

Transformational Education in Brazil

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Abstract

The Brazilian educational system has always been considered extremely complex, both from the political and financial aspects, as well as from the social-democratic aspect. Overcoming structural difficulties like this leads us to remember the transformational format, proposed by Mezirow and subsequently studied by many other authors. The relationship between this format and the Brazilian educational system can be considered a little difficult to understand, but when related to the little aspects that make transformational education what it is, it creates a self-desire that is born from the inner psychological acknowledgment of the need to act, which can promote a powerful impact in the lives of our students.

Keywords: Transformational education, Brazilian education system, Freire, Habermas, School, Society

Transformational Education in Brazil

The Brazilian educational system has always been very complex and difficult to amend due to the many public policy flaws of the past. According to Vaconcelos and Campos (2004), the educational reforms implemented by the Brazilian government in the 90s were characterized by such flaws in the system as a lack of efficiency and not ensuring universal access to education. The vision of education developed over the subsequent years in adherence to these policies continued to deny many young people the benefits of a system that could transform their lives.

The issue that arises here is, how the learning process can have the maximum impact on the lives of students. Although the debate on different types of education systems is ongoing, in recent years, we have been able to extend our understanding of how education changes the manner in which we interpret the world (Laros et al., 2017). This resulted in the creation of several theories that introduced new possibilities for human development. Of them, the most recent and promising one seems to be transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978). This theory is focused on adult learners. Many other authors have devoted much time to research and analysis of this theory and improved upon its concepts, increasing its practicality in the educational environment. This study attempts to highlight the strongest contributions of this theory in the field of education as a foundation for the best proposals regarding the Brazilian education system.

Although the transformative learning theory is aimed at adult education, several of its concepts can be applied to meet the various needs of basic education in a way that can deeply impact the final result of how the learning process occurs at school. It should be noted that many authors who have discussed transformative learning (Laros et al., 2017; Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Hoggan, 2016; Illeris, 2018) agree that the links between experience and didactics are intimately related at all stages of the individual's education. Thus, a discussion about its possibilities is more than necessary. By analyzing its implementation from a socio-educational perspective, this study will make recommendations for implementing transformative learning, which could result in the reduction of the socio-educational gap in the country.

The Brazilian Education System and its Problems

The Brazilian education system is defined by two main legislatures: The Law of Directives and Bases of Education—or Law No. 9,394 of 1996, also known as LDB—and the general guidelines of the Federal Constitution of 1988, Chapter III of which determines that basic education is a right of all citizens (Campioni, 2018). These guidelines authorize government spheres to conduct and maintain educational programs designed based on the Common National Curriculum Base or *Base Nacional Comum Curricular* (BNCC). The BNCC is envisaged in the LDB as a set of guidelines for students to achieve educational goals (De Melo, 2016). It seeks to ensure that all students have access to basic and indispensable knowledge, regardless of their background, origin, or the condition of their educational environment. Mainly, it is up to the union, states, federal districts, and municipalities to plan, finance, maintain, and execute teaching policies as defined in the BNCC, the LDB, and the constitutional guidelines.

Let's highlight the views of some of the leading Brazilian educators on education:

- Anísio Teixeira, opines “The school is a space for the exercise of democracy and is the main republican institution, whose function is to guarantee the autonomous and free-thinking of students to prepare them to build the desired society.” (Teixeira, 1996).
- Darcy Ribeiro is a defender of the comprehensive education program, who mainly supported the integration of school and family.
- Paulo Freire believes that cultural history should be integrated with pedagogical teaching and that adult students tend to learn more from their history and experience.
- Maria Nilde Mascellani believes in the power of a student's personal decisions to try different classes and choose their destiny through trial-and-error.

All these educators have emphasized the need for a renewed focus on education and investment in this sector. They have made it clear that this is the minimum expected of any country anticipating the development of its people. It is also in accordance with the Brazilian constitution which stipulates very clearly that education is the state's obligation (Brazil Gov., 2010). However, there are several problems that inhibit the educational development of Brazil: the lack of efficient systems and improvement, training and continuing education of teachers; a curriculum that is uninteresting and disconnected from reality; insufficient public investments to meet educational needs; excessive use of outdated teaching methods (questionnaires, copies of the lessons on the blackboard, theoretical classes without student participation etc.). These problems are symptomatic of a neglected education system that is always in need of effective administrative, financial, and social policies.

Understanding Transformative Learning and its Effects on People's Lives

There are some moments in life when we are inspired to give our lives a new meaning. Such moments make us see reality from a new perspective and radically change our mentalities. They enable us to criticize long-standing beliefs and conventions. These are transformative experiences that awaken our minds, stir up powerful emotions, and leave lasting impressions.

Many of these events transform our thoughts, perspectives, attitudes, and behavioral patterns. This evolution is of great importance to the theory of transformative learning which explains how adults learn through these transformative moments. The theory is connected to the belief that learning occurs when new meaning is attributed to previous experience or an old experience is reinterpreted and seen from a new perspective. These new interpretations of old experiences and meanings, and the behavior they transform, are means of learning and understanding. They are possible thanks to the changes in the frames of reference that transform the meaning of the accumulated experiences of an individual (Mezirow, 1990).

Based on the transformative theory, it is indeed possible to create moments of inspiration for students. The learning advocated in this theory is not isolated; instead, it is closely related to the individual's perception of truly transformative experiences. It is connected to the very human essence. It is important to note that transformative learning is not independent of content or curriculum (Kelly,

2009). A student with a transformational vision does not simply accept knowledge, but rather engages in debates and discussions that lead to an ideal cycle of knowledge construction.

Through her many contributions, Kathleen P. King (2019) reinforces the idea that transformative learning “describes how people react when they encounter difficult points and what they learn from them.” Similarly, Illeris (2014) reflects on how the criticisms directed at his first contributions led Mezirow to emphasize that an individual’s emotional and social conditions are also important in their education. It reinforces the importance of each person’s unique identity in the learning process. Therefore, the impacts of critical mentality, reaction, and the socio-emotional capacity of the individual are important in the process of transformative learning. This reinforces the idea that the individual becomes the real protagonist of the knowledge to be built through this process. We can observe that this viewpoint places educational practice as the main determining factor in people’s choices and lives.

How Transformational Education Was Created

When he began developing the transformative learning theory, Mezirow credited Paulo Freire and Jürgen Habermas for his inspiration (Fleming, 2018). Through Freire’s works, we can observe the effects of transformative learning on both educators and students. A study at the University of Recife showed that 45 days of transformative education enabled cane cutters to read and write (Kirylo, 2011). Transformative learning is imparted in the following stages:

- Research stage: Joint search by the teacher and student for the most significant words and themes in the student's life, from the student’s known vocabulary and the community where they live.
- Thematization stage: The moment of becoming aware of the world through the analysis of the social meanings of themes and words.
- Questioning stage: The stage in which the teacher challenges and inspires the student to overcome a general and uncritical view of the world for conscious observation.

Freire argued that the success of this method was directly related to the cultural reality of the students (Freire, 1971). These arguments are also related to their personal experiences, which theoretically reinforces that transformative learning promotes the cognitive development of the individual with the help of his own reality. Jürgen Habermas (1984) argued:

The actions of the agents involved are coordinated, not through successful egocentric calculations but through acts of reaching understanding. In communicative action, the participants are not primarily oriented towards their success, they will seek their individual goals respecting the condition that they can harmonize their action plans based on a common definition of the situation. In this way, the negotiation of the situation definition is an essential element of the interpretative complement required by the communicative action. (p. 285–286)

Therefore, that it is important to valorize the communication between environment/content and the process of self-knowledge/construction. However, it should arise from the inspiration of the students themselves.

Through the analysis of these two educators’ works, we can understand how to base this theory in the Brazilian context. There is clearly a need to inject real meaning into educational values, actions, and structures to enable the students to take control of their learning process (Illeris, 2018). Combined with a transformative orientation, it can lead to easy access to properly systematized education. It is important to note, therefore, that the transformative theory created from the views of Freire and Habermas has the potential to bring an educational evolution in the country. It also allows us to understand that social scientific theories are not products of single optics and that we do not necessarily need to have absolute focus on the suggested structures. A specific example of this is how, on some occasions, Mezirow applied the observations of the potential influence of the social implications to education as a whole.

Transformative Learning to Potentialize Social Participation through Intensive Real-Life Experience and School Integration

Based on the reflections of the famous authors presented here, we propose to use the theory of educational learning to potentialize Brazilian schools and social participation by creating a relationship between content and real-life experiences. Designing and delivering a learning process that adheres to the reality that people live in would be the best way to attract their attention to the content and will, therefore, be the best way to build the learning process (Freire, 1971). This format could overcome the aridity of sequential learning from textbooks and contribute to the development of interdisciplinary proposals. It involves strategically selected activities, values, knowledge, students' intellectual advancement and enables the evolution of students' concepts (Gonzalez, 1999).

An effective and efficient way to start would be to use the desire of different companies to demonstrate the use of content. Every company likes to have its image linked to actions that can enhance their participation in social conversations and eventually lead to profit. If they do not like such linking, it may be because they are doing their business incorrectly. However, it falls to the educators to notice students' interests, understand where they come from, and what is important to them at that moment. It becomes the teachers' job to connect the content to reality. To gain an understanding of a student's reality, it is also important to avoid questionnaires or any other indirect means of information gathering. An empathetic conversation about family and life is the simplest way to get honest answers.

Integration of School and Society

Social participation in the school valorizes the knowledge and affective assimilation of parents and students. Both features are extremely important in times of a financial (which is a reality in public schools) or moral crisis (the current situation in Brazil) (Cowan, 2016). This connection establishes values and expectations on both sides that can be promising for the student's learning life.

In world where technology prevails, Zoom, Skype, and other such applications make meeting across great distances possible. If such contact is not possible, then personal visits become necessary. It is also important to note the possibility of the constant social demonstration of what the school has been developing. For students, this is very important for the formation of social bonds. Experimenting with real-life activities, such as socio-environmental and socio-economic ones, is of utmost importance and must be restored and implemented.

Many schools, in an attempt to reinforce the importance of certain content, put up demonstrations or fairs. However, not many students want to participate in these events. From the transformative point of view, this behavior must be countered through an analysis that would help in creating events of interest to the students. The success of these educational fairs can then be enhanced and consequently, the pleasure in learning will become more evident.

Conclusion

These proposals are neither innovative nor new to the Brazilian education system. Their essence is simplicity, which increases the chances for many educators and schools to succeed in their missions. It is understandable that, within a legal framework, education is a right and is guaranteed to every Brazilian. Unfortunately, this does not always transform into reality. What is proposed here, however, is a return to the transformative practices that are inherent in each educator. In many cases, this manifests itself as the feeling or perception that we have long been stuck with wrong beliefs or that we do not know what we should. This is often the trigger for digging up information or revising our mentalities and thought patterns. Not knowing or realizing that we have the wrong information is deeply disturbing for all of us.

The main transformative idea is to recognize the educators' doubts and point out to the audience what they do not know to make them curious about what is being taught. It would establish personal relevance for the students. It is important for teachers to ask themselves, "What is it about me that inspires people and can promote their learning?" The context can be personal, professional, or social and they must establish the context at the beginning of every new project or when presenting an idea to stimulate interest and reiterate it often to keep learners connected. Students, in general, are

motivated to learn when they see the results of their efforts (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). It is extremely important when teaching certain subjects, such as math or the sciences. Applying the use of numbers and theories in real-life everyday tasks can engage students' interest in these subjects.

It should also be recognized that students gradually develop their cognitive abilities. Therefore, the teachers must create opportunities for critical reflection to encourage them to re-examine their beliefs and attitudes (Cranton, 2016). When they are allowed to evaluate their feelings and thoughts, they can realize for themselves what they need to believe or what they must adjust their perception about. Thus, they will become more willing to accept and assimilate learning.

In a society dominated by professional and social injustices, educators must know how to separate their needs from their goals as human beings and create in themselves a passion for their profession. Not much is required to transform the lives of students, only a little bit of interest and goodwill. It is through their relentless desire to help students and society that educators may help students to develop their ideas and contribute to society's progress.

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