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ПАУЛУ ФРЕЙРЕ И ПРИМЕНЕНИЕ КРИТИЧЕСКОЙ ТЕОРИИ К ПРОГРАММЕ УГЛУБЛЕННОГО ИЗУЧЕНИЯ ПРЕДМЕТОВ: СЛИЯНИЕ И СТОЛКНОВЕНИЕ

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Аннотация. В целом американская общественность благосклонно относится к программе углубленного изучения предметов (программа AP). Она стала главной опорой государственного образования в Соединенных Штатах и предлагает существенные преимущества для участвующих в ней студентов. Тем не менее программа AP все чаще подвергается критике в связи с предполагаемым неравенством возможностей для участия и отсутствием охвата маргинализированных групп населения, а также в связи с тем, что она является синонимом образования для одаренных учащихся. Сама по себе одаренность трудно поддается определению и зависит от культурных ценностей и ценностей общества. Существует множество исследований, касающихся образования одаренных детей, но подавляющее большинство из них игнорирует расовые меньшинства. И наоборот, количество исследований программ AP ничтожно мало. Ссылаясь на философский анализ образования одаренных детей в форме программ AP, противники разделения учащихся по их способностям заявляют, что эта практика противоречит эгалитаризму. Однако сторонники этой практики считают, что образование для одаренных и, как следствие, программы AP соответствуют критериям эгалитаризма при наличии равных возможностей. Цель данной статьи — обсудить предположения критической теории Паулу Фрейре и выявить параллели между его взглядами и практикой обучения одаренных детей в рамках программ AP и других подобных ей. Хотя все аргументы приведены, обсуждение в данной статье является просто отправной точкой. Следует отметить, что авторы статьи не выступают за прекращение финансирования или запрет какой-либо программы для одаренных детей или программы AP. Вместо этого, используя критический обзор литературы, мы надеемся выявить недостатки и использовать их для поддержки усилий по проведению реформы с учетом интересов всех сторон.

Ключевые слова: программа AP, образование для одаренных, критическая теория Паулу Фрейре, программы углубленного изучения предметов

Analytical article

PAULO FREIRE AND CRITICAL THEORY APPLIED TO ADVANCED PLACEMENT PROGRAMS: COALESCENCE AND COLLISION

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Abstract. The American public generally looks favorably upon the Advanced Placement Program (AP). It has become a backbone of public education in the United States and offers substantial benefits for participating students. Still, there is growing criticism of the AP program in regard to perceived inequality of opportunity to participate and lack of outreach to marginalized populations and being synonymous with gifted education. Giftedness, itself, is difficult to define and depends on the values of the culture and society. There is an abundance of research regarding gifted education, but the vast majority ignores racial minorities. Conversely, research involving AP programs is negligible. When invoking a philosophical examination of gifted education in the form of AP programs, those against grouping by ability argue that the practice is in opposition with egalitarianism. However, those in favor of the practice believe that gifted education, and by extension, AP programs, meet the criteria of egalitarianism if there is equal opportunity. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the suppositions of Paulo Freire's Critical Theory and identify parallels between his views and the intent and practices of gifted education in the semblance of AP programs. While arguments are presented, the discussion in this paper is simply a starting point. It must be noted that this paper does not advocate for the defunding or banning of any program that promotes gifted education or AP programs. Instead, using critical review of literature we hope to identify shortcomings and use them to support efforts for equitable reform.

Keywords: Advanced Placement Program, gifted education, Paulo Freire's Critical Theory, advanced placement programs

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Introduction

Born in Brazil in 1921, Paulo Freire, was among the most significant educators of the twentieth century (Gadotti, & Torres, 2009; Giroux, 2010). Roberts (2007) puts it succinctly when he says that Freire, “left a legacy of practical and theoretical work equaled by few educationists in its scope and influence” (p. 505). His impact on education is so broad that is difficult to summarize effectively. He has been called a pedagogue, philosopher, activist, scholar, writer, intellectual, and revolutionary (Blackburn, 2000; Gadotti, & Torres,

2009). Freire is known and praised as the father of Critical Pedagogy and Theory and his writings have been printed in the millions in more than 30 languages (Gadotti, & Torres, 2009; Giroux, 2010). Gadotti and Torres (2009) argue that his approach can be used to study, “the relations between class, race/ethnicity, gender and the state in education; and its role in illuminating the intricate relationship between politics and education through the paradigm of popular education” (p. 1265). To Freire, education, politics, and socioeconomics are intrinsically inseparable. Although many educators recognize the teachings of Freire as an indispensable resource he was not without disapproval and contempt (Beckett, 2013). In fact, his novel and radical approaches to education led to his exile and label of a subversive and a communist (Gadotti, & Torres, 2009).

Freire began to develop his philosophy of education when he taught 300 impoverished farmers how to read and write in only 45 days (Gadotti, & Torres, 2009). He implemented ‘circles of culture’ where learning was accomplished via critical dialogue between students and teachers (Beckett, 2013; Gadotti, & Torres, 2009; Giroux, 2010). He promoted class consciousness and he was deeply concerned with the plight of the poor (Giroux, 2010). In fact, his educational philosophy was based on the eradication of cultural elements that he believed divided the people in Brazil; elements that he termed ‘oppression.’ He believed that systemic forces entrenched the asymmetry of power in society (Gadotti, & Torres, 2009; Giroux, 2010), and the imbalance of power meant that the lower classes had little voice to enact meaningful change (Gadotti, & Torres, 2009; Giroux, 2010). Freire did not believe that everyone, especially the poor, had enough freedom to achieve happiness and he maintained that societal forces actively disenfranchise groups so that they cannot participate fully (Blackburn, 2000). Graman (1988) expanded on this view when he argued, “it is necessary to negate the political nature of pedagogy to give the superficial appearance that education serves everyone, thus assuring that it continues to function in the interest of the dominant class.” (p. 439). For Freire, problems that plagued society could only be examined when related to larger systemic issues (Giroux, 2010).

Criticism of Established Education

Freire criticized Western liberal education as subservient to the economy and a method of safeguarding the hegemony of the ruling class (Gadotti, & Torres, 2009; Graman, 1988); that is, schools are responsible for societal woes because they authorize what is and is not taught without the input of the oppressed (Gadotti & Torres, 2009). A collaborative relationship between teachers and students would, Freire emphasized, challenge traditional habits of mind representing ineffective education. (Beckett, 2013). Freire believed that the general public receives what he called ‘banking’ education which seeks only to fill the minds of students with facts rather than promote critical thought and self-directed learning

(Blackburn, 2000; Gadotti, & Torres, 2009; Graman, 1988). Giroux (2010) wrote that Freire believed schools to be, “defined through the corporate demand that they provide the skills, knowledge, and credentials to build a workforce that will enable the United States to compete and maintain its role as the major global economic and military power.” (p. 715). Freire believed that societal institutions exist to primarily reinforce class status, cultural values, and subservience (Graman, 1988), and formal education created and reinforced oppression rather than promoting freedom (Blackburn, 2000). Furthermore, Freire criticized neoliberal capitalism as an exploitative and consumerist system that places profits over people and pushes products as substitutes for authentic happiness (Blackburn, 2000; Gadotti, & Torres, 2009; Giroux, 2010). Giroux (2010) noted that “any vestige of critical education is replaced by training and the promise of economic security.” (p. 715). Freire criticized education for ‘democracy’ sake as actually being undemocratic and asserted that if a democratic outcome is the goal of education then democratic pedagogy should be employed. Bolin (2017) stresses that equating democracy solely with procedure (i.e., voting and election of officials) “obscures other important aspects, including social and economic, of a holistic democratic life” (p. 747). In other words, as Shih (2018) admonishes, the practice of freedom as an integral part of education raises the awareness of both teachers and students. Freire advised that education was to be a cooperative endeavor that allowed teachers and students to generate shared understandings and while a collaborative pedagogical practice, has the ability to question the status quo while seeking alternatives. As Freire himself stressed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), “Nobody educates anyone; nobody educates oneself; human beings are educated among themselves, mediated by the world” (p. 39). Freire emphasized that ‘freedom’ does not mean there are no limits but claimed the necessity of joining freedom and authority so as not to pose an infraction of one or the other (Shih, 2018).

Education as Critical Theory

Mahmoudi, Khoshnood, and Babaei (2014) define critical theory and pedagogy as a means to enhance the overall life of students. In this approach, “students are given the chance to challenge others’ accepted hypotheses and also to explore the relationship between their society and the content of their educational environment” (p. 86). Freire believed that education, “should provide students with the necessary instruments to resist the deracinating powers of an industrial civilization” (Gadotti, & Torres, 2009, p. 1260). Freire’s pedagogy promotes humanization whereby students think critically and act freely (Graman, 1988). That is, by working with the teacher, students, “come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process (Freire, 1970, p. 66). His ideal education system would liberate the oppressed as they practiced critical self-reflection to identify their own power and enact

change (Blackburn, 2000). Gadotti and Torres (2009) wrote of Freire, “He rejects the school in favor of the more flexible arrangement of the ‘circle of culture’” (p. 1260). Furthermore, he rejected the prescribed nature of traditional curriculum and instead called for a program that students created alongside their teacher (Gadotti & Torres, 2009). In fact, in Freire’s writings typical educational jargon (e.g., school, student, curriculum) appear infrequently (Bolin, 2017).

By making the student an integral part of the education process, they become self-aware and cognizant of societal complications. Beckett (2013) describes student ignorance as misunderstanding in that what does not exist *for them*, must therefore not exist *at all*. Encouraging students to become equal contributors would replace the traditional education stratum and would result in education as liberation and empowerment. This ‘critical consciousness’ would occur through political enlightenment and a scientific focus (Kohan, 2018).

Components of Critical Theory

Two points of emphasis in Freire’s critical theory emerge time and again: Dialog and problem-posing. For Freire, education and dialog were synonymous. This is in sharp contrast to other educational philosophers and pedagogists who merely acknowledge dialog as ancillary or as an instructional mode. To consider education as dialog is to accept that education is not merely teachers teaching and students learning, but that both teach and learn together. In addition, rather than viewing education as *problem-solving*, Freire envisioned education as *problem-posing* and the problems are found in the students’ perceptions of their world. By eradicating the ‘banking’ approach to education and emphasizing the posing of problems, the students’ ability to think critically would flourish. Through dialog and problem-posing both teachers and students will be exposed to a variety of perspectives resulting in empowerment and, potentially, world transformation (Shih, 2018).

Freire believed that all stakeholders should become political and social scientists in order to become autonomous agents of change who are capable of contributing to and improving democracy (Graman, 1988). Moreover, education should empower stakeholders to discuss their problems without fear of punishment (Gadotti, & Torres, 2009). Freire wanted community-based schools that spread the values of human rights, knowledge, ethics, and freedom (Giroux, 2010). Freire argued that individuals must be respected and valued so that they can oversee their own learning and destiny (Gadotti, & Torres, 2009). He believed that education could be reformed and lead to, “a democratic mentality, a permeable consciousness, experiences of participation and of self-governance” (Gadotti, & Torres, 2009, p. 1257). Gadotti and Torres (2009) wrote that to Freire, “the curriculum has to be intimately related to the life project of each one of them. That is why the curriculum needs to be constantly evaluated and re-evaluated” (p. 1263). In the Freirean approach to learning, “Finding,

naming, and resolving real problems in people's situations are precisely the sorts of activities in which teachers and students must engage themselves in order to grow as critical users of language" (Graman, 1988, p. 444). Graman (1988) argued that in the Freirean class, "the objective is to examine beliefs and the basis for them analytically and critically and to arrive at supporting arguments that reflect sincere and intelligent work to resolve problems." (p. 446). Freire was an outspoken proponent of problematizing the world around us where, "learners must identify problems and come to recognize and understand the significance of those problems in relation to their own lives and the lives of others." (Graman, 1988, p. 436). The Freirean classroom does not reflect the real world because it is the real world by which stakeholders are empowered to critically examine everyday problems and then physically act to bring about tangible change (Graman, 1988). Above all, Freire wanted students to think for themselves and to reject systems that do not include them while directing their actions and thoughts (Graman, 1988). Freire wanted students to develop skills that enabled them to question traditions and their assumptions (Giroux, 2010). He wanted people to transform their reality rather than merely adapt to their surroundings (Blackburn, 2000). However, Freire did not believe his methods were a panacea; "humanization, is a goal that for Freire can never be fully achieved because it requires an ongoing encounter with reality, which is itself permanently changing." (Blackburn, 2000, p. 5).

Advanced Placement Programs as Agent of Separation

Advanced Placement (AP) programs provide high school students in the United States and Canada the opportunity to earn college credit hours while still attending high school in a variety of subjects. The pilot AP classes began in 1952 and AP programs have been under the direction of the College Board (a non-profit organization) since 1955. Classes in high schools are designated to have AP status and the classes must follow a prescribed curriculum designed by the College Board with input from content scholars in higher education. Teachers must receive special training in order to teach AP classes and students must perform satisfactorily on an AP examination at the end of the school year. The examination is prepared, administered, and assessed in a standard manner for all students. "In AP classrooms, students examine texts, data, and evidence with great care, learning to analyze source material, develop and test hypotheses, and craft effective arguments. They engage in intense discussions, solve problems collaboratively, and learn to write and speak clearly and persuasively" (College Board, 2014, p. 5). The collaboration between AP teachers and college faculty provides fairness, rigor, and relevance in the design and delivery of the content and assessment of the students (College Board, 2014). However, the benefit for gifted students as part of the AP program is being questioned by higher education in North America (Raskin, 2017). The early years

of the AP program were perceived as parallel with prestige as it was developed to serve the elite (Kolluri, 2018); indeed, over the course of the last 50 years, the AP program has become synonymous with gifted education (Tenney School, 2015). In addition, much criticism had been levied against the AP program as being discriminatory (Finn, 2020; Graefe, 2019; Kenesson, 2020; Kolluri, 2018; Patrick, 2020).

This brings us to the primary question of whether the AP program, as regarded as a form of gifted education, constitutes a form of segregation. Scholars have debated for years on an equitable definition for intelligent and gifted yet there is no such definition in place nationally (Ford et al., 2001; Ford, & Whiting, 2007). Some educators might oppose designating gifted education as a form of segregation as that description could dilute the broader understanding of historical segregation in America. However, Ford and Whiting (2007) wrote, “We urge readers to place underrepresentation into the larger context of the history of discrimination and school desegregation” (p. 29). Literature suggests that it is justifiable to label gifted education and the AP program as a form of segregation. Ford and Whiting (2007) wrote, “Gifted education, however, remains racially segregated, with Black students being very much underrepresented and underserved.” (p. 28). Minority students are underidentified, underserved, and underrepresented in gifted education and the AP program (Ford et al., 2001; Ford & Whiting, 2007). Identified underrepresented populations in AP programs have been Black (Graefe, 2019; Patrick 2020), Latino (Graefe, 2019; Patrick, 2020), rural (Finn, & Scanlon, 2020), and low socioeconomic status (Finn, & Scanlon, 2020). The College Board itself acknowledges that these and other populations are underrepresented (2014).

The lack of diversity in gifted education leads to bias, stereotyping, and less opportunity for intercultural communication (Ford et al., 2001). Gates (2010) argues that the widely held assumptions surrounding gifted education influences the way that stakeholders interact with students and reduces the uniqueness of each student. The categorization of students as gifted or nongifted oppresses some and privileges others (Gates, 2010). The labeling of students can completely change the life direction of the pupil and rob them of opportunities (Gates, 2010). According to Ford et al. (2001) the rate of minority underrepresentation in gifted education is evidence of systemic efforts to entrench and promote additional school segregation. Additionally, minority representation is especially low in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) AP courses (Kolluri, 2018).

Part of school segregation stems from the use of testing to identify gifted students. It is nearly ubiquitous in American schools as more than 90 % of districts use testing methods for categorizing students (Ford et al., 2001). According to the College Board (2014), the strongest predictor of success in many AP courses is a student’s success on Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT). Gates (2010) criticized high stakes testing as a method of classifying students, primarily, for administrator convenience. The reality is that testing

is not neutral, and the widespread use reinforces class and racial segregation (Ford, & Whiting, 2007). Ford and Whiting (2007) wrote, “As noted in one course case, if a test has a disparate impact on a group, then we must question the efficacy and legality of the measure.” (p. 34). Gates (2010) argued that gifted education, and by extension the AP program, needs serious reform to reduce the bias, stereotyping, categorization, and segregation. However, even the literature that criticizes gifted education as a form of segregation do so chiefly because it presents the loss of potential wealth and not solely for ethical or moral reasons (Ford, & Whiting, 2007). Still, information exists that indicates an increase in participation in AP courses over the last ten years by aforementioned underrepresented groups (College Board, 2014; Finn, & Scanlon, 2020; Kolluri, 2018).

Critical Theory Applied to Advanced Placement

First, there is no evidence that Freire would have been a proponent of gifted education as he was extremely critical of Western education in general (Graman, 1988). Part of the challenge of discussing the AP program comes from the fact that the courses depend greatly on the practices of the individual teacher. A teacher who implements a dialogic approach to their course where students examine societal issues and suggest actions would get close to the Freirean method of teaching and learning. In fact, it is quite likely that some AP educators have studied Freire and successfully implement his methods in their classes. However, simply employing dialog as an instructional mode does not translate as *education as dialog*. Similarly, a teacher who simply asks questions in class is not actually employing the Socratic Method. Additionally, it is difficult to conclude without a doubt that Paulo Freire would have been completely against gifted education or the AP program. However, we believe that Freire would agree with the literature that calls gifted education a form of segregation and in that analysis he would vehemently oppose its existence. Similarly, the AP program does not emphasize individual student interest in the development of the program; that in itself goes against the Freirean method. It is logical to assume that Freire would have been a vocal opponent of the primary use of the AP program where students leverage the courses to improve college acceptance rates, the overwhelming dependence on testing, the lack of equal opportunity, and the reinforcing of status. Freire would strongly condemn gifted education if he agreed with Gates (2010) who argued that it leads to the dehumanization and categorization of students. Gates (2010) emphasized that, “Children are often categorized and labeled according to their intelligence quotient, standardized test score, or some other indicator such as a score in an off-level test. This seems to be most prevalent in the fields of gifted and special education” (p. 200). Lastly, Freire criticized education that separated action and reflection, and neither are the primary purposes for the AP program (Blackburn, 2000).

We believe that Freire would call the AP program a symptom of the larger issues surrounding Western education. His commitment to educational reform supports the idea that the AP program could be improved if its principal goal was to promote humanization, critical thinking, and responsive action (Beckett, 2013; Blackburn, 2000). If Freirean methods were implemented into AP classes, it is possible that students would graduate from them understanding the oppressive cycles that education produces and thus go on to work against these forces. At their core, AP courses are designed to prepare students to be successful on a standardized test, and that is certainly not the aim of critical theory. In a way, a Freirean reform introduced to AP programs across the country could become a self-correcting entity. Students could critically discuss the problematic nature of competitive college application process and gain new motivations for learning so that they would be empowered to enact real revolution in the broader system. An AP teacher who wished to follow the teachings of Freire would need to ensure that their course promoted moral, civic, and political duty (Giroux, 2010). Unless the teacher intervenes in their course then the AP program would be an example of banking education which prevents students from achieving a critical consciousness (Blackburn, 2000). However, so long as the primary purpose of an AP course is to help students achieve high test scores then it will never fulfil the educational goals outlined by Freire.

Conclusions

We can extrapolate and guess, but we must acknowledge that Freire is not able to defend commentary on his postulations. However, we do know that Freire invited critique of his work and there are some examples which call into question the limitations and potential misuses of his methodologies (Beckett, 2013). He might very well solicit the *re*-presentation of AP courses as a *problem-poser*, designed to aid in the decimation of social oppression. Bolin (2017) stresses that critical theorists believe that traditional education perpetuates social structure inequity through a) inequitable school funding, b) standardized testing, and c) unequal power dynamics between teachers and students in the classroom.

Separating students into classrooms based upon perceived skill or ability might represent the most convenient or intuitive system at our disposal, however, there must be an alternate measure to explore and research. It is likely that no definitive answer exists for our main question, but instead community leaders and the public must engage critically in the conversation and decide if the benefits of AP programs and gifted education outweigh the harm. It is likely that we will not reach a fully integrated America in our lifetime, and it is possible that it might never be truly achievable. However, this must not distract us from working to improve the reality of all stakeholders. Education can be used as a power for good, or one that continues to reinforce cycles of disenfranchisement. It may be uncomfortable to admit

that segregation, inside and outside gifted education, still exists in our country but if we follow the example left by Freire, we must expose oppression wherever we find it and work diligently to rectify it. As mentioned earlier, just because something does not exist for someone personally does not mean it does not, in fact, exist period. The Freirean approach will never fix everything; however, educators would be wise to reflect on his teachings to inform their practices and promote peace, justice, diversity, and democracy. The process to desegregate education has been a violent journey but we have achieved noteworthy progress. There is much more work to be done but our situation today is incredibly motivating, and it gives purpose to all stakeholders who act to promote equity in education.

During the research phase of this paper, we became acutely aware of our own biases. We tended to immediately support the egalitarian argument against gifted education. It is better to acknowledge bias rather than ignore its presence and allow it to affect our discussion and conclusions. Like a commitment to lifelong learning, there must be a similar one that commits to identifying bias and reflection on the effects of that bias. However, much of the reading challenged preconceived notions on the topic leading to a much broader appreciation for AP programs and gifted education in general. Freire advocated that considering diverse voices leads to critical reflection, dialog, problem-posing, and critical review.

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