



Business & Social Science  
IJRBS

## Research in Business & Social Science

IJRBS VOL 11 NO 2 (2022) ISSN: 2147-4478

Available online at [www.ssbfn.net](http://www.ssbfn.net)

Journal homepage: <https://www.ssbfn.net/ojs/index.php/ijrbs>

# Analysis of emancipatory pedagogy as a tool for democratic classrooms



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 16 January 2022

Received in rev. form 12 March 2022

Accepted 18 March 2022

#### Keywords:

Emancipatory pedagogy, democratic classrooms, critical thinking skills, self-awareness, transformative worldview.

#### JEL Classification:

I23

### ABSTRACT

Sometimes, teachers or instructors find it challenging to understand or achieve a democratic education without compromising the quality pedagogical process. Hence, this study is conceptualised around the principles of emancipatory pedagogy as a tool to ensure effective classrooms democracy across levels of classrooms. This study answers the following question: how can emancipatory pedagogy be presented as an effective tool to implement a democratic classroom? This study locates its argument within a transformative worldview and adopts a conceptual analysis to interpret emancipatory pedagogy as a conceptual framework for the study. Emancipatory pedagogy, its assumptions, and how they informed democratic classrooms were argued with the conclusion that emancipatory pedagogy is a dimension of effective and democratic classrooms because both concepts promote critical thinking and social justice among students, develop a personal connection with learning and creating an atmosphere for freedom of knowledge construction among students. The study recommends that teachers or instructors interested in implementing democratic education/classrooms adopt the assumptions of emancipatory pedagogy by tailoring their classrooms towards promoting critical thinking skills, development of personal connection with learning, and freedom to enable students to construct knowledge of their own.

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## Introduction

Recently, democratic education has been embraced by scholars interested in value-oriented teaching and learning since democracy is part of an emancipatory educational project. However, the term 'democratic classroom' has rarely been addressed in scholarly research on education; though reflected in Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed" as an approach to education that assumes a social change in order to overcome oppression (Freire, 1970; Freire, 2009; Freire, 2013; Freire, 2021). Hence, the "pedagogy of the oppressed" promotes social change through education. Democratic education serves as a useful point of departure to expand the narrow view of pedagogy that has long dominated educational theory and practice (Huber, 2010). Scholars like Freire believed it is possible to create emancipatory educational spaces through an approach he called 'dialogic' or 'problem-posing' pedagogy, wherein communication becomes an act of love in which dialogue between people can emerge (Barbosa & Wang, 2020; Freire, 2013). They also saw dialogical education as a powerful tool for transcending oppression and domination by involving students in the active investigation and knowledge construction process, in contrast to the more traditional transmission of knowledge. This process is the same as democratic education since democratic education is an educational approach that considers individuals' interests, needs, and values in the educational system (Alshurman, 2015; Şanlı & Altun, 2015). Its core is about giving power to students, treating them as important members of society who can make decisions about their lives (Lo, 2017; Seigel & Rockwood, 1993). In a democratic education system, students have the right to express their views and feelings, question existing ideas and beliefs, and work together with others. Hence, a democratic classroom is that teaching and learning process that encourages students to think for themselves and contribute to the decision-making process within the class and the school community (Blevins & LeCompte, 2016)

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<https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v11i2.1662>

The democratic classroom has been proven effective in developing students holistically and is also significant to students' academic performance and overall achievement (Hope, 2012; Lauder, 2005; Mayes et al., 2016; Tinsley, 2016). Not only that, but it also equips students with critical thinking skills, promote equity and inclusive education, enhance literacy rate, respect for all members of the school community, equal access to opportunities and resources, and enhance diversity management in schools (Biamba et al., 2021; Hosen et al., 2020; Lipsky & Gartner, 2013; Malloy, 2002; Sidebottom, 2019). As good as this concept appears, there seem to be no specific pedagogical guidelines for applying democracy in classrooms, thus, making it difficult for teachers and instructors interested in implementing democratic education. It requires extensive knowledge about the conceptions of social change that underlie educational praxis (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Hence, understanding the social change required to support a democratic classroom is highly significant based on this argument. Moreover, educators cannot begin with the idea of building a free society; instead, they must start by examining oppression within the existing society. That is, an examination of a society that lacks the tenet of democracy and its value necessitates the need for democratic education, which would build the democratic ways of life and doing among young ones. This is consistent with the argument that educators are responsible for dealing with the existing reality that students face, not only in schools but in societal dealings (Ferrari et al., 2006). This lacuna, therefore, raises the question of the need to promote a democratic framework in classrooms.

Promoting democracy in the schools and, most especially in classrooms, is fundamental to students and society at large. Students inclined to the democratic ways of life will make a democratic society where values, culture, social justice, and human rights will be respected (Biesta, 2013). According to Hyttén & Bettez (2011), the establishment of a just classroom is not an easy task because it requires a radical shift in thoughts and practices. They pointed out that working toward creating democratic classrooms - learning environments that include freedom for students, social justice for marginalised people, and critical consciousness - is a challenge for most educators. In other words, Teachers needs concerted efforts to learn and understand possible ways in which a democratic classroom could be implemented. This will practically save students from struggling through understanding the concepts. This means teachers must be prepared to embrace the challenges associated with democratic classrooms, which demands a constant effort to understand the complex nature of democratic education without compromising the quality of the pedagogical process. Therefore, deducing from the philosophy of liberation, this article exclusively conceptualised emancipatory pedagogy as a tool for democratic classrooms since it focuses on students' empowerment in class settings.

In order to give a clear direction to the study, the following research question is raised to guide the study:

- i. How can emancipatory pedagogy be presented as an effective tool to implement a democratic classroom?
- ii. That is, how can the study present emancipatory pedagogy and its assumptions as a veritable tool to implement democracy in classrooms?

In order to answer the above question, the following objectives were formulated to give a clear understanding of how the study was constructed:

- i. The study conceptualises emancipatory pedagogy as a feature of democratic education.
- ii. The study also presented the assumptions of emancipatory pedagogy as cardinal points for implementing democratic education in the classroom.

This argument is located within the transformative paradigm because the intention is to transform classrooms from likely subjectivism into a fully democratised one. This will enable the teachers/instructors to understand the factors needed to inject democratic beauties into teaching and learning and encourage students to embrace the transformation through emancipatory classroom activities. This worldview is relevant for this study because it unpacked the issues of social justice and collaboration towards transforming an existing situation for the better (Mertens, 2007). That is, this paradigm is majorly tailored towards emancipating the perceived marginalised. This is inconsistent with the argument of Dube (2016) that the predominant focus of transformative paradigms is to change one status quo for the better. In the same vein, the paradigm is suitable for addressing injustices and inequalities among people because it seeks to transform the marginalised, colonised, and deprived using emancipatory mechanisms (Mertens, 1999). However, conceptual analysis was employed to make sense of the adopted concept of "emancipatory pedagogy" as a useful tool of emancipation. Conceptual analysis was adopted because it enables the researcher to think and interpret ideas based on deductive reasoning (Ogan & Ziebart, 1991). This approach entails coherent clarification of ideas, critical reasoning and their connections and the identification of theoretical implications and assumptions (Petocz & Newbery, 2010). This is adopted because it allows for critical interpretation of issues and concepts towards meaning-making. I also used thematic analysis to make a cohesive presentation of the argument. That is, issues raised in the conceptual analysis was presented in themes. According to Braun and Clark (2021), thematic analysis enables data to be arranged based on its relevance to the study's objectives.

In this study, the theoretical presentation of emancipatory pedagogy represents the data, and the assumptions were presented in themes to respond to the major research question and the objectives of the study discussed above.

### **Conceptual Presentation: Emancipatory Pedagogy**

Emancipatory education is often caught in between two perspectives. On the one hand, emancipation refers to the act of "setting free" or "liberation", which can be realised through teaching and learning (Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018; Coole, 2015). On the other hand, emancipatory pedagogy is defined by Freire (1970) as a process of dialogue that helps people question their given reality so they can

transform it through the knowledge gained from such a process. This leads to the fact that emancipatory knowledge is thus not objective or neutral but involves critical inquiry aimed at uncovering social structures, mechanisms, ideologies and practices of oppression. However, emancipatory education, in general, has been associated with Deweyan pragmatism (Johansson & Lindhult, 2008; Stroud, 2017), Marxist critical pedagogy (McArthur, 2010), postmodernism (Talbot, 2010), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), among others. While emancipatory pedagogy can be linked to many different approaches, it is characterised by its most common themes, such as social justice teaching/learning to raise awareness about power structures in society and the cognition occurring within social contexts.

Deducing from the above, one could argue that emancipatory pedagogy challenges and actively resists oppressive power structures within the classroom. This is because it builds on Freire's notion of conscientisation, in which educators help students make connections between the social world around them and the knowledge they are acquiring at school. This is a practical argument against "banking" educational practices (Rugut & Osman, 2013) towards embracing problem-posing approaches that engage students in dialogue about everyday problems that connect learning with practice. From general knowledge, when the term "emancipatory" is used in educational studies, it usually refers to the learning that has emerged from oppressed groups who have used their own learning processes to understand their situation and fight for social justice, as Freire (2021) argues, to be critically conscious means committing oneself to the struggle to change reality. On the other hand, emancipatory teaching draws on similar principles to support students in becoming critical thinkers (Blackmore, 2001). It emphasises working with students throughout their educational experiences to become active learners who take personal responsibility for what happens to them through their studies. This type of teaching process is commonly referred to as transformative, linked to critical pedagogy, which implies that students should be allowed to think critically and challenge epistemological processes.

Therefore, emancipatory pedagogy is certainly the practice that aims at emancipation, comprising any forms of teaching, learning and practising that can be seen as transformative in nature. Though these forms may not always be emancipatory in intent, they bring about emancipation for those who engage in them. The same holds for the emancipatory skills intended to help people gain more control over their lives or social situations and provide tools to get involved in emancipation projects. In this way, emancipatory skills are transformative by teaching knowledge to children, making them responsible and involving them in a task that could empower them. Therefore, teaching emancipatory skills implies giving students practical tools to deal with their everyday life situations successfully. That is, emancipatory classroom and or teaching and learning processes should be made to make students gain relevant social conditions for autonomy, self-realisation or self-determination. This also entails gaining control over one's own body and sexuality, the ability to speak one's own views, getting rid of oppressive internalised images, dealing with the pain of past experiences and depression or anxiety. Just as emancipation is not only a process but also a condition that requires ongoing work to maintain it, emancipatory pedagogy should not be seen merely as a goal but also as a method. This leaves a question on how they transform the social situations created for learners through their participation in emancipatory activities. It is expedient that teaching and learning be made emancipatory where children are involved in making decisions about what they want to learn and how they want to do so.

Deducing from the above conceptual presentation, one could argue that the following concepts are the major assumptions that constitute emancipatory pedagogy; development of critical thinking skills, personal connection with learning, and freedom for knowledge construction that enables students to challenge existing knowledge towards self-development. Hence, these assumptions are discussed below.

## **Assumptions of Emancipatory Pedagogy and Democratic Classrooms**

This section discusses the assumptions of emancipatory pedagogy and its relevance to democratic classrooms with the argument that an emancipatory practice is a practical method that could be used to implement democratic teaching and learning in classrooms. This is discussed under the following sub-headings: development of critical thinking skills as a democratic classroom, personal connection with learning and democratic classroom, and freedom for knowledge construction and democratic classroom.

### ***Development of critical thinking skills in a democratic classroom***

From the above theoretical presentation, one could argue that one of the major end products of emancipation in classrooms is to ensure that students are taught in a way to engage in cognitive development. This, in my argument, is a product of critical thinking skills. That is, an emancipatory classroom develops students' critical thinking skills. One could then ask what Critical Thinking is? Critical thinking can be defined as a reasonable reflection that is focused on deciding what to believe or do, which also entails effective communication, problem-solving, and reasoning skills (Din, 2020; Snyder & Snyder, 2008; Tomaszewski, 2022). In addition, critical thinking requires making decisions based on evidence, taking responsibility for the consequences of one's actions, and being sensitive to the needs of diverse populations (Gambrill, 2006). Based on these definitions, one can then argue that critical thinking processes are concerned with how well a person thinks rather than what one thinks, involving inquiry, analysis, understanding, interpretation, insight, judgment and decision making. This is not far from the postulation of emancipatory education, which provides self-awareness skills and assumptions about things. I also agree with the argument that critical thinking skills include: problem-solving, evaluating information, distinguishing between fact and opinion, identifying cause-effect relationships and statements of probability (Fitzgerald, 2000; Khan, 2017; Miri, David & Uri, 2007). This argument made above agrees with the

principles of democratic classrooms, which develop student's problem-solving skills, self-awareness skills, decision-making skills and capacity to apply learning from the classroom to real-life situations (Ahmad & Said, 2014; Marri, 2005). Therefore, it is evidenced that an emancipatory classroom is democratic in nature, and a democratic classroom is tailored to emancipate students as well.

Based on this, one could argue that the best way to implement democratic classrooms is to engage in transformative tendencies that could make students critical thinkers flexible in knowledge development. These fair-minded individuals can adapt their own values and assumptions as new situations arise. This will also make them have a clear understanding of themselves so they can recognise how involved they are in generating their responses to new ideas. This is expedient because critical thinkers have a deep personal conviction that inquiry is important for its own sake, guiding them to make an informed decision. This argument is also in consonance with the findings of Turabik and Gün (2016) that democratic classroom management adopted by instructors is a strong predictor of students' critical thinking disposition. On the other hand, the findings of Aslan (2018) that there is a relationship between students' critical thinking skills and their democratic dispositions in classrooms. That is, students who are critical thinkers have the highest percentage of being democratic in their ways of life. This also indicated that an emancipatory classroom is significant to a democratic classroom in a positive direction.

#### ***Development of personal connection with learning in a democratic classroom***

Deducing from the theoretical presentation above, one could see that emancipatory pedagogy preaches students personal connection with learning. Personal connection means that they are self-aware and willing to challenge the epistemology and its process, especially those that are colonial and anti-liberation of students. More so, self-aware students perceive themselves as acting in the world, reflecting on their behaviour and trying to find out who they are and how they can learn better. This personal connection could also be seen as self-monitoring, such as consciously trying to control one's own actions, self-evaluation, such as reflecting on oneself by comparing it against certain standards, and self-reaction, such as how one perceives oneself feels or thinks about herself. However, a growing body of research suggests that self-awareness has an important role in shaping our lives (Vago & David, 2012). It affects everything from how we go through life, making decisions, coping with difficulties like losing a job, having financial problems or divorce (Younas et al., 2020). It also enables students to understand their study life, why they need to study or not, what needs to be learnt and or unlearned (Nilson, 2013), among others. These are assumptions that could be linked to emancipatory pedagogy and democratic education. In a simple argument, democratic education enables students to be self-aware of themselves and their society, which is an iota of the emancipation of such students. That is, a self-aware student is emancipated from the shackles of social and structural oppression. This argument is also supported by Demetriou et al.'s (2020) conclusion that self-aware students connect easily to their learning and enhance their performance. On the other hand, a classroom that inculcates self-awareness into students could be said to be democratic and aims to build a just and democratic society (Rouf, 2012).

#### ***Freedom of knowledge construction in a democratic classroom***

Deducing from the above theoretical analysis, one could argue that emancipatory pedagogy teaches freedom among classroom stakeholders. For students to be emancipated, the process of knowledge generation must be designed in such a way to accommodate students' freedom of expression, opinions and association towards the structure, aims and the kind of knowledge that will be produced. This aligns with the recommendation of Chan et al. (2014) that freedom to get involved in the classroom process is fundamental to the buildup of a productive and transformational classroom which should be adopted. In a clear presentation, an emancipatory classroom provides freedom to the student to operate, to construct knowledge of their own, challenge and question any perceived oppression, *unpleasant* and oppressive form of knowledge. This kind of freedom is also one of the cardinal forms of a democratic classroom since democracy itself came to create freedom for people to leave the life of their own within the ambit of the law (Singer, 2013). Therefore, one can argue that classrooms where students are free to share their opinions, ideas, suggestion, objections, among others, is democratic and could be laced as democratic classrooms. This further justified that emancipatory classroom is significant to the democratic classroom and that they work hand-in-hand towards promoting a just and egalitarian society.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the above analysis and interrelationships between emancipatory pedagogy and democratic classrooms, this paper argues that emancipatory pedagogy and democratic education work hand in hand towards developing and preparing students for a just society. That is, educators within the pedagogical philosophy aim at realising a democratic classroom space where each member speaks, listens, argues, questions and engages with others about what it means to be educated in such a way as to make democracy possible. Furthermore, since emancipatory pedagogies focus on how schools can create feelings of unity rather than fragmentation, it becomes a tool for classroom democratisation that is not limited to teachers and students but focuses on the relationships between and among various groups and individuals that affect educational processes. It also concludes that emancipatory pedagogy is the best means to implement democratic classrooms. Both concepts promote critical thinking and social justice among students, develop a personal connection with learning, and create an atmosphere for freedom of knowledge construction among students. All these encourage students to participate in classroom discussions, create safe spaces for discussing multicultural issues, participate in anti-racist actions such as petitions protests, all of which are ways that students can develop themselves into citizens who encourage democratic participation and egalitarian society. Based on this, the following recommendations were made:

- i. The teachers and or instructors interested in implementing democratic education/classrooms should ensure that teaching styles and methods are tailored to promote critical thinking skills among the students. This is expedient because critical thinker students are seen as agents of democracy in their classes and daily lives. Therefore, promoting critical skills, which is a sub-set of emancipatory classrooms, is a way to encourage democratic ways of doing.
- ii. The teachers or instructors interested in implementing democratic education/classrooms should promote students' sense of personal connection with learning by developing their self-awareness towards knowing what is wrong from what is right. By doing so, they will be able to challenge, create and adjust themselves to societal needs.
- iii. The teachers and or instructors interested in implementing democratic education/classrooms should promote freedom of knowledge construction among students that enable students to challenge existing knowledge towards self-development. This will enable the students to create a better life and resist any form of social and epistemological oppression in their daily lives.

## Acknowledgement

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, B.I.O.; Methodology, B.I.O.; Data Collection, B.I.O.; Formal Analysis, B.I.O.; Writing—Original Draft Preparation, B.I.O.; Writing—Review And Editing, B.I.O.; Author has read and agreed to the published the final version of the manuscript.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical review and approval were waived for this study, due to that the research does not deal with vulnerable groups or sensitive issues.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest with 3<sup>rd</sup> parties

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