

Remembering Paulo Freire

UBIRATAN D'AMBROSIO

Paulo Reglus Neves Freire was born on September 19, 1921 in Recife, in the Northeast of Brazil. His family was poor, but he always used to refer to it as a congenial family, impregnated with love. His own life was an exercise of love. He died in São Paulo, on May 2, 1997, following a short cardiac problem.

Paulo Freire was internationally known for his proposals for a pedagogy aimed at freeing the individual from fear and oppression. His last writing synthesises his ideal:

If we opt for a progressive ideal, if we are in favour of life and not of death, of equity and not of injustice, of rights and not of abuse, of conviviality and not denial of the different, then there is no other way of living our lives but by this ideal: to embody it, thus narrowing the gap between what we say and what we do.

This clearly shows Paulo Freire as an educator with a strong ideal and at the same time with a practice subordinated to this ideal. The philosopher and theoretician was also, with equal strength, a man of action.

It is very difficult to summarise the contributions of Paulo Freire. His entire life was devoted to education. His method to enable adults to become literate was simple. The starting point was to use some significant key-words pertinent to meaningful social situations which were well-known to the community. Identifying these words was the objective of previous research within the community. Breaking of these words into syllables (a common method of teaching to read, as Portuguese has very simple and clear syllable boundaries and great consistency in letter-sound correspondences) should go hand-in-hand with reflection on the natural and social meanings of the objects and settings represented by them, using the analysis of language as part of analysing the world. Thus, Paulo Freire was able to offer dignity to those adults deprived of participation in the world, to those marginalised due to social, economical and political reasons. Ever since his youth, Paulo Freire had encountered these sections of the population.

He was a good student, one attracted to studies of grammar and literature, and soon realised that to be free, women and men must be fully aware of the conditions determining their role in society and should clearly understand that they have the possibility of modifying these conditions. An important instrument for this is the domain of written language.

Paulo Freire was not a politician, in the common sense of the word. He was in charge of the National Literacy Plan at the time of the military coup in 1964 and was exiled. His

method, directly related to his ideal of a democratic and just society, was seen as threat, and after much harassment and periods spent in prison, he left Brazil. He stayed abroad for fifteen years, holding appointments in several universities, among them Harvard University and Université de Genève, and also worked as a consultant for UNESCO and for the World Council of Churches, travelling and lecturing extensively. Besides his recognition as a major educator and philosopher of education, Freire became a symbol of non-conformism. In his view, men and women have the potential for breaking the chains of inequity and discrimination.

In 1979, Freire returned to Brazil. He became a Professor of Education at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo and at the State University of Campinas/UNICAMP. He was a founding member of the Workers Party [*Partido dos Trabalhadores - PT*], a most influential party in the democratisation of Brazil. He was the Secretary of Education of the City of São Paulo when the mayor elected was from the PT, but he stayed only two years in this position (1989-91). Clearly, Paulo Freire was much more comfortable in an educational environment than in the political arena. He was fundamentally an educator, totally conscious of his role in endeavouring to build a new humanity, one without inequities, discrimination, arrogance and violence.

I personally never met Paulo Freire until his return to Brazil and his joining of UNICAMP. There, I met him a couple of times, in a somewhat formal academic environment. Then, in the early eighties, I flew to the USA and was fortunate enough to be assigned a seat next to Freire. What I already knew, namely my total affinity with the ideas of the master, was confirmed during several hours of conversation during a night flight. We engaged in fruitful conversations on several occasions since then.

This is the Paulo Freire we have known and loved in Brazil, as in just about everywhere else in the world. A conversation with Freire always resulted in renewed hope for a brighter future for humankind. He had never directly discussed mathematics education in his writings, but his ideas of education in general were highly inspiring. Many other mathematics educators around the world are grateful to him either for stimulating conversations or for inspiring readings or both. But he had never explicitly exposed his ideas about mathematics.

In 1996, Paulo Freire was invited to give the opening plenary lecture at ICME-8, in Seville. This was a much anticipated opportunity to hear, directly from him, his ideas both about mathematics and about mathematics education.

But, in the event, a health condition prevented him from going to Seville. Arrangements were made to have him videotaped and an edited version of an interview was shown during the congress. This is why this half-hour interview of which you are about to read a full, translated transcription took place. In his comments during this short conversation, we find enriching reflections about philosophy, history, mathematics, mathematics education, cognition, teacher

training and a string of pearls about the evolution of humankind towards better days.

Paulo Freire recognised the presence of mathematics in all human activities. Indeed, he identified being human with acquiring a mathematical presence in the world. This talk is a legacy from one of the most influential educators of this era to all mathematics educators: a legacy of challenges and of hope.

June 1997

