



Freirean Utopian Didactic: A Retrospective View of Education in the South African Education Environment

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the utopian didactic in education can be achieved in South Africa. It is foregrounded by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's collective and forward-looking dreams about what education, in the shattered sense of the "now", can look like if teachers and students participate democratically in the learning process. Education, in a general sense, is a form of learning in which knowledge, skills and habits are transferred and nurtured from one generation to the next. But, in the Freirean utopian didactic, education involves so much more than the mere transfer of knowledge. It is about transformation, both internal (the individual) and external (society). By allowing students to critically reflect and engage in honest dialogue with their teacher, education can lead to social injustices being challenged and, hence, being overcome. Freire's utopian vision of education is one in which hope and imagination are celebrated in the quest for a better world. This vision is sorely lacking in South African educational environment today, which is still bruised by decades of inequality. Using a literature review, this conceptual article explored whether a Freirean utopian didactic can be applied to the current education system in South Africa and bring about the much-needed transformation. We have examined whether a utopian education can be considered a basic right in South Africa, according to the Constitution, and whether it can be applied more broadly to the African continent. For education to meet the needs of all learners in the education system, a utopian education system based on quality educational skills, values and equal distribution of resources is highly recommended.

KEYWORDS

Democracy; Utopian philosophy; South African education; Paulo Freire; relationship

INTRODUCTION

The education process is simple and logical, consisting of teachers or lecturers and students. Multiple levels are found in a school, but I am going to focus mostly on higher education and how utopian philosophy relates to other aspects of schooling (Lapum et al., 2022).

What does a utopian philosophy in an education system entail? According to Stein (2018), utopia is about creating intellectual enlightenment and coming up with creative systems to allow students to succeed. It is also a philosophical system that fosters moral and cultural development designed to make sure that quality education will always replenish itself through its youth (Stein, 2018).

Numerous studies have shown that utopian education studies concentrate on developing socially conscious people in closed-off classrooms, distant from the broader context (Dube et al., 2023; Haavelsrud & Stenberg, 2012; Garcia & Weiss, 2017; Kennedy, 2022). But not many studies have framed utopian education around learning, specifically learning that is integral to social, political and economic systems, the environment and life, in general.

What we are interested in is the process of schooling and the reciprocal relationships between teachers and learners in the education environment, which allows the whole system to operate optimally and achieve its goals. For integration of these relationships to happen effectively, we need to consider the thoughts of Kennedy (2022), who affirms that:

...to create dialogue between the individual receiving education and the educational system disposing of it all leads to a democratic education space, which if compared to a psycho class for which intra-human dialogue both produces and is produced by interhuman dialogue (democracy), has emerged in the midst of a dialectical process of dismantling three major modes of self-understanding: Plato's hierarchical tripartite self with its clear (both internal and external) class positions; Descartes' discrete, isolated subject – *homo clausus*. In addition to Freud's queering of the Platonic hierarchy, reflecting the crisis of the Enlightenment, the revenge of the unconscious and the post-Freudian project, though tragically hampered, of the emancipation of Eros are examples of Descartes' discrete, isolated subject, *homo clausus*, as a function of the radical individualism of the rising bourgeoisie and the capitalist ethos (p. 587).

All of these philosophical underpinnings are directed towards reshaping and positioning an education that is not only democratised, but also emancipatory. South Africa is a country with a very dark past. During the years of apartheid (1948 to 1993), institutionalised racism was the norm. People of colour (black, Coloured and Indian) were not allowed to vote, nor were they permitted to mix with white people, who were seen as superior. At every level of society, people of colour were undermined and looked down upon (Wilson-Fadiji & Reddy, 2021).

Education was no exception. People of colour were placed in schools where the infrastructure alone was demoralising. The Group Areas Act of 1966 caused people to live in the worst of circumstances. People of colour were forcibly removed from white suburbs and

dumped in locations that were far from the city centre. There, they would have to live and fend for themselves in very harsh circumstances (Ledwaba, 2022). Avvisati (2022) more recently added that the educational environment provided for black, Coloured and Indian learners was inconducive to good schooling. The facilities provided were not of the highest standard, the government did not provide sufficient textbooks and inadequate funds were allocated, compared to what was given to affluent white schools. Apartheid's cruelty has scarred South Africa for generations to come, but worst of all has been its effect on our education system (Zuze et al., 2017).

This is in stark contrast to John Dewey's philosophy of education, which aspired to break down social barriers by exposing students to multiple viewpoints:

... the increase in the number of individuals who participate in an interest, so that each has to refer his own action to that of others and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, [which] breaks down barriers of class, race and nationality, leading to more numerous and more varied points of contact and, as such, greater diversity of stimuli to which an individual has to respond, which puts a premium on variation in our actions, which is linked in turn to the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities, a widening area of shared concerns and greater individualisation and a broader community of interest (Dewey, 1916, p.87).

To understand from whence this article moves in terms of utopian education, it can be framed as:

...the utopian ideals of democracy, social justice and sustainability. Educational research cases are positive examples of a phenomenon and were selected for their illustrative value, particularly for the way in which they were able to demonstrate how young people can become engaged with wider concepts and ideals (e.g., democracy, social justice, sustainability) and situated knowledge and experience (Lotz-Sisitka, 2008, p.136).

This study explores how utopian ideology, which places a premium on democratic ideals and an equitable allocation of resources with respect to high-quality education, helps the South African educational system to manage participation. The aim is to facilitate an improvement in education, in addition to making sure that the learning environment is secure and welcoming. The conceptual underpinnings of the study, including the philosophy of Freire and other authors, will be examined. The paper will then go over the utopian strategy proposed for the South African environment before drawing some conclusions.

Conceptual Framework

This article engages in an open form of critical inquiry into utopian discourse, using the love for utopia which Freire espouses:

Utopia involves a certain course, a certain type of people. It is a love that has to do with the creation of a society that is less perverse, less discriminatory, less racist and less machoistic than the society we now have. This love seeks to create a more open society, a society that

serves the interests of the always unprotected and devalued subordinate classes and not only the interests of the rich, the fortunate, the so-called well-born (Freire, 1993b, p.140).

Pietersen (2022) further alludes to the fact that the foundation of Freire's epistemology is human interaction, which has a significant impact on his educational theory and his dialectical understanding of reality. According to Freire, understanding is a uniquely human process that involves engaging in conversation with people and interacting with a dynamic environment, which can be compared to a utopian educational universe.

The term "world of education", in this context, refers to both the natural environment and the social world of institutions, as well as to Freirean and utopian education structures, policies and practices. Through our interactions with others and the world of education, the inner realm of subjective experience is constantly "on the move". Given a complex reality that is constantly changing, the quest for knowledge is an ongoing endeavour (Roberts, 2015, p.379–380).

Freire's work has always been strongly utopian in nature, particularly as it relates to learning. It is not always simple to define the fundamental components of a uniquely Freirean view of utopia and its pedagogical importance. Freire himself experienced a great deal of annoyance when his intentions and ideas were misunderstood. This may be summarised as follows:

According to Roberts and Peters (2015) a lack of trust is built into the fabric of institutional life and this is reflective of a broader ethos of mean-spiritedness, of ruthless competition between individuals, corporations and countries (p.389).

Critics of Freire assert that he is supporting anti-intellectualism, oppressiveness and colonialist tendencies (Walker, 1980; Ellsworth, 1989 & Margonis, 2003). Others, in the form of Weiler (1991), believe Freire is not strong enough in his stance against oppressive education systems. However, we believe that by placing his ideas in their appropriate context, we will gain an understanding of his utopian pedagogy and how it can be applied to South African education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Freirean and Utopian Pursuit of Education

The difference in the quality of education during apartheid was easily discernible. Not only was education afforded to the white population better in terms of access and quality (see Bush, 2020; World Bank, 2020), but it also enabled them to access better jobs due to certain types of work being reserved for whites only. In contrast, urban black youth had to make do with township education, which was of a very poor standard (Naidoo, 2021). Although formerly black schools now receive proportionally more funding than they did during apartheid, standards have not improved dramatically. For example, South African grade 9 learners ranked second to last in a study of 39 countries by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement in mathematics and last in science in 2015. Sadly, less than 5% of black students in primary school will end up with a university qualification (Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019). Based

on these and other available evidence, it is undeniable that schools located in underdeveloped areas will hardly achieve the same level of education as schools in wealthy areas, due to vast socio-economic disparities.

In his controversial book, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Freire (1972) presents a vision of a utopian philosophical and educational didactic, setting it apart from the views of those on the political right who want to contribute to well-functioning education systems. He asserts: Utopia tends to be dynamic rather than static; tends to life rather than death; to the future as a challenge to man's creativity rather than as a repetition of the present; to love as a liberation of subjects rather than as pathological possessiveness; to the emotion of life rather than cold abstraction; to living together in harmony rather than gregariousness; to dialogue rather than muteness; to practice rather than 'law and order'; to men who organise themselves reflectively for action, rather than men who are organised for passivity; to creative and communicative language rather than prescriptive signals; to reflective challenges rather than domesticating slogans; and to values which are lived rather than myths which are imposed (Freire, 1972, p.72). The different areas lay forth different class systems. Different class systems will mould different types of individuals. South Africa's history has irrevocably traumatised many, and although we would like to leave behind the almost incurable wounds of the past, we are faced with its daunting legacies daily in our schools. Today there may not be an institutionalised separation of people based on class or colour, but there is a clear distinction between the level of education seen in different schools (World Bank, 2020).

Evolution of the Education System in South Africa

The question we would like to ask is: is it too late to fix the problem or has South Africa's history ruined our education system in many ways? According to Dewey (1922), in order for education systems to move toward a genuine interaction between the individual receiving education and the system dispensing it, the following needs to happen:

Habits can be formed which are more intelligent, more sensitively percipient, more informed with foresight, more aware of what they are about, more direct and sincere, more flexibly responsive than those now current. Then they will face their own problems and propose their own solutions (Dewey, 1922, p.128).

Everything in life has a purpose. Just as the caterpillar becomes a butterfly, so does the education system guide the student toward their dream of becoming a lawyer, doctor, accountant or engineer. Taking this viewpoint into account, it can be said that it is the responsibility of teachers to pass on that knowledge, so that students' dreams for the future can be fulfilled. As teachers teach and learners learn, there are many different processes taking place. There are social and psychological dynamics at play, either positive or negative, depending on the teacher's pedagogical style and the student's attitude toward the teacher or subject. Teachers may refine their educational content and adapt their pedagogical approach based on their students' ability to understand what they are being taught (Badaru & Adu, 2022;

Crawford & Jenkins, 2017). Learners, in turn, may acquire different skills and knowledge based on the expectation of which career they want to pursue.

No education system is flawless. In accepting an imperfect education system, we must, nevertheless, aim for it to be complete to the extent to which there is room for improvement. It should be constructed by a panel that is knowledgeable enough to provide guidance in terms of internationally recognised educational standards. By nature, education systems are constantly evolving, either for the better or worse, with unprecedented growth in participation and attainment levels (OECD, 2022). They are always in a state of flux because they encompass an entity that is ever-changing: people. Education systems should have appropriate policy frameworks, which should place all schools on the same level. Whether private or public schools, those in rural areas and townships or previously Model C schools¹, government policy and planning should allow all South African learners, regardless of their colour or background, the opportunity to advance in life. The emphasis should be to enrich all learners with knowledge in their respective fields of study and to guide and nurture them to achieve standards of excellence in their education. The Report of the OECD (2022) is in agreement that the goal of education should be to empower learners, both individually and collectively. And as societies continue to change, education systems need to provide opportunities for learners to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that enable them to realise their potential throughout their lives. As Milojevic rightly puts it:

The great social problems of a society cannot be solved without changing the entire structure of the society within which these problems reside... [Utopian philosophers] saw a twofold necessity for education: first, for educating men to the need for great and important changes and second, they saw education as a vehicle for enabling the man to adjust to these changes (Milojevic, 2002).

Education in human society has generally focused on two issues. Firstly, the need to know and secondly, the ability to retain information and reproduce what has been learnt. Is education purely education or has it always been a process of trial and error? Are children enrolled as the guinea pigs of their respective schools? In our experiences as teachers, it seems as if every four to six years, the South African curriculum changes and teachers and children are forced to adapt. Curriculum 2005 with its underlying philosophy of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), for example, was a curriculum introduced shortly after South Africa became a democracy in 1994². It was meant to prepare learners for further education and training, but unsurprisingly, it failed and was replaced with the more streamlined National Curriculum Statement. In South Africa, one has to be very cautious when trying to implement a utopian education system because of the country's complex network of social dynamics. The challenges pertaining to the curriculum,

¹ Model C is a common term in South Africa, used to describe previously whites-only schools.

² According to Botha (2010), OBE, introduced in 1998 by former Education Minister Kader Asmal, was an attempt to reverse the wrongs of apartheid education by creating a skilled workforce.

as well as the complex social dynamics, are some of the factors that are some of the factors that should be considered when piecing together a utopian education system.

Utopia in Education: Challenges, and Perspectives

Education, then, in utopia is not just a means of intellectual enlightenment; it is a programme of moral and cultural development designed to make sure that utopia will always replenish itself via the learners (Milojevic, 2002). In this utopian way of thinking, there are many changes that need to occur in order for the implementations to work for long periods of time. The changes that the education system would have to undergo would be major, as this has a ripple effect on many aspects of society. Social change is one of the objectives of an education system and, therefore, if changes are implemented, it would have to be on a large scale within the society and involve parents and keep them up to speed with the latest changes. Allow the parents and elders of the community to have a say and get involved, as these are people who are in direct contact with their children daily. An advisory panel should be set up and this panel on the governing body should guide the school in terms of direction and focus areas. Schools should have a central department that serves as the planning and structural body that will establish the curriculum; that will be their sole task. In this way, the focus is on education and in which direction it is heading. This implies that a real change in a utopian context is possible through a critical reflection of the current education system. Freire (2018) describes this crucial involvement as follows:

Reflection and action in close interaction are the necessary conditions for dialogical action and if one of them is prevented, the word becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action (Freire, 2018, p.87).

It is important to mention that, according to Freire, utopia is not a blueprint for the future in which every aspect of social organisation and operation is predetermined. However, the utopia of the Freirean reflection should be considered an integral part of the educational process; it is not something that should be added to the “real work” in schools, universities and other institutions as a kind of patronising afterthought. The very idea of keeping alive, through our teaching, research and wider community activities in the education sphere, the robust consideration of social alternatives is itself an important element of this kind of utopia (Roberts, 2015, p.377-378).

A Pedagogical Case for Utopian Education

Education is a basic necessity, like healthcare. The South African Constitution is clear that everyone has a right to education, and we are convinced that the execution of this right is critical if South Africa is to compete successfully in the global economy. However, to reach that point, which is related to the utopian Freirean education philosophy, it means that resources need to be made available for all educators up to the level of higher education. This needs to take on a streamlined approach, so that students who come through primary, secondary and tertiary education are well equipped to become active citizens. This includes reimagining the disparities

that exist at the school level, where parents of learners who attend former Model C and private schools can afford these schools, whereas impoverished parents cannot. This is especially vital, as Garcia & Weiss (2017) point out that extensive research has conclusively demonstrated that children's social class is one of the most significant predictors of their educational success. The government should, therefore, direct resources back into disadvantaged and state schools, providing them with basic necessities, such as textbooks, a classroom roof that does not leak and windows that are not cracked. Garcaia and Weiss (2017) add that greater investment is needed, as the undeniable relationship between economic inequalities and education inequalities represents a societal failure. An environment thus needs to be created where learners are provided with facilities that are of benefit to them, so that they can appreciate their importance and use these resources to their full potential. However, this needs to be done with proper stakeholder engagement, so that communities take ownership of the facilities that are given to them. Dohrmann, Porche, Ijadi-Maghsoodi & Kataoka (2022) propose that addressing these persistent disparities to move toward educational equity requires clinicians, educators and school administrators to collaborate in reducing barriers and increasing support for minoritized students through innovative policy and practice change.

Education and skill training are a major component in the establishment of a utopian education system. This shows one important direction that postmodern utopian education theory might take in order to inform a related critical and transformative education theory, turning problems into endless possibilities. This is poignantly expressed by the modern utopianist, Fredric Jameson, who places Hegelian emphasis on dialectical solutions to failed educational approaches:

...peaceful images [educational] are also, in and of themselves, violent ruptures with what is, breaks that destabilise our stereotypes of a future that is the same as our own present, interventions that interrupt the reproduction of the system in habit and in ideological consent and institute that fissure, however minimal and initially little more than a hairline fracture, through which another picture of the future and another system of temporality altogether might emerge (Jameson, 2010, p.415)

Disruption constitutes a utopian vision. A kind of vision from Jameson, it would seem, that breaks down systems in the South African educational space (primary, secondary and higher education), where the government is at the top of the hierarchy, but remains as an advisory panel, not as the body in charge. This gives way for schools and higher education institutions to be run by principals, directors and vice chancellors, with the governing body acting in an advisory capacity.

McMaster (2013) points out that a utopian vision is based on the fundamental belief that human beings can take an active role in changing and shaping their reality. In a more practical example, the vision for a utopian school and education system would be one where there are highly proficient teachers. Teachers and lecturers alike would be very goal-oriented and efficient in what they do. This will serve the majority of students. They will realise that there are some

students who need more attention than others; this would prompt teachers and lecturers to empathise more with their students' struggles. Any teacher and university lecturer who places the well-being and success of any student above all else in the school and higher education context would be the ideal teacher. This includes a belief that pedagogical approaches should include head, heart and soul (McMaster, 2013). In today's world, we are faced with technological advances and whiteboard systems and calculators; it is as if things are designed to allow us more free time. Teachers and lecturers should use this free time to spend with students and use technology to their advantage in their classrooms. A teacher's effectiveness should reflect in their students' test results, not just a selected few. This is a perfect measure of how effective teaching styles and methods ought to align with utopian thinking. This will enable students to achieve their objectives in the classroom and to create active citizenry for South Africa. McMaster (2013) adds that translating through translating the tasks of the progressive educator to the classroom, would be through an educator with the responsibility to critically analyse how society works and challenge learners to think critically about their social realities. The major focus area in any utopian education system would be the transition from primary to secondary school, and then from secondary school to higher education institutions in order for graduates to make a greater impact to the broader society (Ferri et al., 2020).

Utopian Educational Philosophy in Education: A *Salto Morte Leap*

Critics would argue that this utopian philosophy is just what it claims to be: utopia. However, many researchers have indicated that changing the format of instruction due to the influence of utopian educational philosophy often translates in positive learning performance by students (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). Interestingly, they argue that the difference in employing utopian philosophy in education can affect learning effectiveness, although some of them convey that this kind of philosophy, in its practical form, can only work on an individual basis. Also, teachers practise education, but they have to be collaborative in their teaching and learning approaches to make utopian education possible, without any significant issues arising (Choi & Chung, 2021).

In realising all of the above, it must be said that there will always be a component of misrecognition involved, but that the utopian educational philosophy and disruption foregrounds the fundamental tool for identifying, representing and trying to fulfil the desire to turn learners and students into quality citizenry. In other words, a postmodern educational utopian leap requires a necessary but impossible *salto mortale*³, or leap of faith, into an idealised future, but with the understanding that it can never be fully formed or taken as perfect (Rancière 1991; Noddings 2003; Levitas 2009 & Kasperek 2016). Put differently, investing in people and safeguarding skills development that compliments employment creation are critical platforms on which to build future prosperity for utopian education philosophies to be fully comprehensible (Kraak et al., 2006).

³ Italian for "risky leap".

Levitas (2013) is confident in her conviction that any kind of social and economic structure can provide the means for a quality education, but that it should be a system that benefits everyone with a secure and enduring means of subsistence. For those who maintain that utopia is about the unachievable, the reality is that continuing with social and economic systems that benefit a select few, while ignoring the needs of the impoverished majority, is equally untenable. Finding an alternative means of education is essential to our very survival (Mair et al., 2020).

A Utopian and Idealistic Education System for South Africa and the Continent

According to Waghid and Davids (2018), South Africa's education system is intentionally a mirror of society, most visible at the local level. As a result, there has been a growing awareness of the necessity of eradicating discriminatory educational practices in favour of contextualising education. The socio-political changes in South Africa have enhanced our understanding of education in context and accelerated the abolition of educational practices that disenfranchise students. In terms of education, South Africa's transition post-democracy has had a profound effect on mainstream schools and on the creation of utopian philosophical and educational settings (or lack thereof), as well as on the creation of educational policies (Engelbrecht, 2020). If the aforementioned is well considered, then utopian education can be a vibrant vision that can be developed to produce a quality citizenry and a better South Africa and continent. This is echoed by the African educational philosopher, Ojah Uti Egbai:

System building [like utopian philosophical education] is part of the overall goal of creating conversational philosophy [including the principle of *ubuntu*⁴], which has been demonstrated in some quarters as the future direction of African philosophy (Egbai, 2018, p.34). The adoption of a system building approach will enhance the intended goal of a utopian philosophical education and establish the groundwork for teachers and students participating in the teaching process to propose significant and lasting change. An alternative education system for South Africa (and indeed Africa) may include the following:

1. More focus on critical thinking and problem-solving skills, rather than rote memorisation.
2. Multilingual education, with instruction in both English and at least one of the country's official languages.
3. A strong emphasis on STEM education⁵ to prepare students for the jobs of the future.
4. A more equitable distribution of resources and funding to ensure that all schools have access to the same quality of education.
5. Incorporation of cultural and historical education that is inclusive and reflects the diversity of South Africa's population.
6. A more flexible and personalised approach to education, with a focus on the individual needs and learning styles of each student.

⁴ Ubuntu is a Nguni term for humanity: "I am because we are."

⁵ STEM education emphasises the importance of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

7. A greater emphasis on teacher training and development to ensure that educators are well-equipped to meet the diverse needs of their students.
8. A strong emphasis on community involvement and partnerships to ensure that the education system is responsive to the needs of the community it serves.
9. A focus on developing the whole person, not just academic skills, by incorporating extracurricular activities, physical education life skills education, as well as educational philosophy.

CONCLUSION

This article contributes to the literature that examines the history of South African education and where we are today in terms of educational philosophy: there is a clear distinction between the past and the present mindset regarding utopian education. Changes to the education system hint that we have not yet arrived at a system that meets the needs of our students or the country's economy. The search for this elusive system is causing our students and teachers to feel as if they are on a treadmill, with their goals in sight but virtually unattainable due to the lack of proper infrastructure, guidance and qualified advisory structures at the top of the hierarchy (in other words, the government). This article proposes an alternative utopian education system based on quality educational skills (teachers and learners), values, equal distribution of resources and effectively trained teachers who can manage diversity and teach effectively (Stronge, 2018). For comparison purposes, similar cases and countries facing similar problems can be cited in countries such as Nigeria, which, as a country with a large population and diverse cultures, faces several problems, such as lack of resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of qualified teachers. The other two countries that could benefit from an alternative utopian educational system are India and Bangladesh (Bokova, 2016).

According to Freire, utopia and our incompleteness as human beings are inextricably linked. If we are dedicated to continuing our educational development, we must accept that the future is always in flux, since we are creatures who are constantly in the process of becoming. In his later years, Freire emphasised that we must be prepared not only to tolerate, but also to actively welcome uncertainty. Since it indicates that we will continually have to accept the truth that there is much we do not know, this calls for both courage and humility. This is a motivation to strengthen commitment, rather than forsake it (Roberts, 2015).

The true definition of commitment is not in standing by what is most familiar and comfortable, but in being prepared to act in a world that is always shifting and unpredictable. According to Freire, pursuing political clarity is crucial, but this is not the same as sticking steadfastly to a stance when circumstances call for a subtle and nuanced re-evaluation of the options available to us (Pietersen, 2022). This has never been truer than now in the light of the educational crisis facing South Africa.

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