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A Critical Analysis of Freirean Educational Principles and Their Application Within the Iraqi Kurdistan Education System

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ABSTRACT

This research critically examines the applicability of Paulo Freire's educational principles within the education system of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The study adopts a qualitative, analytical review approach based exclusively on the provided literature, with particular attention to curriculum theory, Freirean pedagogy, educational reform, architectural education, language teaching, and the historical and policy context of Iraqi Kurdistan. The analysis positions Freirean education around several interconnected principles: dialogue, critical consciousness, learner participation, praxis, contextualized knowledge, and the transformation of teacher-student relationships. The literature indicates that these principles have considerable relevance to educational environments in which curriculum, institutional structures, and pedagogical practices are shaped by historical, ideological, and policy conditions. Null's conception of curriculum as a relationship between educational theory and practice provides an important conceptual foundation for evaluating whether curricular intentions are translated into meaningful classroom experiences (Null, 2011). Evidence concerning architectural education in Iraqi Kurdistan further demonstrates the practical potential of Freirean ideas, while studies of English-language teaching and broader educational reform reveal both opportunities and structural constraints. The findings suggest that Freirean pedagogy can contribute to participatory, reflective, and context-sensitive education in Iraqi Kurdistan, but its implementation requires institutional support, teacher preparation, curriculum flexibility, and recognition of local educational realities. The study concludes that Freirean principles should not be treated as a universal instructional formula but as a critical framework that can inform locally responsive educational transformation.

Keywords: Paulo Freire; Freirean pedagogy; critical pedagogy; Iraqi Kurdistan; educational reform; curriculum theory; dialogue; critical consciousness; teacher-student relations; educational transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has developed within a complex historical and institutional environment. Questions concerning curriculum, policymaking, teaching practices, educational quality, and the relationship between educational institutions and wider social conditions are therefore central to understanding possibilities for reform. Pir (2024) demonstrates the importance of examining Iraqi education through the historical and ideological

backgrounds of policymakers, while Vernez, Culbertson, Constant, and Karam (2016) emphasize the significance of initiatives directed toward improving educational quality in the Kurdistan Region. These perspectives indicate that educational transformation cannot be understood exclusively through classroom techniques; it must also be considered in relation to institutional structures and policy environments.

Within this context, Paulo Freire's educational philosophy provides a useful critical framework. Freirean pedagogy challenges passive forms of learning and emphasizes dialogue, participation, reflection, and the development of learners' capacity to interpret and transform their social realities. Such principles have relevance to curriculum because curriculum is not simply a collection of subjects or prescribed content. It represents an interaction between educational aims, knowledge, teaching practices, learners, and institutional contexts. Null (2011) is particularly important in this respect because his treatment of curriculum connects theoretical assumptions with educational practice, making curriculum a central site for examining how philosophical principles become pedagogical realities.

The relevance of Freirean thought to Iraqi Kurdistan is also supported by existing studies. Rauf and Shareef (2022), for example, explicitly examine architectural education in Iraqi Kurdistan through Freire's ideas. Rion, Kakamad, and Fatah (2018) investigate a Dogme-inspired approach to English-language teaching in Kurdistan, demonstrating the relevance of learner-centered and less traditionally structured pedagogical practices. Shun (2024) further considers educational advocacy and teaching transformation through Freirean principles in relation to emerging curriculum standards. These studies collectively suggest that Freirean educational theory can provide a productive lens for reconsidering teaching and learning practices in the region.

The central problem addressed in this study is therefore not whether Freirean principles can simply be imported into Iraqi Kurdistan, but how and under what conditions those principles can be meaningfully applied. A critical approach is necessary because educational systems involve institutional constraints, curriculum requirements, teacher expectations, cultural contexts, and policy priorities. The study consequently aims to analyze the principal Freirean educational principles, examine their relevance to the Kurdistan education system, identify areas of practical application, and evaluate the limitations that may affect their implementation.

The scope of the research is restricted to the literature supplied for this study. Its significance lies in bringing together theoretical discussions of curriculum and Freirean pedagogy with literature specifically addressing education in Iraqi Kurdistan. In doing so, the study develops an analytical interpretation of Freirean educational

application rather than presenting Freirean pedagogy as a standardized teaching method.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Curriculum as the Connection between Educational Theory and Practice

Curriculum provides the conceptual foundation for examining educational philosophy in practice. Null (2011) emphasizes the relationship between curriculum theory and educational practice, allowing curriculum to be understood not merely as prescribed content but as an expression of educational purposes and assumptions. From this perspective, an educational philosophy becomes consequential when its principles influence what is taught, how knowledge is organized, how teachers interact with learners, and how educational outcomes are understood.

This theoretical position is directly relevant to Freirean pedagogy. If education is expected to promote participation and critical engagement, these aims must be reflected in curriculum organization and classroom practice rather than appearing only as philosophical statements. A curriculum based predominantly on transmission of predetermined knowledge may conflict with pedagogical approaches emphasizing dialogue and learner agency. Consequently, curriculum reform represents a major mechanism through which Freirean principles could be translated into institutional practice (Null, 2011).

2.2 Freirean Pedagogy, Praxis, and Participatory Learning

Steiner, Krank, McLaren, and Bahruth (1999) position Freirean pedagogy in relation to praxis and educational possibilities. Their work provides a theoretical basis for understanding Freirean education as more than a collection of classroom strategies. Praxis involves an ongoing relationship between reflection and action, suggesting that learners should engage intellectually with their circumstances while developing the capacity to respond to them.

Spener (1992) similarly presents the Freirean approach within adult literacy education, highlighting its relevance to participatory and socially situated learning. These perspectives are important because they challenge the assumption that effective education is primarily a process

of transferring information from teacher to student. Instead, learning becomes an interactive process in which learners participate in constructing meaning.

Rubyutsa, Achtenhagen, Stendahl, and Musekura (2024) demonstrate the continued relevance of Freirean thought outside conventional school settings by examining informal training and rural entrepreneurship in Rwanda. Although the geographical context differs from Iraqi Kurdistan, the study provides a useful conceptual comparison: education can become more transformative when learners' experiences and practical realities are incorporated into the educational process. The relevance of this insight to Kurdistan lies not in direct geographical comparison but in the broader principle that educational practices become more meaningful when connected to learners' social contexts.

2.3 Freirean Principles and Iraqi Kurdistan

The literature addressing Iraqi Kurdistan provides more direct evidence of the applicability of Freirean ideas. Rauf and Shareef (2022) specifically reconsider architectural education in Iraqi Kurdistan through Freire's ideas. Their focus is significant because professional education can traditionally emphasize technical competence and established disciplinary knowledge. A Freirean perspective introduces questions concerning participation, dialogue, critical reflection, and the relationship between professional education and wider social realities.

Rion et al. (2018) examine a Dogme "lite" EFL teaching approach in Kurdistan. The relevance of this study to the present analysis lies in its engagement with less rigid and potentially more learner-responsive forms of language teaching. Such approaches can create greater space for classroom interaction and learner contribution, although their compatibility with formal curricula and institutional expectations requires careful consideration.

Shun (2024) extends the discussion by connecting Freirean principles with educational advocacy, teaching transformation, and new curriculum standards. This reinforces the argument that Freirean educational theory is relevant not only to individual teaching practices but also to broader discussions about curriculum and educational transformation.

2.4 Policy, Ideology, and Structural Conditions

The application of any educational philosophy depends on the institutional environment in which it operates. Pir (2024) draws attention to the historical development of Iraqi education and the ideological backgrounds of policymakers. This perspective is crucial for Freirean analysis because educational systems are shaped by decisions concerning curriculum, authority, institutional priorities, and acceptable forms of knowledge.

Vernez et al. (2016) similarly focus on initiatives intended to improve educational quality in the Kurdistan Region–Iraq. Their work indicates that quality improvement is connected with systemic initiatives rather than isolated classroom interventions. Freirean pedagogy therefore needs to be considered alongside institutional capacity and policy structures.

The literature suggests a research gap in the limited integration of these perspectives. Existing studies address particular dimensions—curriculum, architecture, language teaching, educational policy, or advocacy—but fewer analytical discussions bring them together through a unified framework for examining Freirean application across the education system of Iraqi Kurdistan. The present study addresses this gap through a thematic synthesis of the provided literature.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative conceptual review methodology. Rather than collecting primary data from schools or teachers, it systematically analyzes the provided scholarly and institutional literature to identify recurring theoretical concepts, educational applications, and structural limitations associated with Freirean principles in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The analytical framework consists of five interconnected dimensions: curriculum orientation, teacher–student relationships, learner participation, contextualized learning, and institutional conditions. These dimensions were selected because they provide a logical connection between Freirean educational theory and the practical organization of education.

First, curriculum orientation examines whether educational content is treated as fixed knowledge to be transmitted or as material that can be critically interpreted in relation to learners' experiences. Null's (2011) distinction between curriculum theory and practice is especially relevant

because curriculum transformation requires alignment between educational objectives and classroom implementation.

Second, teacher–student relationships are examined through the Freirean emphasis on dialogue and participation. In a conventional transmission model, teachers are positioned primarily as authorities and students as recipients. A Freirean orientation instead encourages reciprocal intellectual engagement. This does not eliminate teacher expertise; rather, it changes the function of expertise from unilateral authority toward facilitation and critical engagement.

Third, learner participation concerns the extent to which students actively contribute to educational processes. Rion et al. (2018) provide a relevant contextual example through their examination of a Dogme "lite" EFL approach in Kurdistan. A participatory model may involve discussion, problem-based activities, collaborative interpretation, and student-generated questions. However, participation must be connected to curricular objectives rather than becoming unstructured activity.

Fourth, contextualized learning examines whether educational content relates to learners' social, cultural, and professional realities. Rubyutsa et al. (2024) demonstrate the broader value of connecting educational activity with practical contexts, while Rauf and Shareef (2022) show the relevance of Freirean ideas to professional education in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Fifth, institutional conditions address the role of policy, curriculum structures, teacher preparation, and educational quality initiatives. Pir (2024) and Vernez et al. (2016) are particularly relevant to this dimension because they demonstrate that educational outcomes and reform cannot be separated from institutional and policy environments.

The resulting conceptual model can therefore be represented as:

Freirean principles → curriculum transformation → participatory pedagogy → contextualized learning → critical learner engagement → educational transformation

This model should not be interpreted as a linear causal mechanism. Rather, it represents an analytical relationship in which each component influences the others. For example, participatory teaching cannot be sustained if

curriculum structures leave no room for learner contribution. Similarly, curriculum reform may have limited effects if teachers do not possess the preparation and institutional support necessary to implement new pedagogical practices.

A hypothetical classroom example illustrates the model. In a traditional language lesson, students might be required to memorize a predetermined vocabulary list and reproduce it in an examination. Under a more Freirean approach, students could identify communication problems relevant to their daily lives, discuss them collectively, and use language activities to investigate and express their experiences. The teacher would remain responsible for linguistic accuracy and learning objectives but would organize instruction around dialogue and student engagement. Such an approach illustrates how philosophical principles can influence curriculum implementation without abandoning academic standards.

The methodology therefore treats Freirean pedagogy critically rather than prescriptively. The purpose is to determine where its principles can strengthen educational practice and where institutional realities may limit their implementation.

4. RESULTS

The analysis identifies five major findings concerning the application of Freirean educational principles within Iraqi Kurdistan.

First, curriculum is the central mechanism through which educational philosophy becomes practice. Freirean principles cannot have sustained institutional influence if they remain detached from curriculum design. Null (2011) provides the conceptual basis for understanding this relationship because curriculum connects educational theory with actual educational practice. The implication is that a meaningful Freirean transformation would require changes not only in classroom techniques but also in the organization, purposes, and interpretation of curriculum.

Second, dialogue and learner participation represent potentially important areas of pedagogical transformation. The literature suggests that approaches allowing greater learner involvement can challenge rigid teacher-centered practices. Rion et al. (2018), through their examination of Dogme "lite" EFL teaching in Kurdistan, provide contextual evidence for the relevance of flexible and

interaction-oriented approaches. Such practices are compatible with the broader Freirean emphasis on active participation, although their effectiveness depends on curricular and institutional compatibility.

Third, Freirean pedagogy has relevance across different educational fields rather than only within general classroom education. Rauf and Shareef (2022) demonstrate this through architectural education in Iraqi Kurdistan. The finding is significant because it suggests that Freirean principles can be adapted to disciplinary environments in which professional knowledge, technical skills, and critical reflection must coexist. A student in architecture, for instance, can acquire technical competence while also examining how professional decisions affect communities and social environments.

Fourth, educational transformation is constrained by policy and institutional structures. Pir (2024) highlights the importance of policymakers and ideological backgrounds in understanding Iraqi education, while Vernez et al. (2016) emphasize organized efforts to improve educational quality in the Kurdistan Region. These findings indicate that pedagogical reform cannot be separated from system-level conditions. Freirean principles may encourage classroom transformation, but their sustainability requires supportive curriculum policies, teacher preparation, institutional flexibility, and compatible quality-improvement mechanisms.

Fifth, contextualization strengthens the potential relevance of Freirean education. Shun (2024) connects Freirean principles with educational advocacy and emerging curriculum standards, while Rubyutsa et al. (2024) demonstrate the wider value of informal, context-sensitive learning inspired by Freirean thought. The implication for Iraqi Kurdistan is that Freirean pedagogy should be interpreted through local educational conditions rather than copied as a predetermined model.

Overall, the findings support a contextual adaptation model. Freirean principles offer conceptual resources for improving participation, dialogue, reflection, and learner agency, but their educational impact depends on the interaction between classroom practice and institutional structures. The strongest application is therefore likely to be selective and context-sensitive rather than comprehensive replacement of existing educational systems.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that Freirean educational philosophy can provide a productive critical framework for examining educational development in Iraqi Kurdistan, but its application involves significant theoretical and practical tensions. The most important issue concerns the relationship between educational ideals and institutional implementation. Null (2011) demonstrates why curriculum must be examined as both theory and practice. A curriculum may formally support learner development while classroom routines continue to reproduce teacher-centered patterns. Consequently, adopting Freirean terminology without changing educational practice would constitute symbolic rather than substantive reform.

The first major implication concerns teacher authority. Freirean pedagogy does not require the elimination of teacher expertise; rather, it challenges forms of authority that prevent meaningful dialogue. In Iraqi Kurdistan, a practical adaptation would therefore involve redefining teachers as facilitators of inquiry while retaining their responsibility for disciplinary knowledge and academic standards. Rion et al. (2018) indicate that less rigid instructional approaches can provide space for learner engagement, but the sustainability of such approaches depends on compatibility with institutional expectations.

The second implication concerns professional and disciplinary education. Rauf and Shareef (2022) demonstrate the relevance of Freire's ideas to architectural education, suggesting that professional education can incorporate critical reflection rather than focusing exclusively on technical competencies. This principle could potentially extend to other fields in which students must understand the social consequences of professional decisions.

The third implication involves policy and educational governance. Pir (2024) indicates that educational development in Iraq is inseparable from policymaking and ideological context. This creates a potential tension with Freirean pedagogy because participatory educational models depend upon institutional willingness to accommodate questioning, dialogue, and critical reflection. Educational reform therefore requires alignment between classroom-level innovation and system-level policy.

A further tension concerns standardization versus

contextual flexibility. Quality-improvement initiatives, as discussed by Vernez et al. (2016), may require common standards and measurable objectives. Freirean pedagogy, by contrast, places considerable value on contextualized learning and learner participation. These approaches do not necessarily conflict, but excessive standardization can reduce the space available for dialogical teaching. A balanced system would retain core academic standards while allowing teachers flexibility in how students investigate and interpret educational content.

The principal limitation of the present study is methodological. Because it relies exclusively on the supplied literature, it does not provide empirical evidence from teachers, students, administrators, or classrooms in the Kurdistan Region. The conclusions should therefore be understood as conceptual and analytical rather than as direct measurements of educational outcomes. Another limitation is the uneven scope of the literature: some studies focus specifically on Kurdistan, whereas others provide broader applications of Freirean ideas. Cross-contextual evidence can inform theoretical interpretation, but it cannot automatically be generalized to Iraqi Kurdistan.

Nevertheless, the convergence of curriculum theory, Freirean pedagogy, professional education, language teaching, educational advocacy, and policy literature provides a coherent basis for arguing that Freirean principles have meaningful analytical and practical relevance. The key is adaptation rather than imitation. As Null (2011) suggests through the relationship between curriculum theory and practice, educational philosophy becomes significant when it is translated into institutional and pedagogical action.

6. CONCLUSION

This study critically analyzed the potential application of Freirean educational principles within the Iraqi Kurdistan education system using only the provided literature. The analysis identified curriculum transformation, dialogue, learner participation, contextualized learning, critical reflection, and institutional support as central dimensions of Freirean educational application.

The study demonstrates that Freirean pedagogy offers more than a teaching technique. It provides a critical framework for reconsidering relationships among curriculum, teachers, learners, knowledge, and educational

institutions. Null (2011) is particularly important because the connection between curriculum theory and practice demonstrates that philosophical transformation requires practical curricular expression. The literature concerning architectural education and English-language teaching in Kurdistan further indicates that participatory and reflective approaches can be considered within specific disciplinary and pedagogical contexts.

At the same time, Freirean principles cannot simply be transferred into Iraqi Kurdistan without consideration of local policy, institutional structures, curriculum requirements, and educational traditions. Pir (2024) and Vernez et al. (2016) highlight the importance of systemic and policy conditions, while Shun (2024) indicates the continuing relevance of Freirean principles to educational transformation. Thus, successful application requires contextual adaptation supported by teacher preparation, curricular flexibility, and institutional commitment.

The principal contribution of this study is its integrated conceptualization of Freirean educational application in Iraqi Kurdistan. Rather than treating critical pedagogy as a universal formula, it proposes viewing Freirean principles as adaptable resources for developing more dialogical, participatory, reflective, and context-sensitive educational practices.

Future research should complement this conceptual analysis with empirical investigations involving teachers, students, curriculum designers, and educational policymakers in the Kurdistan Region. Classroom observations, interviews, comparative case studies, and evaluations of learner outcomes could determine which Freirean practices are most feasible and effective under local conditions. Such research would provide stronger evidence for developing a contextually appropriate framework for critical and participatory educational reform.

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