

Research Article

Paulo Freire's Educational Philosophy and Implications in the Kurdistan Region of Iraqi Education

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History	Paulo Freire was one of the most influential educational theorists of the 20th century, and his ideas have continued to shape pedagogical practices around the world. This paper explores how Freire's educational philosophy, principally his critique of the "banking concept" of education, can be applied to the current educational system in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. A survey of ten-item questionnaire was conducted with 258 university students across Kurdistan region. The findings reveal that a significant majority (94%) view their learning experience as fitting the banking model, in which students passively receive information from teachers. These results raise significant concerns regarding the effectiveness of the current system and suggest a need for reforms grounded in critical pedagogy. The paper concludes by offering practical recommendations for incorporating Freire's ideas into local educational practices, with a focus on encouraging critical thinking and student engagement.
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1. Introduction

The educational system in the Kurdistan region and Iraq requires reform (Kakamad, 2013; Pir, 2024). This system bears similarities to the 'Banking concept' of education discussed by Paulo Freire in his book '*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*'. The Kurdistan higher education system has faced difficulties in producing highly skilled and qualified human capital due to its reliance on memorization of information and its passive approach to learning (Mamand et al., 2021). Education professionals believe that Kurdistan region government must change many aspects of the system to move forward and compete globally (Ibrahim & Abdullah, 2024; Kakamad, Babakr, & Mohamedamin, 2021; Mamand et al., 2021).

Freire references this idea and other concepts such as critical pedagogy, praxis, and problem-posing in his works, particularly in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Darder, 2024; Gibson, 1999; Haymes, 2002; Rubytsa et al., 2024; Shun, 2024; Spener, 1992; Taufiqurrohman et al., 2024). Even the 'Banking concept' was used as a teaching method in Iraqi Kurdistan (Ibrahim & Abdullah, 2024; Kakamad, Babakr, & Mohamedamin, 2021). Darder (2024), in the preface of the book *The Student Guide to Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, writes: "Freire's philosophies remain to flourish through inventive readings of his works". More than fifty years after the first publication of his pioneering work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Walter Kohan (2021) reminds us that Freire's relevance is greater than ever.

1.1. Freire's Life and Career

Paulo Freire (1921–1997), a Brazilian educator and philosopher, is widely regarded as one of the most influential thinkers in the field of education in the 20th century (Rauf & Shareef, 2022). He is best known for his work on critical pedagogy and for introducing the concept of the "banking concept" of education, in which students are treated as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants in their own learning (Darder, 2024; Freire, 2000). His early experiences of poverty during the Great Depression had a lasting impact on his worldview, leading him to dedicate his life to social justice and education for the oppressed (Elias, 1993; Freire, 1995).

Freire's innovative adult literacy campaigns in Brazil enabled thousands of marginalized people to gain not only reading and writing skills but also a deeper awareness of their social reality—a process he called "conscientização" or critical consciousness (Freire, 2000; Spener, 1992). After being imprisoned and later exiled following the 1964 military coup in Brazil, he worked in Chile, the United States, and Africa, developing and applying his pedagogical philosophy in diverse sociopolitical contexts (Darder, 2024; Gibson, 1999). His writings, especially *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, have shaped educational movements across Latin America, Africa, and beyond, and continue to inform debates on equity, dialogue, and transformative learning (Freire, 2016; Haymes, 2002).

1.2. Study Objectives

Therefore, most of the educational system in Kurdistan is based on this 'banking' idea. For instance, Kakamad (2013) concluded that universities in the Kurdistan Region were unable to adequately prepare students for study in Western institutions, primarily due to differences in educational systems—particularly

the reliance on traditional learning methods in Kurdish universities (Kakamad, 2013). This brief paper delves into numerous concepts related to 'critical pedagogy' and Paulo Freire. The aim of this study is to explore how Freire's educational philosophy can be applied in the context of higher education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, focusing especially on the banking concept of education and its impact on students' learning experiences. This paper will also explore the potential implementation of these ideas within the Kurdish-Iraqi educational system. Finally, it will discuss other issues that the people of Kurdistan and the educational system are facing, along with recommendations for policy solutions. As a result, further study and research on Freire was necessary, with the aim of utilizing his ideas as a foundation for reforming the current educational system in Kurdistan.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design and Setting

This research adopted a descriptive, cross-sectional design. The study was conducted in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, targeting final-year students enrolled in English language departments across several public universities.

2.2. Questionnaire

The instrument used in this study was based on Paulo Freire's 10-item questionnaire, which is reserved from his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000). The questionnaire aims to assess educational environments to determine whether they reflect the characteristics of the "banking concept" of education. Each item is a statement describing a feature of banking-style pedagogy (e.g., "The teacher teaches, and the students are taught"), and responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The full questionnaire is presented in Table 1.

2.3. Data Collection and Inclusion Criteria

The survey was administered to 258 students who were in their fourth (final) academic year in English departments at selected universities in the region. Inclusion criteria were: first, being enrolled as a final-year undergraduate student, and second willing to voluntarily participate in the survey. The questionnaire was distributed and collected during regular class time to ensure a high response rate and minimize disruptions. Prior to participation, students were informed about the study's purpose and assured that their responses would be kept confidential.

Table 1. Banking concept Questionnaire

No.	Statements	SA	A	ND	D	SD
1	The teacher teaches, and the students are taught					
2	The teacher knows everything, and the students know nothing					
3	The teacher thinks, and the students are thought about					
4	The teacher talks, and the students listen-meekly					
5	The teacher disciplines, and the students are disciplined					
6	The teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply					
7	The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher					
8	The teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it					
9	The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students					
10	The teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects					

SA- Strongly Agree; A= Agree; ND= Neither Agree nor Disagree, D= Disagree and SD Strongly Disagree.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Questionnaire had been used in this study and all participants provided informed verbal consent before completing the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequences. No personal identifiers were collected, ensuring participant anonymity and data confidentiality.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each of the 10 items on the questionnaire. Additionally, mean scores and standard deviations were computed to assess the overall trends in student perceptions regarding the prevalence of banking-style education.

3. Results

The findings of the study reveal a strong student perception that the educational system in the Kurdistan Region aligns closely with Paulo Freire's "banking concept" of education. Across all ten statements derived from Freire's frame, the majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the descriptions of banking-style teaching.

As Shown in Table 2, out of 258 respondents, approximately 48.48% strongly agreed and 45.34% agreed, on average, across all statements, indicating a dominant consensus. Specifically, statements such as “The teacher teaches, and the students are taught” and “The teacher knows everything, and the students know nothing” received mean scores above 4.4, reflecting high agreement. Statement One had the highest mean score ($M = 4.58$), while the lowest, Statement Four, still reflected a strong endorsement ($M = 3.98$).

These results suggest that students view their educational experience as passive and teacher-centered, with limited space for critical thinking, dialogue, or student agency (core concerns of Freire’s critique). The consistency in responses across all ten items further supports the conclusion that the “banking” model remains the dominant pedagogical approach in the region’s higher education system.

Table 2. Percentage, mean, and standard deviations for banking concept of education statements:

Statements	SA	A	ND	D	SD	Mean	Standard Deviation
Statement One	180 69%	62 24%	8 3.1%	4 1.6%	4 1.6%	4.58	.76
Statement Two	82 31.8%	162 62.8%	5 1.9%	6 2.3%	3 1.2%	4.21	.69
Statement Three	123 47.7%	121 46.9%	6 2.3%	4 1.6%	4 1.6%	4.37	.74
Statement Four	41 15.9%	184 71.3%	26 10.1%	3 1.2%	4 1.6%	3.98	.66
Statement Five	131 50.8%	115 44.6%	5 1.9%	3 1.2%	4 1.6%	4.41	.73
Statement Six	143 55.4%	102 39.5%	5 1.9%	3 1.2%	5 1.9%	4.45	.76
Statement Seven	143 55.4%	102 39.5%	4 1.6%	4 1.6%	5 1.9%	4.44	.77
Statement Eight	142 55%	102 39.5%	5 1.9%	5 1.9%	4 1.6%	4.44	.76
Statement Nine	142 55%	101 39.1%	6 2.3%	6 2.3%	3 1.2%	4.44	.75
Statement Ten	124 48.1%	119 46.1%	7 2.7%	5 1.9%	3 1.2%	4.37	0.74
Total	1251 48.48%	1170 45.34%	77 2.98%	43 1.66	39 1.511	43.76	6.46

SA- Strongly Agree; A= Agree; ND= Neither Agree nor Disagree, D= Disagree and SD Strongly Disagree.

4. Discussion

4.1. Freire's Intellectual Life

Today, Paulo Freire is considered by many educators and curriculum developers to be one of the most critical educational thinkers of all time. Most universities across the world utilize his ideas and 'critical pedagogy' (Freire, 2016; Haymes, 2002; Rauf & Shareef 2022; Rubyutsa et al, 2024; Shun, 2024; Taufiqur-rohman et al., 2024). In his 'Letter to Paulo Freire', Professor Balduino A. Andreola writes, 'Our children's and our students' education becomes a greater and greater challenge in light of the growing magnitude of the problems the modern world presents.' You bring no recipes, Paulo, and that was never the meaning of your work. Your pedagogical letters, however, do offer valuable contributions to all of us—fathers, mothers, and educators of the new century and the new millennium. Thank you, Paulo." (Freire, 2016).

In *Curriculum: from Theory to Practice*, author Wesley Null calls Freire 'a formidable figure within what has become known as 'critical pedagogy' or 'critical theory' (Null, 2011). Education critic Herbert Kohl says Freire is "perhaps the most significant educator in the world during the last half century" (Freire, 2000). According to Macedo, Freire's ideas aren't as well received in the US as elsewhere. He says this is because of the radical nature of his thoughts, which are critical of the present 'positivistic and management model' practiced by so many American institutions (Freire, 2016). Many conservative commentators and critics in the United States criticize Freire's ideas for drawing too closely from Marxist ideas and theories of power. On the other hand, according to an article entitled 'The Freirean approach to Adult Literacy Education' published by the Center for Adult English Language Acquisition, Freire's methods are widely practiced in some English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in the United States, such as the Hispanic Literacy Council in Chicago, Bronx Educational Services, BASE in Los Angeles, the Adult Literacy Resources Institute in Boston, and numerous others (Spener, 1992).

Moreover, there is little doubt that Freire's ideas are still important. In 1997, Macedo reported the printing of over 1,000,000 copies of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in over 20 languages, such as Arabic, Kiswahili, Hausa, and Mandarin. Furthermore, there are Paulo Freire Institutes at such institutions of higher learning as UCLA in Los Angeles, the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, the University of Central Lancashire in the United Kingdom, the Federal University of Pernambuco in Brazil, and dozens of other locations. Shortly before Paulo Freire died, he wrote the following: "We need to say no to the neoliberal fatalism that we are witnessing at the end of this century, informed by the ethics of the market, ethics

in which a minority makes most profits against the lives of the majority. In other words, those who cannot compete die. This is perverse ethics; in fact, it lacks ethics. I steadfastly maintain my human nature. I would be the last educator in the world to reject the idea that history is deterministic. I embrace history as a possibility where we can demystify the evil in this perverse fatalism that characterizes the neoliberal discourse at the end of this century” (Freire, 2000).

4.2. Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire is most widely known for his radical education ideas called ‘critical pedagogy’ or ‘critical theory’ (Darder, 2024; Freire, 2016 Haymes, 2002; Taufiqurrohman et al., 2024). The education critic and reformer Henry Giroux describes critical pedagogy as an “educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action” (Giroux, 2010). One of the most important ideas of Freire’s is the banking concept of education. Many scholars have discussed and written about this idea. Many textbooks (Darder, 2024; Mamand et al., 2021; Rauf & Shareef, 2022; Taufiqurrohman et al., 2024), also discuss this idea.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire discusses this idea. "In the banking concept of education, those who consider themselves knowledgeable bestow knowledge upon those they consider to know nothing," he says. Projecting absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the oppression ideology, negates education and knowledge of inquiry processes. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposites; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence” (Freire, 2000). Furthermore, Freire formulated and described general characteristics of the banking concept of education and contrasted them with his proposed problem-posing education. If a school or classroom can be defined by those features, then they represent the banking concept of education (Table 1) (Freire, 2000; Freire, 2016).

Many educational critics, such as Kohn, Giroux, Aronowitz, Macedo, and others, believe that most conventional education is based on the banking method. For this paper, a survey was conducted among students at Kurdistan universities, which included questions related to Freire's survey. The results clearly showed that most of the students in this program believe that it is a banking style of education (see Table 2). Furthermore, almost all of the schools and classes in the Iraqi-Kurdish education system teach this method. There are very few programs where students can decide what types of classes to take or what kind

of information they want to learn in Kurdistan (Ibrahim & Abdullah, 2024; Mamand et al., 2021; Pir, 2024). For example, there are no electives or choices for students in the higher education curriculum. Every student must take the same classes and utilize the same curriculum. Referring to "teacher centered learning" (Vernez et al, 2016). Most students in the Kurdistan region and Iraq's educational system memorize the teacher's lectures and notes. After this process, all of the students must take a test and pass with at least 50% (Pir, 2024; Vernez et al, 2016).

4.3. Praxis or Dialogue

'Praxis' is another key concept in Freire's work. Freire says that praxis is "the action of men and women upon their world to transform it" (Freire, 2000; Rauf & Shareef, 2022). This part of Freire's idea and theory is that students need to learn by doing things and "engaging, applying, exercising, realizing, or practicing ideas." In other words, we should challenge the students to ask questions and solve problems independently or in groups (Darder, 2024; Steiner et al., 1999). The Center for Adult English Language Acquisition describes one method of teaching this type as follows: "The term 'problem-posing' often misunderstands, possibly due to the negative connotations associated with the word 'problem' and the frequent mention of problem-solving skills in education." To stimulate discussion, the Freirean approach incorporates cultural themes in the form of open-ended problems into materials such as pictures, comics, short stories, songs, and video dramas. "The teacher asks a series of open-ended questions about these materials, encouraging students to elaborate on what they see in them." (Spener, 1992). In Iraq and Kurdistan, there are not many teachers who practice this type of teaching. Consequently, many students are not comfortable asking questions of the teacher or making statements about the lessons (Ibrahim & Abdullah, 2024; Rion, Kakamad, & Fatah, 2018). According to the survey conducted, this was a big problem for students studying at universities. Many students avoid asking questions in class out of concern that the teacher might perceive them as unintelligent or disrespectful (Kakamad, 2013).

Sometimes, Freire calls this type of work 'dialogue'. These philosophical ideas are initially challenging to grasp (Shun, 2024). For example, Freire writes about dialogue in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He says, "Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Therefore, dialogue cannot occur between those seeking to name the world and those who oppose it, or between those who deny others the freedom to express themselves and those who have experienced this denial (Freire,

2000). So it is a relationship between two parts in which both subjects challenge each other as well-informed colleagues in an honest two-way communication (Spener, 1992). This implies that students must possess the ability to freely express themselves and not hesitate to share their thoughts. Students should speak freely about their world and ideas. They are not required to accept the teacher's world and their opinions as the best or true (Darder, 2024; Steiner et al., 1999). These are radical ideas. In Iraqi Kurdistan, students rarely engage in meaningful conversations with their teachers. Students never engage in arguments with their teachers.

4.4. Culture of Silence

Another important idea we will discuss is the 'culture of silence'. We understand that students don't speak because they think it won't matter. People remain silent because they don't believe they are empowered to alter or improve the situation (Darder, 2024; Steiner et al., 1999). In Iraqi Kurdistan, this idea is starting to change. When the dictator Saddam Hussein was in power, the people were afraid to speak out or make complaints. Many individuals who voiced their complaints faced death or imprisonment. Furthermore, a lack of trust among people led to silence, even within their own homes and among their family members. Since Saddam's departure, individuals engage in political discourse and voice numerous grievances against the government. However, despite the changes in the educational system, a significant number of individuals continue to remain silent and avoid speaking out (Rion, Kakamad, & Fatah, 2018; Pir, 2024). Therefore, in Iraqi Kurdistan, critical alertness in educational organizations (including the school and university systems) is mainly weak, and a culture of silence prevails (Ibrahim & Abdullah, 2024). In this system, individuals refrain from voicing their opinions in the classroom. According to Freire's ideas, teachers should encourage students to participate in these types of dialogues and discussions in the classroom (Freire, 2000).

4.5. No-Child-Left Behind Program

One of the most significant educational debates in the United States, with implications for Kurdistan, revolves around the No Child Left Behind Program and its critics. It is crucial for educators in Kurdistan to be aware of this debate, as the entire educational system in Kurdistan relies heavily on testing. Kurdistan, Iraq, constantly tests students, requiring them to memorize nearly every lesson. At every educational level, students undergo tests that hold significant importance for their future (Vernez et al, 2016). In other words, these tests will determine which programs the student will pursue in the future. For example, many of the critics of

Testing and No Child Left Behind talk about Paulo Freire's ideas, like Henry A. Giroux (Giroux, 2010).

Giroux writes in one article "that the major issue now driving schooling is how to teach to the test." He says that many classrooms in America are "dead zones" where there is no critical thinking, self-reflection, or any other types of real learning going on (Giroux, 2010). In his article entitled "Rethinking Education as the Practice of Freedom: Paulo Freire and the Promise of Critical Pedagogy," he quotes the education critic Stanley Aronowitz, who writes: "Few of even the so-called educators ask the question: What matters beyond reading, writing, and numeracy that are presumably taught in the elementary and secondary grades? The old question of what a kid needs to become an informed 'citizen' capable of participating in making the large and small public decisions that affect the larger world as well as everyday life receives honorable mention but not serious consideration. These unasked questions are symptoms of a new regime of educational expectations that privileges job readiness above all other educational values." (Giroux, 2010).

According to Aronowitz, Freire did not think that education was only for teaching students how to get jobs or careers but instead a way to learn to live in the world and live a "self-managed life" (Giroux, 2010). Kurdistan's educational system primarily focuses on securing employment for students in the economy or society. The educational system in Kurdistan does not impart life skills in the global economy and world, nor does it adequately prepare students to compete with new companies entering the region from the Western world (Ibrahim & Abdullah, 2024).

Despite the government's efforts to send many students to Western countries, such as the United States and England, the majority of classroom education in Kurdistan still focuses on jobs or "careers" for the future, leaving many of these students ill-prepared to pursue higher education in the West (Kakamad, 2013; Mamand et al., 2021). Giroux says that Freire rejected these types of ideas. He argues that Freire opposed the notion that education should solely cater to the demands of the economy or market', instead emphasizing the importance of challenging students with critical thinking, promoting freedom, and instilling social responsibility. Furthermore, both Giroux and Aronowitz state that Freire believed that education should also be about teaching students how to create a socially justice world. (Giroux, 2010). Even though most young Kurdish students are very interested in politics and our country's future, the educational system does not participate in this dialogue. In the Kurdish system, there is no debate in the classroom about things like politics, government, and reforming the system. These types of discussions take place mostly outside of the classroom.

Another prominent critic of the American education system is Alfie Kohn. In his book 'The Schools Our Children Deserve,' he writes about the banking concept and talks about Paulo Freire. Kohn says that throughout history, many educators have critiqued the system. He quotes John Dewey, who called this type of system a "static, cold storage ideal of knowledge." Kohn calls the present system a "jug and mug" model. He clarifies that this implies the transfer of information or knowledge from the large container to the smaller ones (Kohn, 1999). Many educators and students may find this information entirely new. They stated that they had never thought about the potential negative effects of testing students. This is important because in Kurdistan-Iraq, the government is focusing a lot of new attention on higher standards, test scores, and copying Western models of administration (Vernez et al, 2016). Kohn's book also discusses Taylorism and John Dewey's ideas from the early 20th century. According to Kohn, the No Child Left Behind, or testing model, bears a striking resemblance to the practices implemented in America during the inception of the state-controlled educational system. Kohn asserts that these methods were ineffective both then and now. In his book, he quotes from a saying of John Dewey about this problem in education: "What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worthwhile, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur" (Kohn, 1999).

Scholars believe that these are some of the key concepts for education reform. Furthermore, these concepts offer a fresh perspective on how students learn and how to improve the quality of education. However, the banking concept of education poses a significant problem in Iraqi Kurdistan, and we anticipate that changing this will be a challenging task. Ultimately, it's crucial to employ several of these concepts to equip students for university studies in western nations, as well as to enhance their readiness for the globalizing world. Many scholars and citizens acknowledge Kurdistan's rapid changes and the need for new ideas to facilitate them.

4.6. Limitations and Strengths

The study is limited by its focus on final-year English department students, which may not reflect the wider student population. The use of a self-reported form could introduce response bias, and the instrument, while conceptually based on Freire's work, lacks local validation. Additionally, the absence of qualitative data limits deeper exploration of student perspectives. Despite these limitations, the study has several

strengths; this is one of the few studies applying Freire's philosophy to higher education in the Kurdistan Region. The use of his original framework ensures theoretical relevance, and the relatively large sample ($n = 258$) supports the reliability of the findings. The study offers timely, context-based insights into needed educational reform.

4.7. Policy Recommendations

The results of this study show that 94% of students believe their classes reflect a “banking” style of education, confirming Freire's critique. Further research is needed to explore how the pedagogical foundations of the Iraqi education system can shift from a banking model toward a more student-centered approach that fosters critical thinking (Kakamad, 2013). These findings underline the urgent need for reform. Based on this, the following policy recommendations are suggested:

- Implement pilot programs of problem-posing education: Since most students report passively receiving knowledge, small-scale pilot programs should be introduced in universities and high schools to create interactive, student-centered learning environments.
- Revise the national curriculum to reduce banking-style teaching: The survey results reflect that students have no control over class content. Therefore, curriculum revision should allow space for elective subjects, open discussion, and critical thinking.
- Establish research centers focused on critical pedagogy: To support long-term change, universities should create centers for studying Freirean concepts, academic writing, and research methods—areas where students showed weakness, as reflected in their current learning structure.
- Develop professional training programs for teachers: Teachers should receive training on Freire's concepts such as praxis, dialogue, and critical pedagogy, to shift from authoritarian teaching to collaborative learning environments.
- Integrate Freirean philosophy into higher education policies: University policies should promote student-led discussions, participatory classrooms, and teacher roles as facilitators, not just content deliverers—responding directly to the imbalance noted in the survey findings.

These recommendations aim to move away from memorization and standardization and toward a more inclusive and transformative educational model that prepares students for both local and global challenges.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the relevance of Paulo Freire's educational philosophy to the higher education system in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The results showed that 94% of students perceived their classrooms as fitting Freire's "banking concept" of education, indicating a widespread pattern of passive, teacher-centered learning. This finding aligns with the literature and supports the need for structural and pedagogical reforms.

Based on these results, we proposed targeted recommendations to revise curriculum content, promote problem-posing education, improve teacher training, and encourage participatory learning environments. These strategies respond directly to the dominant issues identified in the survey and are grounded in Freirean principles. Further dialogue and collaboration among students, educators, and policymakers will be essential to initiating meaningful educational reform in the region.

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