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Public Policy, Education, and Territory: Student Perspectives in the Humanities and Social Sciences (English Version)

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Critical and rebellious pedagogies: experiences in formal and informal education for the development of community-focused educational policies in Mexico

Pedagogías críticas e insumisas: experiencias en educación formal y no formal para la construcción de políticas educativas con enfoque comunitario en México

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research was to analyze the manifestations of Critical Pedagogies in formal and non-formal educational institutions in rural, indigenous, and urban contexts in the state of Puebla, with the aim of identifying educational experiences that contribute elements for the design of community-focused educational policies. To this end, an exploratory-descriptive qualitative approach was adopted, using a multiple case study design and intentional sampling technique, which allowed for the selection of institutions rich in information. The cases studied were the Paulo Freire School (Huehuetla), the Leandro Valle Official Primary School (San Nicolás de los Ranchos), and the Francisco Peláez Ethnobotanical Garden (Cholula). Data collection included focus groups and semi-structured interviews validated by expert judgment, whose records were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The results show that Critical Pedagogies are expressed differently in each institution, according to their community ties and their autonomy from official educational policy. Compared to the other cases, the Paulo Freire School is a paradigmatic reference point, as it articulates community-based and emancipatory educational practices such as backyard gardens, student cooperatives, and solidarity-based enterprises, framed within an eco-pedagogical model based on the Totonac worldview. Overall, the findings show that the implementation of critical pedagogies does not depend exclusively on the type of institution, but on the strength of its community ties, democratic participation, and the ability to generate localized and transformative educational projects.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogies; Rebellious Pedagogies; Educational Policies.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta investigación fue analizar las manifestaciones de las *Pedagogías Críticas* en instituciones de educación formal y no formal en contextos rurales, indígenas y urbanos del estado de Puebla, con la finalidad de identificar experiencias educativas que aporten elementos para el diseño de políticas educativas con enfoque comunitario. Para ello se adoptó un enfoque cualitativo de tipo exploratorio-descriptivo, empleando un diseño de estudio de casos múltiples y la técnica de muestreo intencional, que permitió seleccionar instituciones ricas en información. Los casos estudiados fueron el Colegio Paulo Freire (Huehuetla), la Escuela Primaria Oficial Leandro Valle (San Nicolás de los Ranchos) y el Jardín Etnobotánico Francisco Peláez (Cholula). La recolección de datos incluyó grupos focales y entrevistas semiestructuradas validadas por juicio de expertos, cuyos registros fueron analizados mediante análisis de contenido temático. Los resultados muestran que las *Pedagogías Críticas* se expresan de manera diferenciada en cada

institución, de acuerdo con su vínculo comunitario y su autonomía frente a la política educativa oficial. En comparación con los otros casos, el Colegio Paulo Freire constituye un referente paradigmático, pues articula prácticas educativas comunitarias y emancipadoras como huertos de traspatio, cooperativas estudiantiles y emprendimientos solidarios, enmarcados en un modelo ecopedagógico basado en la cosmovisión totonaca. En conjunto, los hallazgos evidencian que la concreción de las *Pedagogías Críticas* no depende exclusivamente del tipo de institución, sino de la fuerza de su anclaje comunitario, la participación democrática y la capacidad de generar proyectos educativos situados y transformadores.

Palabras clave: Pedagogías Críticas; Pedagogías Insumisas; Políticas Educativas.

INTRODUCTION

In Mexico, it is possible to observe the intertwining of economic and educational development under neoliberal policies since the formalization of the Free Trade Agreement in 1994 and the creation of a “*Policy for Educational Modernization*” under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who understood education as a lever for transformation to develop productive, liberating, and efficient capacities through science and technology (Bello, 2007).

Since that time, a series of approaches from abroad have been imposed on our country, suggesting that education is key to acquiring and humanizing new forms of production and improving the “*well-being*” of the population, placing special emphasis or attention on the needs of urban areas but excluding rural and indigenous contexts from the processes of public and educational policy-making (Tanck, 2010).

Although the acceptance of the Earth Charter and the Sustainable Development Goals after 2000 has been fundamental in highlighting all these structural problems and complexities faced by education systems internationally as a result of neoliberalism—especially in rural and indigenous areas—there have been few achievements in curbing excessive commodification and the exclusion of other forms of knowledge, practices, and wisdom that are necessary to achieve autonomy and recognition of heterogeneity in educational contexts (Noceda, 2025a). In recent years, the legitimization of educational models focused on instruction, certification, or specialization in the service of economic power has become increasingly noticeable (Valdés & Reyes, 2023).

We are facing an era in which the subordination of educational systems and models to the interests of capital or economic power is not sustainable for society, not only because it exacerbates phenomena that deteriorate or break the dynamics of individuals with their environment and community but also because the separation between educational guidelines and local needs seems to be deepening, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion in which endogenous development and community autonomy are hindered (Noceda et al., 2025). For Viniegra (2023), this subordination and degradation of educational systems can be observed globally from the anthropocentric logic that promotes individualism, reductionist and exclusionary specialization, passivity in the face of abuses of power, competitiveness, and the defense of a consumer society.

Similarly, educational policies support the idea that education is a form of investment that increases the scope of possibilities and human well-being (Schultz, 1959). However, little can be done to fully achieve this desired well-being in the face of a market macrosystem in which the system itself, together with its teachers, are victims of a global apparatus that disregards or

minimizes the social relevance of education. In addition, there is a widespread lack of interest in personalizing the teaching and learning process or providing comprehensive care for students from a biocentric perspective where life is at the center of all educational dynamics (Noceda, 2025b).

In this sense, it is necessary to highlight the gap between official educational policies and the alternative pedagogical realities that are emerging from multiple territories, especially in rural and indigenous contexts, to counteract the onslaught nature of this macromarket system. *Critical, Alternative, or Rebellious Pedagogies* (Medina, 2015)—emanating from Freire’s *Sociocriticism* (1970) or Santos’ *Epistemologies of the South* (2011)—seek to shape a pedagogical style of action that is different from that used in traditional education—also called conventional, official, and compulsory, which is characterized by formalism, authoritarianism, memorization, and repetition. This style reflects a markedly competitive and individualistic tendency that instills passivity and conformity in those who “learn” in the school environment (Alirio et al., 2016).

That said, this paper analyzes specific pedagogical experiences in three formal and nonformal educational institutions in the state of Puebla, which represent an example of how educational innovation depends not only on the availability of or access to technological infrastructure but also on the community fabric, institutional support, and teacher training and education to implement the proposals that the NEM has opened the door to within *Pedagogías Otras*.¹ The institutions addressed in this paper are part of an ongoing research project that seeks to contribute learning and experiences for the development of sociocritical models in rural and indigenous environments. The participating educational projects were the Paulo Freire School, located in the municipality of Huehuetla; the Leandro Valle Official Primary School, located in the municipality of San Nicolás de los Ranchos; and the Francisco Peláez Ethnobotanical Garden, located in the municipality of Cholula.

Within these institutions, beyond resisting the pressures of the hegemonic-dominant educational model, alternative ways of teaching, learning, and inhabiting the school are being constructed. Their experiences invite us to consider the collective knowledge, intergenerational links, ecological practices, and horizontal relationships that manifest themselves in similar educational spaces, questioning the technocratic, standardized, and vertical logic of traditional educational policy.

Critical and Rebellious Pedagogies

Critical and Rebellious Pedagogies break with the conventional style of “banking education” that Freire (1969) considered necessary to address the cognitive characteristics and sociocultural context in which educational practice developed to create a fertile space for inclusion with independence and cognitive autonomy. From Freire’s perspective (1969, 1970b, 1996b, 1997b), talking about *critical pedagogies* refers to the search for an education of emancipation, which is based on the practice of transformative action that rejects the idea of neutrality, cognitive dependence, homogeneity, and passivity.

This allows us to understand that his proposals considered education as a means of change or a means of building citizenship to adapt and transform reality. The latter has made *Other Pedagogies* an intellectual movement with social and political bases concerned with constituting

¹ See *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), *Decolonial Pedagogy* (Méndez, 2021) or *Critical Intercultural Pedagogy* (Oses et al., 2022; Walsh, 2005), *Pedagogy of Tenderness* (Bermello et al., 2023), and *Pedagogy of Dialog and Hope* (Vilchez, 2021), among others.

their own identity. Proof of this is that, through their work, they recover ideas and theories that draw on Latin American Marxism, dependency theory, liberation theory, popular communication, and the coloniality of knowledge, launching a solid discourse against the scientific episteme that still persists in classrooms as part of capitalism's control over society (Mejía, 2011).

For Cabaluz-Ducasse (2016), *Critical Pedagogies* present a series of structural elements that give them unity in terms of central themes, among which are 1) the ethical, political, and ideological nature of education and the relevance of political-pedagogical praxis for radical social transformation; 2) the identification of alienating and dehumanizing factors in culture, and therefore education understood as a process of raising awareness; and 3) dialogical praxis as a genuine—rather than instrumental or formal—recognition of the subalternized popular knowledge of the “Other” as “Other.” However, implementing the different proposals of *critical pedagogies* in education systems involves a profound curricular change toward liberating axes of tradition that allow for a new teaching approach, where students are part of learning, creativity, opinion, and academic intellectual development (López, 2019).

In this curricular change, the ethical mediator—the teacher—must generate social movements that disrupt the structures established by hegemonic systems and reinvent lifestyles, as well as forms of organization and participation of individuals. The dominant ideological context embedded in the processes of receiving messages from the formal and informal educational world must also be analyzed to reconnect academia with collective difficulties and projects (Ramírez, 2008).

In this way, *critical pedagogies* can be seen as expressions of pedagogical sovereignty where there are memories in motion that construct educational options for social subjects that promote other types of societies. This is one of the reasons why, within various contexts, these pedagogies resist, propose, and confront the onslaught nature of traditional education from different regions and educational levels, especially in indigenous and rural communities in Mexico within entities such as Oaxaca, Chiapas, Yucatán, and Puebla. This has been observable since the signing of the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture in 1996, but even more so now, following the implementation of the New Mexican School (NEM) as the official educational model.

Currently, the proposals of Freire (1969, 1970, 1992, 1996, 1997) and Santos (2009) have become fundamental to the construction of alternative educational and productive models that are anchored in the territory and capable of rethinking the economic system from within schools. Their critical reasoning, particularly from the *Global South*, offers a different conception of the educational process and a reinterpretation of teaching work, which aims to provide students with scientific, humanistic, technical, and community knowledge with the main objective of improving the quality of collective life rather than individual life (Noceda et al., 2025).

Education based on *critical pedagogies* is not conceived as an individualistic instrument but as a training process that integrates skills and knowledge closely linked to the community, responding to the specific social, economic, and ecological needs of local contexts. In short, this reveals that in those educational spaces or contexts where these pedagogies are applied, NEM is not something new, as they have been committed for decades to social transformation and the comprehensive reconnection of students with their community, culture, and territory.

In institutions such as those selected for this study, we can observe well-established teaching

strategies based on discovery learning, situated learning, and action research learning, as well as problem-based learning and cooperative learning. Their educational models are deeply rooted in the defense of community identity and the promotion of local production and therefore also aspire to the reproduction of community life and the strengthening of social ties.

Methodological aspects: alternative experiences in formal and nonformal education

This work is part of a qualitative exploratory-descriptive approach whose main purpose is to analyze the manifestations of *critical pedagogies* in formal and nonformal educational institutions in rural, indigenous, and urban contexts in the state of Puebla. Similarly, a multiple case study design was chosen, which is a qualitative research methodology in which several cases are selected and investigated not at random but intentionally to analyze a phenomenon in depth and look for patterns (Yacuzzi, 2005). By applying an intentional sampling technique to deliberately select cases on the basis of characteristics, criteria, or qualities that were “rich in information” for the work (Bisht, 2024), three inclusion criteria were defined:

- A. Territorial diversity (rural, semiurban, and indigenous).
- B. Institutional diversity (basic education, upper secondary education, and nonformal education).
- C. Community involvement (degree of integration of the school with community life).

On the basis of these criteria, three institutions were selected: the Paulo Freire School in the municipality of Huehuetla (indigenous community high school), the Leandro Valle Official Primary School in the municipality of San Nicolás de los Ranchos, and the Francisco Peláez Ethnobotanical Garden in the municipality of San Andrés Cholula. Field research was subsequently conducted, followed by focus groups with the aim of collecting data on their educational models and experiences with *critical pedagogies*, in which semistructured interviews (Escobar & Bonilla, 2017) validated by expert judgment (Escobar & Cuervo, 2008) were recorded and transcribed to perform thematic content analysis to identify, organize, and describe patterns of meaning (themes) emerging in the participants’ narratives. The participants in each of the focus groups were administrators, coordinators, and full-time teachers, as they were key informants who, owing to their experiences, ability to empathize, and relationships with the topic, could sponsor the research, becoming an important source of information while also opening up access to other people and new scenarios (Robledo, 2009).

Main findings. Similarities and contrasts

Analysis of the information gathered in the focus groups at the three selected institutions revealed that *critical pedagogies* are expressed in different ways, depending on each institution’s relationship with its community and the degree of knowledge or appropriation of the proposals derived from *sociocriticism* in its educational work.

In the case of the Paulo Freire School (CPF), participants in the focus group mentioned the existence of a comprehensive appropriation of the principles of *critical pedagogies*, particularly in relation to *the dialog of knowledge, community participation, education for sustainability, socioenvironmental justice, and transformative praxis*. Their community eco-pedagogical model, built collectively and on the basis of the theoretical foundations of the ideas of Freire (1970) and Gadotti (2003), closely links the Totonac worldview with education for the Earth, in which education is conceived as a collective process oriented toward a harmonious relationship with nature, the defense of cultural identity, and the construction of productive community projects with a sustainable approach.

The discussion revealed educational practices that transcended traditional school logic and were integrated into everyday life through the mention of activities such as backyard gardens, animal husbandry, student cooperatives, and the management of solidarity-based enterprises. According to the participants' narratives, these experiences do not respond to a dynamic of vertical instruction but rather to an exercise in autonomy and community organization, where students actively participate in decision-making. In addition, the CPF model questions the hegemonic notion of education as simply the formation of "human capital" by privileging the production of situated and socially relevant knowledge.

In the focus group with the Leandro Valle Official Primary School, the conversation reflected a partial and ongoing appropriation of the principles of *critical pedagogies*, since the institution is governed by the guidelines of official educational policy or the NEM, but there are also pedagogical initiatives that seek to articulate the school with the community. Among these, community projects related to the care of the school grounds and food programs involving the participation of students and families stand out. In this context, the focus group showed a genuine interest in the role of the teaching staff in strengthening their training in alternative pedagogies and developing more participatory practices. However, experiences are limited and lack the systematization that would allow them to be consolidated as part of a comprehensive critical model similar to that of the Paulo Freire School. Nevertheless, the link between school work, the community, and social justice offers a starting point for moving toward more emancipatory pedagogical practices.

For its part, the discussion with the coordination of the Francisco Peláez Ethnobotanical Garden provided a significant example of how a nonformal space can consistently implement the principles of *critical pedagogies*. In this case, the *Pedagogy of the Earth* emerged in various activities, as community and intergenerational workshops are organized, as well as a course called "*Educating through the Senses*," which promotes deep reflection on the environmental, cultural, and social issues of the territory. This institution promotes dialogic learning, the active participation of various social actors, and the revaluation of ancestral knowledge, integrating science, art, and tradition into the same pedagogical horizon. Although its initial purpose is not to build a formal school model, the practices observed confirm that the garden functions as an educational laboratory that questions the verticality of knowledge and favors the collective construction of social alternatives.

Comparatively, the Paulo Freire School and the Ethnobotanical Garden present a more solid and diverse integration of the principles of *critical Pedagogies* due to their strong community roots and institutional autonomy. In contrast, the Leandro Valle Primary School, which is subject to a more rigid official curriculum, shows incipient development, although with the potential for strengthening, as it manages to systematize its experiences. Overall, the results show that the implementation of *critical pedagogy* does not depend exclusively on the type of institution (formal or nonformal), but rather on the relationship it establishes with its community and the degree of autonomy it has to articulate educational projects with emancipatory horizons.

Reflections on the Paulo Freire School. Contributions to the design of community-based educational policies

Among the selected cases, the Paulo freire school (CPF) is a paradigmatic example of how *critical pedagogies* can be implemented in a localized, community-based, and emancipatory educational project. This institution, promoted and supported at the time by the Tutunakú

Indigenous Organization, has developed a strong social consciousness in the community for the understanding that official education cannot be a mechanism of cultural domination and community disintegration, imposing language, religious practices, and values alien to local life.

Currently, Paulo Freire School is a real alternative based on the right to self-determination. Through its educational practices and projects, it defends the idea of building a school closely linked to culture, the Earth, and social organization. The findings of this research show that, in this institution, education is not conceived as a vertical process of content transmission but rather as a social and political practice that integrates students, families, councils of elders, and teachers in a dynamic of shared responsibility. The horizontal organizational structure—composed of community assemblies, student councils, and collegiate bodies—confirms that school management becomes a pedagogical space in itself, where democracy and daily autonomy are exercised.²

Similarly, the CPF's educational proposal articulates community, productive, field, and cultural work, consolidating a pedagogy that is not limited to school instruction but rather recovers ancestral knowledge, promotes food self-sufficiency, and stimulates collective creativity. These axes reveal that *critical Pedagogies* find fertile ground in the CPF to question the hegemonic notion of education as mere training of “human capital,” shifting it toward a horizon of training social subjects committed to community transformation.

In this sense, the specific case of the Paulo Freire School can provide key elements for thinking about the design of community-focused educational policies, such as the following:

- Recognizing communities as active subjects in the definition of educational models.
- Promoting horizontal management structures that strengthen democratic participation.
- The integration of productive, cultural, and environmental practices is a central dimension of the educational process.

In short, the discussion of cases such as that of the Paulo Freire School confirms that *critical pedagogies* are not merely theoretical frameworks but also living experiences that offer viable alternatives for a more just and inclusive national education project rooted in community realities. The results of this work, which is still in progress, will reveal even more details about how educational institutions with models such as those of the CPF can be relevant not only for the design of educational policies but also for the creation and development of sociocritical educational models.

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²For more details on the history and purposes of the Paulo Freire School, please refer to the document “Alternative knowledge and pedagogies: the educational model of the Paulo Freire School” (NOSSH, 2024).

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