or ideological instrument (OECD, 2013; Wiliam, 2011).

7.1 EMPIRICAL CONTRAST: PISA PERFORMANCE AND INSTRUCTIONAL SENSITIVITY

This instructional logic is reflected in international assessment data. Chart 1 summarizes Brazil's performance in reading, mathematics, and science in PISA. Rather than revealing isolated weaknesses, the chart shows a pattern of cross-domain cognitive fragility, indicating structural deficiencies in cumulative knowledge acquisition.

Mathematics emerges as the most critical domain. Given its high sensitivity to explicit instruction, sequencing, and cumulative practice, Brazil's consistently low mathematics performance is analytically incompatible with pedagogical models centered on minimally guided dialogue or diffuse problematization. Reading and science results, although comparatively higher, likewise indicate limitations in advanced comprehension, abstract reasoning, and conceptual transfer.

Chart 1 | Comparative PISA Scores in Reading, Mathematics, and Science

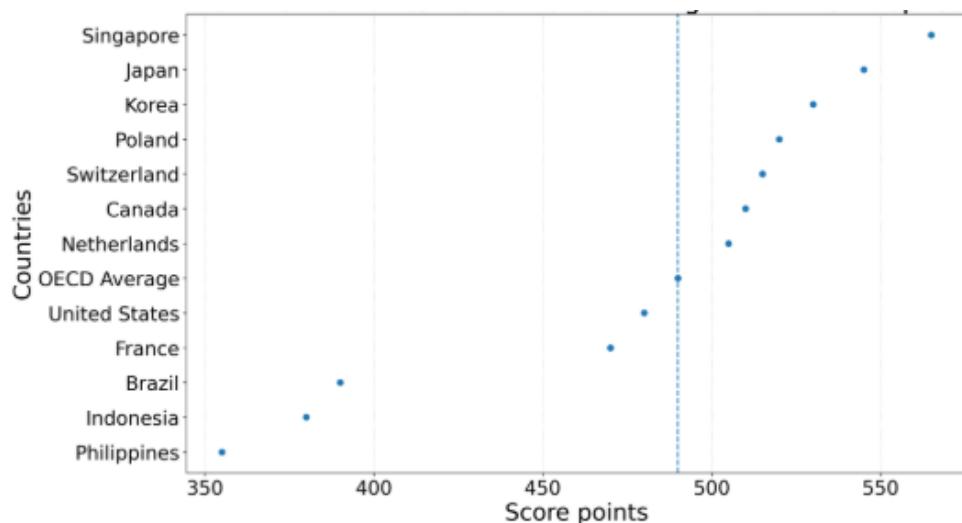


Source: Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2018), data compiled by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Note: The chart reports average scores in reading, mathematics, and science for Brazil and selected high-performing education systems. Results are presented for comparative analytical purposes and reflect performance in standardised assessments designed to measure cumulative and transferable cognitive competencies among 15-year-old students.

Chart 2 situates Brazil's performance relative to consistently high-performing systems. The magnitude of the gap—often exceeding two years of schooling overall and nearly three years in mathematics, according to OECD benchmarks—cannot plausibly be attributed to socioeconomic factors alone (OECD, 2019). Instead, it points to systematic differences in instructional organization and cognitive expectations.

Chart 2 | PISA: Brazil vs. High-Performing Countries



Source: Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2018), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Note: The chart situates Brazil's average performance relative to selected high-performing countries and the OECD mean. Score differences are interpreted as indicative of variation in cumulative learning outcomes and instructional organisation, rather than as direct causal effects of specific pedagogical models.

From the perspective of cognitive science, this performance profile is characteristic of instructional environments with low cognitive density, in which weak guidance overloads working memory and inhibits the formation of stable schemas in long-term memory (Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006; Sweller, Ayres & Kalyuga, 2011).

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7.2 INTERPRETIVE SYNTHESIS

The comparative evidence supports three central conclusions. First, there is no positive association between the hegemonic institutionalization of Freirean pedagogy and sustained improvement in national learning outcomes. Second, Brazil's performance profile is consistent with pedagogical environments characterized by insufficient instructional structure. Third, the elevation of dialogue to a central instructional principle disproportionately disadvantages students who depend on school as their primary source of access to structured knowledge, thereby amplifying educational inequality rather than reducing it (Hirsch, 2006; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970).

Taken together, PISA and IDEB data undermine the claim that Freirean pedagogy produces robust or equitable educational gains. The observed deficiencies are not episodic but structural. By prioritizing moral intention over instructional design, pedagogical practice risks producing schooling without learning, in which symbolic inclusion substitutes for cognitive development.

The experience of high-performing systems demonstrates that educational equity is achieved not through ideological alignment in the classroom, but through curriculum coherence, instructional clarity, teacher authority, and accountability for learning (Schleicher, 2018). Far from promoting emancipation, the politicization of pedagogy diverts attention from the mechanisms that enable genuine intellectual autonomy.

CONCLUSION: IN DEFENSE OF EDUCATION AS KNOWLEDGE

This article argues that, by subordinating knowledge to political objectives, Freirean pedagogy ultimately compromises the core cognitive function of schooling. When education is redefined primarily as a vehicle for ideological formation or moral conscientization, the systematic transmission of accumulated knowledge is relegated to a secondary role. As a result, the school ceases to function as an institution dedicated to intellectual development and becomes instead a space oriented toward symbolic affirmation and political positioning. This shift weakens the very mechanisms through which students acquire the conceptual tools necessary to understand reality in a rigorous, autonomous, and critically informed manner.

Far from emancipating learners, this pedagogical configuration tends to produce intellectual impoverishment—especially among those who rely most heavily on formal education as their primary, and often only, source of access to structured knowledge. Students from privileged backgrounds continue to acquire cultural capital through family environments, private schooling, and extracurricular enrichment. By contrast, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are left with pedagogical experiences that emphasize expression, dialogue, and identity recognition without ensuring mastery of the knowledge that underpins academic success, professional mobility, and civic participation. What is presented as liberation thus becomes, in practice, a denial of opportunity.

The article therefore maintains that criticizing Paulo Freire does not constitute a rejection of social justice, nor does it imply indifference to inequality or oppression. On the contrary, it reflects a commitment to a more demanding and consequential conception of justice—one grounded in the right of all students to effective, rigorous, and cumulative knowledge. Social justice in education cannot be reduced to moral intentions, symbolic inclusion, or emancipatory rhetoric; it must be evaluated by its cognitive outcomes and its capacity to expand learners' intellectual horizons.

In deeply unequal societies, the preservation of pedagogical dogmas—especially when they are insulated from empirical evaluation and critical scrutiny—is not a moral virtue but a form of intellectual negligence. When a pedagogical doctrine is treated as untouchable, its failures are rationalized rather than confronted, and its consequences are borne disproportionately by those with the least power to escape them. Upholding such dogmas in the name of justice ultimately undermines the very goals they claim to advance.

Defending the centrality of knowledge in education is therefore not an elitist or conservative stance, but a profoundly egalitarian one. It affirms that intellectual rigor, disciplined instruction, and high expectations are not privileges reserved for a few, but rights that must be universally guaranteed. Only by restoring the primacy of knowledge, evidence, and responsibility can education fulfill its promise as a genuine instrument of emancipation rather than a vehicle for the reproduction of inequality under a moralized guise.

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