

## **A Grammar of Oppressed Childhood**

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**ABSTRACT – A Grammar of Oppressed Childhood.** This article is the result of a qualitative-documentary research, which sought to identify ‘a grammar’ of oppressed childhood based on a review of the references, meanings, and evocations that Paulo Freire makes about children in some of his works. Three elements of this grammar were identified. Oppressed childhood appears in corporations marked by hunger and malnutrition, the views on the imposition of silence in the child’s voice, and the historical oppression imposed by the racist and colonial matrix. Thus, the conclusions include some announcements addressing oppressed children’s education.  
Keywords: **Oppressed Childhood. Popular Education. Paulo Freire.**

**RESUMEN – Una Gramática de la Infancia Oprimida.** El presente artículo es resultado de una investigación de corte cualitativo-documental, en la que se buscó identificar ‘una gramática’ de la infancia oprimida a partir de la revisión a las referencias, sentidos, evocaciones que, sobre los niños y niñas, hace Paulo Freire en algunas de sus obras. Se identificaron tres elementos de esta gramática; la infancia oprimida aparece en corporeidades marcadas por el hambre y la desnutrición; en las miradas sobre la imposición del silencio en la voz infantil; y en la opresión histórica impuesta desde la matriz racista y colonial. Así, las conclusiones recogen algunos anuncios para abordar la educación de la infancia oprimida.  
Palabras-clave: **Infancia Oprimida. Educación Popular. Paulo Freire.**

## Introduction

Se os homens não deixassem morrer dentro deles o menino que eles foram se compreenderiam melhor (Lacerda, 2016 apud Paulo Freire).

Although the main focus of Paulo Freire's educational work was the literacy of young people and adults, identifying in them the transforming power capable of building another world without oppressors or oppressed, we cannot ignore that throughout his work, there are some elements and concerns about the different childhoods. Our task is to recover this grammar on the childhood condition that Paulo Freire proposes - based on his readings and experiences with oppressed childhoods revealed in daily photographs as he passed by and in the process of becoming – our task<sup>1</sup>.

It is important to mention the re-readings and new appropriations that are made today of Freire's educational legacy, which he locates in his autobiographical accounts, in his condition of childhood experience, questions, and perspectives that allow us to recognize that childhood becoming, which always accompanies us and is inscribed in an enormous capacity for thought and political action. For this purpose, qualitative research was carried out since the interest was identifying the meanings enunciated about childhood in some of Paulo Freire's works.

Thus, the research was based on tracing and compiling some of his works to identify what the author enunciates about childhood and how he refers to other children in his childhood memories, in different passages of his life, and in some literacy proposals in which he participated. In this way, it is assumed that qualitative research produces the understanding of reality (Galeano, 2004), in this case, of the views on oppressed childhood that can be located in Freirean thought. At the same time, this research, in conjunction with documentary research, implies assuming that the sources investigated take into account the historical contexts and the ethical-political positions of the speaker, in this case, the Brazilian educator.

From this research work, we propose to speak of the grammar of oppressed children, in which we also use the same Freirean perspective, which in addition to denouncing their conditions of existence, marked by injustice, abandonment, ignorance, and lack of love, etc., we announce possibilities to build with them another world, *less ugly*, the one we deserve.

Pioneering works nourish these readings carried out by Brazilian colleagues, who, from the theoretical review of Freire's work, analyze the references on childhood, boys and girls, to contribute to the view of popular childhood education and its possibility of "being more," of recognizing themselves as historical subjects, unfinished, in the process of becoming (Peloso; Texeira de Paula, 2011), as well as to contribute in the construction of an education for popular and oppressed child-

hoods (Peloso, 2017; Peloso; Teixeira de Paula, 2021). In some cases, we find elaborations that recover educational experiences with childhood developed from the Social Movements, especially from the Landless Movement (MST), that strong relationship between children's education and social movements, in which Freire's contributions are made visible to locate a childhood of rights, desires, and struggles (Angelo, 2009).

On the other hand, some of these investigations focus on the construction of a pedagogy of oppressed childhood, in which it is assumed as an experience from the perspective of Giorgio Agamben, thus de-centering it from a chronological state to evidence its condition of unfinishedness and hope in the face of "neoliberal determinism" (Santos Neto; Alves; Paulo da Silva, 2011). Along the same line, it is about unveiling a more affirmative, revolutionary childhood, understood as a condition of human existence that contrasts the dependent, undervalued, fatalistic childhood (Santos Neto, Paulo da Silva, 2007; Kohan, 2019). Some mentions today invite us to enter into the understanding of these oppressed childhoods from the south of the world and our America, to recognize their power and the possibility of building life alternatives.

This work adds to the task of unsettling those perspectives on childhoods, which assume them as objects of the deficit without the condition of class, ethnicity, sexuality, and desire. As Peloso (2017) rightly mentions, it is about assuming childhoods are also subjects of oppression.

### **Manifest Oppression in the Childhood Corporeality**

The poverty and injustice experienced by the oppressed people are expressed in the daily life of the families, in the domestic economy that manages poverty with what it can, that lives with hunger, malnutrition, and the difficulties of learning and knowing the world that this entails. These aspects taken from some experiences of the Brazilian educator allow us to identify how this economic, cultural, and educational oppression system manifests itself in the corporeality of boys and girls. Some aspects that allude to his different experiences in scenarios in the south of the world, such as Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Nicaragua, Guinea Bissau, Angola, and Sao Tome and Principe, reveal this grammar of oppressed childhood that we can say, are still valid in the 21st century.

Referring to some passages of his childhood in the 1930s, in the face of the economic crisis of 1929, he tells us how, as a child of a declining middle-class family, he shared the experience of hunger with the children of the rural world of the Brazilian Northeast, "[...] the boys and girls of the streams, of the mocambos, of the hills" (Freire, 1996, p. 38), i.e., with the most disadvantaged children differently. Let us think of the life of rural families in the 1930s anywhere in South America, where there was no drinking water, no electricity<sup>2</sup>, and no access to education, and many of these possibilities did not even exist in the main cities, perhaps only for the families of the elites<sup>3</sup>. In these conditions, he refers to a

childhood doubly besieged by hunger, firstly because of its rural condition and secondly because of the economic crisis.

The Brazilian educator will portray hunger expressed in the struggle for survival in an inhuman way in the dispute for food in the garbage dump, drawn between children and animals,

What excellence will I be that which, in the Brazilian Northeast, coexists with such an exacerbation of misery that it seems more like fiction: boys, girls, women, men, fighting for scraps with hungry dogs, tragically, animalistically, in the large garbage dumps on the outskirts of the cities, to eat. And São Paulo is not free from the experience of this misery (Freire, 1996, p. 111-112).

Dispute that also brings parasitic diseases, malnutrition, infant diarrhea, tuberculosis, and diseases of misery, as Freire (1970) would tell us, that make children “dead in life”, “shadows”, that surely if they were treated in a dignified manner, they would not end up being one more figure in the statistics of child death due to diseases that can be preventable and treatable. These effects are deepening today; the World Health Organization (WHO) identified that in 2019 about 5.2 million children under five years old and more than 500 thousand between 5 to 9 years old died from preventable causes. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the highest infant mortality rate,

The leading causes of under-five deaths are complications of preterm birth, birth asphyxia or birth trauma, pneumonia, congenital anomalies, diarrhea, and malaria, all of which are preventable or treatable through simple and affordable interventions such as immunization, adequate nutrition, safe water, safe food, and quality care by a skilled health care provider when needed (WHO, 2020).

This expresses the injustices in access to health systems and timely medical attention to which it has historically been subjected.

Oppressed children are also subjected to malnutrition based on the views imposed by the oppressor, with the use of slogans to define what is nourishing and what is harmful, only to obtain a benefit for themselves. In the experiences documented in Bolivia, Sao Tome and Principe, Freire and Faundez (2013) find the same discourse of the colonizers, which influenced the food practices of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples by establishing beliefs that maintained a diet with low protein content for children,

An Aymara mother told me about a common belief among Aymara women, giving milk and eggs to a child means the risk that the child will take a long time to begin to speak or even become mute. In other words, giving the child milk and eggs implies an imminent danger for the child. The mother does not give it either (Freire; Faundez, 2013, p. 152).

A similar relationship is found in Sao Tome and Principe:

The colonizer inspired in the heads of the colonized, as some said, 'that eating eggs was dangerous. Instead of eating eggs, the colonized sold their hens' eggs to the colonizer at an affordable price' (Freire; Faundez, 2013, p. 153).

These stories, from only five decades ago, make it evident that it was an influence of the Spanish colonizers, who forbade eating them but not producing them because, according to the Aymara indigenous woman, "[...] we had to produce them, but for them, not to solve the food problem of our children, and this is still valid" (Freire; Faundez, 2013, p. 158). The challenge in that context was to build and investigate with them the nutritional possibilities of eggs and milk for the children of their communities while confronting the ideology of domination that supported malnutrition. This ideology today is installed in the promotion and sale of ultra-processed foods or food excesses, with high content of sugars and fats, which, as we know, have a future impact on health, diabetes, and/or child overweight.

Malnutrition and hunger also affect the learning process of children. According to Freire (1996), the relationship between a reasonable learning rate and healthy, adequate nutrition is evident. In his experience as director of the Education Division in Recife in the early 1990s, he noted,

[...] how difficult it was for proletarian children, subjected to the rigors of greater and more systematic starvation than I had suffered, and without any of the advantages I had enjoyed as a middle-class child, to achieve a reasonable rate of learning. (Freire, 2008b, p. 34).

This aspect is also crossed today by the difficult possibilities of access and connection to the Internet, as one of the basic rights, especially in times of pandemic.

These readings of reality, from a critical look at the injustice expressed in our own and others' hunger, drawn in skeletal and ragged bodies of boys and girls who, in marginal areas, suburbs, and favelas, inhumanly live the consequences of an economic model that massifies poverty, involve us in the pedagogical and ethical work.

Knowing this reading of the world makes it possible, to begin with, a critical understanding of reality and, thus, to make this life experience the unprecedented viable way to transform the world. Paraphrasing Freire (2008b), boys and girls from the earliest age will be able to understand what needs to be changed in the world and what is wrong with it.

## **Oppressed Childhood is Voiceless Childhood**

One of the etymological meanings of the word infancy, coming from the Latin *infans*, refers to one who does not speak or is unable to

speak. This definition refers to early childhood when there is no verbal language or utterance of words. However, it ignores that to make themselves understood from the earliest age, boys and girls resort to body language, looks, crying, hand-holding, and even ignoring the “other” to make themselves heard.

This element of silence, of the silencing of the child’s voice, as a distinctive feature of the grammar of oppressed childhood, is expressed in various ways in the educator’s thoughts and work. Social institutions such as the family, and later the school and the State, will be the object of Freire’s analysis. All of them are institutions in which the imperative voice of the adult, mother-dad, teacher, and governors has prevailed, who, from imposed patterns, usually request “silence” on the part of boys and girls. This mention refers to a cultural invasion in Freirean terms (Paulo Da Silva, 2020) since it is expressed in the disqualification of the voice, the right to participate, and the children’s culture.

This form of oppression materializes in the disregard for the understanding of the world elaborated by children in their contexts:

What I have said and repeated without tiring is that we cannot leave aside, despised as useless, what the learners - be they children who come to school or young people and adults in centers of popular education - bring with them in their understanding of the world, in the most varied dimensions of their practice within the social practice of which they are a part. Their speech, way of counting, calculating, knowledge about the so-called other world, their religiosity, health, the body, sexuality, life, death, the power of saints, and spells (Freire, 1996, p. 110).

Behind the imposition of silence, children’s thinking is unknown since the relationship between thought and language is fundamental in understanding the world; if we do not talk about how we think about the world, how do we re-elaborate it or build it while we constitute ourselves? In the requirement of infantile silence, adult thinking is imposed, in which children quickly discover “[...] that, as in the home, to conquer certain satisfactions they must adapt to the precepts that are established vertically. And one of these precepts is not to think” (Freire, 1970, p. 199), so they learn to silence their thinking.

This situation is not very different in the school scenario, where on the one hand, the curricular contents are defined by governmental, and educational policies. On the other hand, they ignore contexts, cultures, and possibilities of the children’s world in this definition. Freire thus recreates this aspect,

Pedro, for example, knows how to harvest cocoa very well. He has learned, in practice, since he was a child, how to pick the cocoa pod without hurting the tree. By looking, Pedro knows if the pod is ready to be harvested. But Pedro does not know how to print a newspaper. In practice, Antonio learned how to print a newspaper very early but

does not know how to harvest cocoa. Harvesting cocoa and printing newspapers are equally necessary for national reconstruction (Freire, 2008a, p. 160).

Thus, we find knowledge, feelings, and practices that are of vital importance in the lives of boys and girls, which go beyond the contents of school disciplines by attending to the understanding and performance of tasks that can contribute to building the new world destined for men, women, youth, and children. Much of this knowledge “[...] are expressions of their resistance” (Freire, 2008a, p. 35) and are those that can contribute to the consolidation of the dreamed world.

On the other hand, with the silencing of girls and boys in the school environment, content is imposed to be addressed and evaluated. In this way, children’s knowledge is not recognized, and their elaborations are distrusted, which are usually considered erroneous and, of course, are not part of learning. This oppressed childhood is subjected to be evaluated for promotion instead of being trained to live to the fullest,

I am convinced that the difficulties as mentioned earlier would diminish if the school would take into consideration the culture of the oppressed, their language, their efficient way of accounting, and their fragmented knowledge of the world from which, finally, they would transit to the more systematized knowledge, which corresponds to the school to work (Freire, 2008b, p. 34).

This invisibilization of children’s feelings and knowledge is also expressed in the fact that,

The child perceives early on that his imagination does not play: it is something almost forbidden, a kind of sin. On the other hand, his cognitive capacity is challenged in a distorted way. On the one hand, the child is never invited to imaginatively relive the story told in the book, and on the other, to gradually appropriate the meaning of the text content (Freire, 2006, p. 65).

In an education without desire, the culture of oppressed children inhabited by fears, feelings, desires, and emotions is not addressed in the school world. An aspect that, instead of being ignored, announces Freire (2006), should be the object of rigorous, loving, and serious treatment. Paraphrasing him, he invites us to understand that what the child knows, he knows with all his body, mind, intuitions, desires, and emotions.

This denial and ignorance of the voice, that is, of the knowledge, thoughts, and experiences of oppressed children, also impact the “expulsion” suffered by this population from school. It is important to mention Freire’s (1996) critique of the notion of school dropout as if it were a decision of families or children and not a situation forced upon them by the capitalist world, “[...] which ‘prohibits’ 8 million children of the people from attending school; which ‘expels’ from schools a large part of those who manage to enter and calls all this ‘capitalist modernity’”

(Freire, 1996, p. 112). That is why he speaks of expulsion, a phenomenon that continues in our schools to this day<sup>4</sup>.

In addition to this grammar of silencing, there is the judgment made on their language, be they urban-popular, from ethnic groups, Afro-descendants, or peasants. This judgment is based on power and class relations, from which it is defined what is accepted or not, in what boys and girls enunciate,

Who defines a certain speech pattern as the good one, the cultured one? If there is a cultured one, it is because another is uncultured. Which is one, and whose is another? Who says that the language of popular children is bad and deficient? Who speaks of the inability of abstraction, of lack of coherence in the language of the dominated popular classes? (Freire; Faundez, 2013, p. 136).

This pattern, or the language of distinction, which imposes the terms of what can be said and what cannot be said in the children's world, subjected to the extermination of the use of their languages in many indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, installed a feeling of undervaluation in popular children -urban, migrants, peasants, from ethnic groups or displaced, who carry with them a wealth of words, sayings, their knowledge that are subjected to oblivion at school. This discrimination installed by the ideology of the dominant classes discriminates against children of the popular classes (Freire, 1997). Yes, when we speak, we give an account of our worldviews and ways of life. When our speech is censored and silenced, we are silencing our ways of thinking and living.

Therefore "‘You cannot at home or school’ in the name of order and discipline, castrate the learner's dignity, his ability to oppose and impose on him a quietism that denies his being" (Freire, 2012, p. 40). The announcement for families, caregivers, and teachers is to recognize the power, the courage, and the expressions of resistance in the child's voice. Therefore, our productive work does not separate the teaching of school disciplines from the critical reading of the world recreated in the children's voices (Freire, 2008; Freire, 2011) on how their communities, neighborhoods, and ethnic groups function. This announcement, as a challenge, leads us to think about the formation of children from solidarity, creativity, and the imagination of a better world.

The oppressed childhood will recognize itself in these critical readings, but also in its possibilities of pronouncing the world,

Existence, as human, cannot be mute or silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but by true words with which men transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to 'pronounce' the world, to transform it. The pronounced world, in turn, returns problematized to the pronouncing subjects, demanding from them a new pronouncement [...] Men are not made in silence, but in the word, in work, in action, in reflection (Freire, 1970, p. 71).

If we extend it to children, it will imply thinking that by making it possible for them to pronounce the world, they will be able to transform it. At the same time, boys and girls are made in word and action, in the recovery of their questions, of the boldness of their answers, of the power of their proposals, in that language that exceeds us. For those of us who have been children's educators, it is enough to remember their answers on how to build a fairer country,

Children need to grow up exercising this ability to think, inquire and investigate, doubt and experiment with hypotheses of action, and program, and not just follow programs imposed rather than proposed. Children must be assured the right to learn to decide, which can only be done by deciding. If freedoms are not constituted from themselves but in the ethical assumption of the necessary limits, these limits are not made without these freedoms running risks, as well as the authority or authorities with which they dialectically relate (Freire, 2012, p. 71).

The announcement against the silence of childhood already appeared in the first concerns of the educator. Thus, in 1959, when writing *Educación y Actualidad Brasileira*, quoted in Santos Neto, Alves e Paulo da Silva (2011), he already announced the need for a democratic education in which boys and girls could ask their questions, work in groups, recognize the problems of their realities, as well as risk their answers to them. In this way, the idea was for children to be makers of their history, capable of influencing their collective destinies. Respecting children's curiosity expressed in their speech, as well as in listening and recognizing dialogue as a loving act, allows us to recognize "what they know about the world," how they interpret it, but also how they modify it. The right to say respect for the use of the word in these ages emerges in creativity, in the possibility of being able to be, a matter that transcends the duty to be (Santos Neto; Alves; Paulo da Silva, 2011).

If to exist humanly is to pronounce the world, how can we think of an emancipating practice with children, with boys and girls, if we do not recognize in them subjects who are producers of culture, of words, with the capacity to think, to create, to transform? In total agreement, we consider that.

The death of the beginning of political life in children lies in not knowing their capacity to ask themselves about the world and their creative possibilities of answers. This condemns them to reproduce the world, the questions in books, and the answers given therein (Freire; Faundez, 2013, p. 77).

In this regard, it is suggestive of what Peloso and Teixeira de Paula (2021) have stated when reviewing the relationship between education and popular childhoods in Freire<sup>5</sup>, in which it is necessary to retake the author's ideas that lead to demonstrate the need for recognition, the constitution of the human being, of "being more," which is instituted from the childhood experiences themselves. This leads them to take up

again the Freirean passages that claim the right and the need for education for popular children as a possibility of constituting and contributing to their humanization process.

### **Historically Oppressed Children**

Freire's experience of exile between 1964-1980 allowed him to learn about other proposals for social transformation on the move, accompanied by educational challenges capable of responding to these social transitions. In this way, he accompanied the national liberation movements in Guinea Bissau and Sao Tome and Principe with his literacy proposals for young people and adults. Spaces that, like the Sandinista Revolution, his time in Chile and Bolivia expanded the challenges in the bid to make the world a less ugly place. However, Freire (1997; 2001) mentions that from his earliest age, he could not conceive of walking in the Faith of Christ, discriminating against others because of their "race," gender, class, or social origin. His life experience with other cultural perspectives strengthened his criticism of colonialism, expressed in the denial of African and indigenous cultures in the erasure of their languages and capacities. He evidenced the state of inhumanity, being treated as inferior, subjected to slavery practices, and denying their history and social power.

There we find another feature of the grammar of oppressed childhood, in this case, aimed at the negation, erasure, and invisibilization of native cultures and, with it, of these other childhoods. It is clear that historically the selection of the history to narrate, of the culture and the language that circulates in the school, has been an imposition of the dominant classes,

By reproducing (as it could not help but be) the colonialist ideology, the colonial school sought to inculcate in children and young people the profile that this same ideology had forged for them; a profile of inferior beings, of incapable beings, whose only salvation would be to become 'white' or 'white-souled blacks' (Freire, 2011, p. 23).

In this perspective, the cultural heritages, the contributions these groups have made to the struggles and national histories, and even the advantages and potencies inscribed in them are unknown. For this reason, we will insist on the need to recover, preserve and massify their languages to free themselves from the history and ideology of the colonizer. This process begins in the education of children. Thus, it is powerful to reflect,

When a society, for such and such reasons, asks the colonizer's language to assume the role of mediator in the formation of its people – that is, that the knowledge of biology, mathematics, geography, and history be done through it –, when a society freed from the colonial yoke is forced to do so, it must be aware that, in doing so, it will be, whether it wants to or not, deepening the differences

between social classes instead of resolving them (Freire; Faundez, 2013, p. 179).

How can we contribute to the liberation of oppressed children if we continue to educate them from official languages and histories that only contemplate the view of the colonizer's power, which has excluded them from history itself? Some educational experiences, such as those of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Chiapas, Mexico, and the Indigenous Education led by the Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca (CRIC) in Colombia, have advanced in the task of maintaining their languages as forms of thought and cultural resistance. There, children are initiated in understanding their own culture and the critical reading of the colonizing history, making it possible to build from their cultural and situated referents, in these other life practices, community and autonomy, and dignified life is key element.

This challenge in the indigenous populations in the framework of the Sandinista revolution,

The main topic of one of those conversations was how the revolution should behave toward the Miskito Indians. Like those of Fernando and Ernesto, I thought the revolution had to respect them. The question was not to impose literacy in Spanish, a language they did not speak, but to incorporate them into the revolution through economic projects for their region combined with cultural projects of which the language issue would be part. The revolution would not run any risk, as it did not run any risk if it respected the Creole English spoken by the miskitos (Freire; Faundez, 2013, p. 126).

Therefore, keeping one's language alive is not a minor matter, even though it is difficult in the current acculturation processes that our native peoples have gone through. In addition to the exclusion of indigenous children, it is worth mentioning the anecdote of a rural child, which is taken up by Freire, to consider the recognition and struggle of rural populations: "Are you used to dreaming?" a television journalist once asked a ten-year-old boy, a rural worker, in the interior of São Paulo. "No," said the boy, surprised by the question, "I only have nightmares" (Freire, 2006, p. 91-92). In the absence of dreams, this oppressed childhood alludes to a broken world that makes them despair. How can different dreams be made possible for this rural childhood if not through loving, dignified contexts in which production and labor are ensured, as well as the knowledge of the countryside is recognized and vindicated?

Regarding this historically oppressed childhood, Freire finds in the "children's mockery" against the oppressor a possibility to make the "strongest" lose their calm (Freire, 2008b). Thus, children's mockery is a sign of strength, rebellion, and childhood experience that leads us to think of its creative power, which resists, transforms, and is called to participate in the revolution, to "be more," in Freire's sense. This indicates that the revolutionary task is not only for men, women, and young

people since in the literacy texts that circulated in Guinea Bissau, Freire reminds us that,

[...] thus, with very simple, provocative, poetic texts, as you called them, we challenged the masses and ourselves to reflect on a new kind of participation and a new form of power, on reconstruction, on the recreation of a different organization, on the restructuring of society, etc. Some texts proposed that the revolution is not only the responsibility of men, of leaders but also of women; not only of adults but also of children and old people; texts that proposed that each of these social groups, divided by age, sex, or by the roles they played in society and the social process, all of them had an obligation to be part of the revolutionary process so that this process would be successful, in the sense of building a different and better society (Freire; Faundez, 2013, p. 203).

The revolutionary task includes childhoods, attending to their readings of the world and their role in their societies. From this perspective, we find in Kohan (2019), regarding his analysis of childhoods inspired by the life and work of Freire, the possibility of thinking today in an “affirmative childhood,” that is, in the childhood of the revolution, the one capable of overcoming the notions of childhood associated with the deficit the vulnerable or lacking. This possibility of thinking of an affirmative childhood is associated with the strength to create and transform, with the boldness expressed in the nascent revolution. This aspect is located when Freire names the Sandinista revolution as “a child”,

On my first visit to Managua, in November 1979, talking to a large group of educators in the Ministry of Education, I told them how the Nicaraguan revolution seemed to me to be a child revolution. A child, not because it had ‘just arrived’, but because of the evidence it was giving off its curiosity, its restlessness, its taste for asking questions, for not being afraid to dream, for wanting to grow, to create, to transform. [...] I also told them on that hot afternoon that it was essential that the Nicaraguan people, fighting for the maturation of their revolution, should not allow her to grow old, killing the child she was being (Freire; Faundez, 2013, p. 221).

The revolution begins in and with childhood.

## **Our Work with Oppressed Children**

Any work against the oppression of children necessarily involves working with the adults who care for them, train them, educate them and build the world with them. Hence, the work with the family, the community, and the school are recognized as the power of this transformation. The first element of this oppressed childhood is seen in “deformed children in a loveless, oppressive environment, frustrated

in their potentiality” (Freire, 1970, p. 199). The right to love, to affection, to grow up in a family, to count on affectionate teachers, allow the empowerment of that creative childhood, capable of daring, that of the political world. Thus, today, we insist on the revision of physical punishment practices (Freire, 1996) in the care of this moment of family life to contribute to the thinking of other ways of influencing the formation of boys and girls.

The family in Freire (1997; 2008; 2008b; 2009; 2011) represented his first stage of political formation and literacy. In several of his autobiographical notes, he acknowledges the work of his father, Joaquín Temístocles Freire, and mother, Edeltrudes Neves Freire, teaching him to write, in the shade of leafy mango trees in their home in Recife: “The words with which I became literate were words from my infantile linguistic universe, which I wrote on the ground, ‘my first slate’, with sticks, ‘my first chalk’” (Freire, 2011, p. 176).

A loving process that started from his own experience with the world, from his vocabulary universe, as he rightly mentions, from which he takes back the living experience that would allow him to read the world and then write it as if transforming it.

In 1928 I listened to my father and my uncle Monteiro talking about authoritarianism, the power of the powerful, about ‘do you know who you are talking to?’, the arbitrariness, the excesses, the frauds, the lack of respect for the people, about their exploitation, about the silence imposed on them, about the impunity of the rulers and their henchmen, about the practice according to which: to friends, everything; to enemies, the law [...] In 1928 I heard my father and my uncle Monteiro say that it was not only necessary to change the state of affairs in which we lived but that it had to be done urgently. The country was being destroyed, dispossessed, and humiliated. And then, the famous phrase: ‘Brazil is on the edge of the abyss’ (Freire, 2008b, p. 62).

This evocation is accompanied by a democratic exercise in the family, in which the voice of children, siblings, and parents is taken into account in household decisions (Freire, 1996; 2008b). An announcement and challenge that implies thinking of the family as a scenario in which we design necessary experiences and memories about affection, loving listening, lessons of justice and honesty, humor and love, and recognition of others, evidently, the beginning of the positions we will have in front of the world. An example, brought from the voice of a nine-year-old girl,

When my mom and dad met with friends, they would go on dates to get together and talk about many things, including politics... In those years, the president, Mr. Turbay Ayala, had decreed the security [security statute], which allowed the army and the police to commit outrages. And one law of that statute was that everyone was guilty until proven guilty (Story elaborated by a 9-year-old student about the reconstruction of her family history, her arrival to the world, May 26, 2001).

This story, which is part of my experiences as an early childhood educator, is recreated in the family biography, the political readings of the parents themselves on an episode of recent history, the late 70's and early 80's, marked by the disappearances and murders of social leaders, the criminalization of social protest, the curtailment of fundamental freedoms, among others. There, the role of families is evident in the critical comprehension of the history that furrows children's existence.

In the case of the school, as a scenario that contributes to the creation of hope, it can only realize this dream in relationships mediated by a dialogic, liberating education (Freire, 1970; 1996), which is none other than one that recognizes the other, believes in the other, builds with the other, that is, with the children. It depends on the educator's decision-making capacity to materialize a formative work with children that recognizes their questions that contribute to their search for critical readings of the world (Freire, 2001) and the imagination of desirable and possible futures. "When the child imagines a joyful and free school, it is because his school denies him freedom and joy" (Freire, 2006, p. 93). Accordingly, we must ask ourselves what school we imagine, what school we want, what school we wish to inhabit, and what school we build hand in hand with our children.

The memory of their first teachers will reiterate to us today the importance of the work of the early childhood educator. The images of her childhood teachers left imprints associated with rigor, commitment to the reading of the world, ethics, and political coherence between saying and doing. Besides Eunice<sup>6</sup>, the teacher with whom I learned to 'form sentences', only Áurea<sup>7</sup>, still in Recife, and Cecilia<sup>8</sup>, already in Jaboatão, really marked me" (Freire, 2006, p. 47). Especially with Eunice, "[...] the reading of the word was the reading of the 'word-world'" (Freire, 2008b, p. 100). They marked him because they were not annoying or mediocre, demanding, rigorous, and knowledgeable about the world they taught. Thus, the educational work with oppressed children requires a high level of training of child educators, knowing what they teach and "knowing how to teach it" (Freire, 2008b; 2006). Hence,

The learning of the learners is related to the teaching of the teachers, to their seriousness, to their scientific competence, to their capacity to love, to their humor, to their political clarity, to their coherence, just as all these qualities are related to the more or less fair or decent way in which they are respected or not (Freire, 2008b, p. 107).

The educator will remind us that we cannot teach what we do not know, an aspect that goes through materializing the right that all children in popular areas "[...] have to learn the same mathematics, the same physics, the same biology that children in the 'happy areas' of the city learn" (Freire, 2012, p. 53). Pedagogical work in which we can contribute so that boys and girls question and change the slogans and the imposed limits and set their dreams in motion.

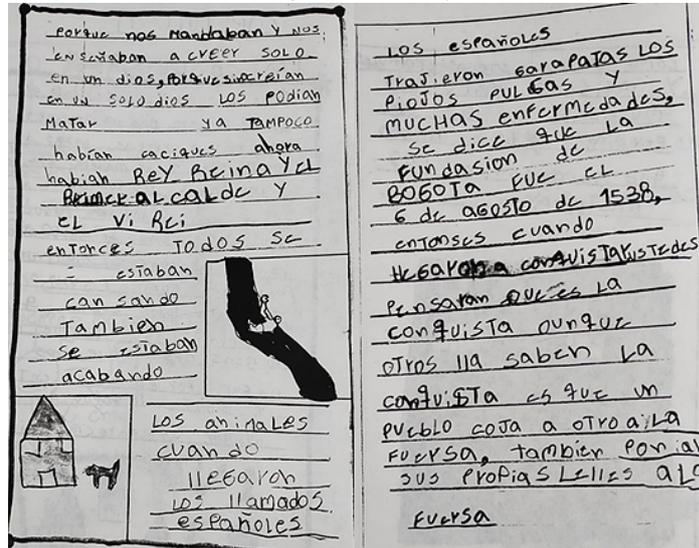
This is understood in the openness to understanding and listening to the socio-historical and cultural contexts of our children in making the school the experience of democracy, a dream that Freire recreates about an experience shared with him by a group of Spanish migrants in Switzerland, who, inspired by liberating education, carried out a school experience for boys and girls, children of migrants, in which they alternately questioned the textbooks and instruction offered by the Swiss state for their children, inspired by liberating education, carried out a school experience for boys and girls, children of migrants, in which they alternately questioned the textbooks and the instruction offered by the Swiss state for their children, while stimulating criticism, desire, questioning and imagination (Freire, 1996, p. 171). Freire had already had this dream during his visit to Chile, where, from his literacy experience with a group of peasants, he mentioned his desire to accompany a literacy process with children to observe the processes, the step-by-step of this literacy experience<sup>9</sup>.

The fundamental challenge also lies in the training of early childhood educators, with proposals that recognize the understanding of the world that children bring with them, which cannot be understood as preconceptions (Peloso; Teixeira de Paula, 2011). But at the same time, as the authors later state, in recognizing that children are historical and social subjects, that they are part of the world, that they are with the world and with others and can also build their ontological vocation, that of humanization (Peloso; Teixeira de Paula, 2021). Their hunger, and the practices of child abuse or exploitation, are not mere preconceptions; there is embodied living knowledge of the unjust reality, practices that subject childhood to an object of dehumanization by not being considered the right to live and be (Peloso, 2017). Hence, thinking about the training of early childhood educators involves recognizing the political stakes themselves, rigorously addressing the living conditions and the different contexts of oppressed children (ethnic, urban popular, peasant, Afro-descendant, etc.), as well as an understanding of our historical evolution, the armed conflict or the shameful past that deepen the misery of our children today.

Another example of this, regarding the understanding of the colonization of our Colombian territory, as a product of my aforementioned pedagogical commitment, which allowed me to unveil critical understandings of our reality and which are inscribed in the historical and political readings of this process, we find the following interpretation.

They all believed that they were gods because the Muisca believed their god would arrive from the east, and they arrived there. Although they did not look like gods because they commanded us and taught us to believe in only one god, they could be killed if they did not believe in only one god. There were no longer caciques either, now there were a king and queen and the first mayor and the virei (sic), so everyone was getting tired (September 30, 2001).

Figure 1 – Story



Source: Personal Files.

Therefore, listening to children’s contexts and readings of reality requires addressing their political and historical understandings of the world, the history of forced impositions of some peoples on others, and the history of extermination, domination, and plundering that has affected them.

But it is also urgent to address the denials that are found in the training processes of future educators, who arrive at the urban university and are faced with the exclusions, discrimination, and stigmatization that their people have suffered. For example, some Afro-descendant students feel invisible because their oral, artistic, and musical production is little considered in teacher training. Some of our indigenous students have learned to defend their languages as their own lives because, in their communities, their peers are ashamed of being indigenous and speaking their languages. Not to mention our peasant students, who have been subjected to mockery and accusations for their speech because they first learned milking, harvesting, and peasant sayings, before Western pedagogy. Our work with the future educators of children has been to unveil with them the origin of this racist contempt. To locate answers that allow us to vindicate and recognize ourselves within a valuable culture that has contributed to the construction of our peoples in the recovery of our history.

At the same time, it generates other openings to a new childhood in the relationship of educators with their childhood. It is not that, for an educator, the rescue of his or her childhood is a guarantee of a questioning education, nor that Paulo Freire’s recovery of his or her childhood is a model, but that it can inspire and generate other

possible educating lives of and in childhood (Kohan, 2020, p. 155).

On the other side, the training of educators implies an understanding of how to build pedagogically with children their readings of the world and their creations about a new life and society. Working with oppressed children is the first order's ethical and political task. Let us remember that Freire himself announces that it was the literacy process he received at home, as well as his first readings of the world that appeared there, accompanied by the committed work of his teachers, that contributed to the construction of his proposal for liberating education. Because childhood is the place to return to because there is always something to learn, and there is a power that can be gestated.

We can mention some educational experiences contributing to this political-pedagogical bet with childhood. In this regard, it is interesting to the work of Angelo (2009)<sup>10</sup>, which, from the critical review of early childhood care policies focused on welfare, recovers the banners of the struggle of some of the social movements in contemporary Brazil. There, the praxis of the MST and the community movement of the Santa Teresa neighborhood, which fight for children's education from a political, emancipatory practice that recognizes children as subjects of rights and desires, but also of care and knowledge, is rescued. There, the experience of creating the first Kindergarten at the end of the 1970s in the Santa Teresa neighborhood, a suburb of São Mateus, in northern Brazil, is powerful. This kindergarten was born from the struggle of working women and residents searching for an educational and care proposal for their youngest children from a formative perspective that would make this space more than just a place to "leave" the children. This community educational experience became an innovative space in which pedagogy gave way to constructing educational proposals built with the children. In the same way, the MST, from its platform of struggle, has conceived the importance of educating and recognizing the families, their youth, and peasant children in the struggle for land and life in the countryside. From an educational proposal that encompasses all education levels and emphasizes freedom and social emancipation training. From these banners of struggle, the MST has recognized an important field in rural early childhood education (from 0 to 6 years old), recognizing this population as subjects of history, as part of the movement, and as the transformation of society. In this way, the movement contributes to the formation of children who recognize themselves as part of the world and as part of its transformation, political subjects of resistance and the struggle for land, recognized in the proposal of infant education called *Ciranda Infantil*, which, since the '90s, is associated with the idea of rhythms, movements, joys, intertwining of hands, steps that are taken together, collectively (Angelo, 2009). It is the possibility of training children, through movement, in recognition of their voice and their transforming political possibilities.

We found the experience advanced with the Center for Popular Education for Children and Adolescents (CEPIA), in a popular suburb

of Villa María, in Córdoba – Argentina<sup>11</sup>. Since 2011, sustained work has been maintained in the territory through a formative process linking visual and plastic arts, sciences, music, and literature from a popular educational perspective (Fatyass, 2021). In this experience, they approach the implementation of popular education practices in formal education scenarios, where the class practices that reinforce the “social subordination of boys and girls” are questioned (Zavala; Romano; Fatyass; Iriarte; Remondetti, 2017, s/p). From Freirean’s perspective, the world inhabited by these childhoods is listened to, identifying how they name it and how they locate and identify themselves in it. It is from there that those understandings and criticisms of the reality lived in the children’s world are built, generating other possibilities of knowledge and of assuming life, social, and school trajectories,

[...] our proposal is intended to work from childhood in the consolidation of different ways of approaching the social world from knowledge, promoting valuable educational experiences, giving rise to a dialogical exchange with the children, through which their experiences concerning the School and inside and outside the neighborhood are problematized and, in turn, the relationship between adult and child gazes is put in tension (Zavala; Romano; Fatyass; Iriarte; Remondetti, 2017, s/p).

There we find possibilities for recognizing children’s knowledge of their world and the commitment to generate formative processes in which they can “be more,” even amid the pandemic (Fatyass, 2021). In this same perspective, we can take up again the collective *Aula Vereda*, an educational project that was born in 2008 and operates in the Cultural Center La Casa de Teresa in the Almagro neighborhood (Montenegro; O’Dezaille; Podetti, 2017). The work with children in this experience addresses early education (3 years and older), enabling listening and processes of choice and decision in children: from games to readings about the everyday world<sup>12</sup>. In this experience, the power of the collective, participatory and cooperative is fundamental in the processes of social change.

In both experiences, the analysis of family and neighborhood realities is fundamental; with them, life alternatives are constructed that seek to move away from the welfarist viewpoints, which favor the appropriation of the public, while at the same time expanding the pedagogical and cultural offer, which in many cases is not assumed in formal education: going to the cinema, concerts, outings in the city, to museums, etc. Political pedagogy constitutes them in the meantime, they try,

[...] generate a space where we can pleasantly approach knowledge and, through learning, denaturalize the reality that ‘touched us’ to thus positioning ourselves, both children and teachers, as subjects of our own history with the capacity for transformation (Montenegro; O’Dezaille; Podetti, 2017, p. 50).

We want to close this reflection with a phrase from Amílcar Cabral that Freire (2011) gives us about how he referred to children as the “Flowers of our revolution”. Therefore, it is one of the most urgent tasks to assume the formation of our children rigorously, to safeguard, care for and preserve this time of childhood, which we insist, will always accompany us.

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## Notes

- 1 The article is a product of the research project “Building collective memory of the National Pedagogical University: three training proposals in community education”, approved by the Research Center of the National Pedagogical University (2018-2019). There, the undeniable contribution of popular education and Paulo Freire to community education is evidenced. In the present article, we propose, about Freirean contributions, this reading in the key of “oppressed childhood”.
- 2 The electric light adoption in Latin America had its first appearances in Havana in 1877, Mexico 1833, Brazil 1879, Colombia 1890, mainly in urban centers (Tafunell, 2011).
- 3 Currently, according to WHO (2017), about 2100 million people (1 in 3) have no access to safe drinking water, and 4500 million lack safe sanitation; especially rural areas are the most affected. As a result, about 361 thousand children under five die yearly from diarrhea and the continued transmission of diseases such as cholera, hepatitis A, dysentery, and typhoid fever.
- 4 According to UNESCO (2015), “Just over 1.50% of Latin American and Caribbean countries have achieved universal primary education, but in the [Latin American] region, there are still 3.7 million children out of school in this cycle of education. Two countries - Guyana and Paraguay - are far from achieving this goal, with only 80% of primary school-age children attending school. While in Latin America as a whole, the number of out-of-school children decreased by 9%, in the Caribbean region, it increased by 11%. In 2012, 16% of the region’s out-of-school children were concentrated in a single country suffering from protracted conflict: Colombia. More than one-fifth of the region’s primary school students drop out before completing this education cycle. This situation has not changed since 1999”.
- 5 In this article, Peloso and Teixeira de Paula (2021) analyze Freire’s ideas on the education of children and his contributions to this purpose, based on the review of three Freirean works: *Política e Educação*, 2001; *Cartas a Cristina: reflexões sobre minha vida e minha práxis*, 2003; and *Professora sim, tia não: cartas a quem ousa ensinar*, 2008. The authors have chosen these three works as they allow us to review, in greater depth, ideas, relationships, and statements of the Brazilian thinker, on his concerns and reflections on the education of children of the popular classes.
- 6 Eunice Vasconcelos, his first formal teacher, on his six years old.
- 7 Áurea, his teacher in Bahía.
- 8 Cecília Brandão, his teacher in Jabatão.

- 9 In the research performed by Peloso and Texeira de Paula (2011), regarding the reading Education in the City by Freire, 1991, they extract the following comment on the subject: “[...] *gostaria de acompanhar uma população infantil envolvida num projeto assim e observar seus passos na experiência de alfabetização*” (Peloso; Teixeira de Paula, 2011, p. 257) [I would like to accompany a child population involved in such a project and observe their steps in the literacy experience] (Peloso; Teixeira de Paula, 2011, p. 257). 257) [I would like to accompany a child population involved in a project like this and observe their steps in the literacy experience].
- 10 In this work, the author retakes contributions of his doctoral thesis carried out in 2007, in which he analyzes the contributions of Paulo Freire’s thought to the Pedagogy of Early Childhood Education. Thus, it is a pioneer work, which also allows this article to explain the policies on child care implemented by the dictatorship, to locate from them the historical struggle of social movements, the struggle for rural early childhood education, in which children are recognized for their rights, and training needs; from the need for pedagogically prepared professionals for early childhood education, the review of other conceptions of childhood, society, and even education, which overcome the welfare logic and school success-failure.
- 11 The proposal is part of a university volunteer project entitled *School, Childhood, and University*. Through volunteering, the National University of Villa María articulates research projects and practices that affect children’s formative processes through workshops offered on an extended day (Zavala; Romano; Fatyass; Iriarte; Remondetti, 2017).
- 12 The proposal operates on Saturdays and carries out political, pedagogical work with Early Education (3-5 years); Literacy (1st and 2nd grade); Medixs (3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th), and Grandes (7th and high school). The experience seeks to maintain the close link between the political, affective, and cultural, offering formative processes and workshops around the collective and cultural that allow walking social emancipation (Montenegro; O’Dezaille; Podetti, 2017).

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