

# The Cruciality of Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy in 4th Goal of Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs)

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**Abstract:** This article investigates the crucial contribution of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy to the realization of the fourth goal of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), which aspires to guarantee inclusive, equitable, and quality education while promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Freire's pedagogy of dialogue, problem-posing, and critical consciousness challenges traditional "banking" models of education that reproduce passivity and inequality. Instead, it affirms education as a transformative and participatory process that enables learners to recognize structures of oppression, claim their agency, and engage in social transformation. Through qualitative method, this article underscores how Freire's framework directly advances SDG 4 by redefining quality education as not merely the transmission of skills but as the cultivation of empowerment, equity, and democratic engagement. In contexts where poverty, exclusion, and systemic disparities hinder access to education, Freire's pedagogy offers a praxis-oriented approach that unites literacy, critical reflection, and collective action. This article argues that embedding Freirean principles into educational policies and practices provides a robust pathway for achieving the aims of SDG 4. In conclusion, by linking education with social justice and human dignity, Freire's model ensures that the pursuit of inclusive and equitable education becomes a genuine force for sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Education, 4th Goal of Sustainability Development Goals, Paulo Freire.

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## Introduction

Modern education moves between educators and learners, playing great amount of effect regarding what should be understood in life. That education tends to focus on learner-centered approach in which there is a shift from the teacher as the sole authority to students as active participants. It is also emphasizing critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving rather than memorization (Corbett & Guilherme, 2021; Freire, 2015; Kirana et al., 2025). Moreover, it is also closely related to technology, especially digital platforms, online learning, and AI tools. Its main focus is also to be integrated through global and inclusive outlook. Its purpose is noble; to value diversity, equity, and inclusion within cross-cultural competencies.

In practice, contemporary education still places a stronger emphasis on growth and measurable outcomes rather than on equality and inclusivity. Academic grades continue to serve as the dominant indicator of student success, often overshadowing other dimensions of learning such as critical thinking, collaboration, and social development. Although educational discourse today highlights a shift toward student-centered learning, the hierarchical role of the educator remains firmly in place (Corbett & Guilherme, 2021; Freire, 2015; Kirana et al., 2025). Teachers often continue to assert their authority as the primary source of knowledge, thereby limiting the degree of autonomy granted to learners.

Students are indeed encouraged to demonstrate creativity and innovation, yet such encouragement is frequently constrained by the persistent reliance

on standardized assessments and examinations. This reliance reflects a paradox: while education seeks to nurture independent and critical thinkers, it simultaneously subjects them to rigid structures of evaluation that can inhibit authentic exploration and intellectual risk-taking (Corbett & Guilherme, 2021; Freire, 2015; Kirana et al., 2025).

The implementation of the so-called “independent curriculum” (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) illustrates this tension further. Although it is presented as a progressive reform aimed at granting students greater freedom and flexibility, in practice it often functions as another form of directive. Rather than enabling genuine independence, it channels students toward compliance with broader societal and governmental agendas, particularly the demand to adapt to rapid technological and informational change (Ammarul, 2024; Jackson, 2007; Saputro et al., 2025). Thus, what is framed as liberation within education may, in reality, represent a restructured form of control.

Paulo Freire comes with his criticism towards modern education in his thesis about critical pedagogy. His approach to education treats learning as a shared journey toward awareness and freedom. Freire believed that education should not simply be about teachers giving information to students, but about both learning from each other through open dialogue and reflection. He called this process of conscientization (Ammarul, 2024; Jackson, 2007; Saputro et al., 2025). It is meant in helping people become aware of their reality, question injustice, and find ways to bring about change. Freire criticized what he called the “banking model” of education, where students are seen as empty vessels to be filled with facts.

Instead, Freire imagined classrooms as spaces of conversation, where students think critically, share their experiences, and connect learning to real life. This way of teaching encourages curiosity, creativity, and courage to speak up. For Freire, education was not just about personal success but about building a more just and caring world. Teachers become guides who listen, question, and learn alongside their students (Riza et al., 2025; Shor, 2002; Takona, 2025). Critical pedagogy, in this sense, helps learners see that they have the power to shape their own lives and communities that awaken both

the mind and the heart, inspiring hope, dignity, and a sense of shared responsibility.

Freire’s ideas connect beautifully with the 4th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), which calls for inclusive and quality education for all. Freire believed that education should do more than teaching facts. Indeed, it should help people understand themselves, their communities, and the world around them. He saw learning as a dialogue, where teachers and students learn from one another with respect and curiosity. This idea fits perfectly with SDG 4’s goal of making education meaningful, fair, and accessible to everyone, especially those who are often left behind. His approach encourages people to think critically, question injustice, and take part in improving their society (Ammarul, 2024; Jackson, 2007; Saputro et al., 2025). He believed that education should awaken hope and confidence, helping learners see their own power to create change. In this way, Freire’s critical pedagogy supports SDG 4 by promoting education that nurtures both the mind and the heart. It should be an education that builds goodwill and also goodness for a better world.

### Materials and Methods

By using qualitative methods, certain concepts and written data are analyzed to answer the question in this paper. Written through description in explorative approach, online and offline scripts are used to explain correlations between Paulo Freire’s ideas and SDG 4 in the sense of cultural studies. Online and offline scripts are derived from books and journals to understand shown matters. The data analysis includes attaining sources, reading sources carefully, comparing with other issues, quoting into paper, and writing down in references lists. The research data comes from Freire’s critical pedagogy and SDG 4 discourses. Each of them is read then broken down into its every particular element. More elaborations related to deepened analysis are also provided in addition furthermore.

### Results and Discussion

### Paulo Freire’s Understanding of Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy starts from a common feeling, that is the experience of sitting in a classroom and feeling like a container waiting to be filled with information. Freire saw this often in modern education. It should be a place to understand, not to be daydreaming waiting to be fulfilled. He called it the “banking model” of education, where the teacher is the expert who makes deposits of facts into passive students. It is told as a system that can make people feel small, as if their own experiences and ideas do not matter at all (Darder, 2017; Giroux, 2010; Pasopati et al., 2025).

For Freire, this was not just a boring way to learn. It is indeed a harmful one. He believed it trained individuals to accept the world as it is, without question. It mirrors a power dynamic where one group holds all the knowledge and the other is expected to simply listen and obey. He saw this firsthand in his work with poor, illiterate communities in Brazil, and he felt there had to be a more human way. It is only asserting the authoritative usage of power that indeed shapes domination for the learners (Darder, 2017; Giroux, 2010; Pasopati et al., 2025). Such education is modern and growing, but it neglects any uniqueness of human beings as stated within every learner’s complex and even contextual everyday life.

Instead of a bank, he imagined a classroom as a kind of meeting place. His proposal was built on dialogue. It should be a genuine, two-way conversation where the teacher learns from the students just as much as the students learn from the teacher. The goal is not to deposit information, but to explore it together. The teacher becomes a facilitator, someone who asks questions alongside the students (Darder, 2017; Giroux, 2010; Pasopati et al., 2025). It is in line with Habermas’ dialogue in which such interpretation and intention are not dominative to each other. Each aspect empowers other party, making them learn consecutively. Indeed, modern education tends to see teaches as the main sources of knowledge. Meanwhile, Freire’s understanding underlines that such teachers should always update their knowledge by engaging with their learners as well.

Trend of modernity is what Freire called as “problem-posing” education. Rather than memorizing dates from a textbook, a class might start by talking about the challenges in their own neighborhood. Why is it hard to find a job? Why is the local park neglected? By starting with their own reality, learning becomes relevant and alive. It is not abstract anymore; it’s personal. Freire’s idealistic manners are clear; learners should understand that being educated is actually being social (Darder, 2017; Giroux, 2010; Pasopati et al., 2025). Each learner is not a tabula rasa or even studying things *ex nihilo*. Each of them is appreciated human being that should be involved in their everyday life despite any problems inside.

Through this process, something special happens. Freire called it developing a “critical consciousness,” but one can think of it as a light turning on. It is that moment when a person stops seeing personal struggles as just bad luck and starts to see the larger systems and patterns at play. It is the shift from feeling like a victim of circumstance to understanding that one has a role in shaping that circumstance. Critical pedagogy should enhance people’s roles in society, making them as someone that matters. It shapes confidence that no one understands his/her conditions beside each own being (Darder, 2017; Giroux, 2010; Pasopati et al., 2025). This critical consciousness is full awareness as a concept that is automatically contextual, making people shape understanding based structures that is used to strangle them. Furthermore, it involves not only critically reflecting on how social, political, and economic forces impact one’s life but also taking action to transform those realities and achieve liberation.

Freire also believed that true learning leads to action or a cycle he called “praxis.” It is the dance between reflecting on the world and then taking a step to change it. This does not have to be a grand, historic gesture. It can be as small as starting a community garden or organizing a meeting (Gibson, 1999; Shor, 2002; Zhafirah et al, 2025). The point is that education should inspire people to act, not just sit still. At its heart, Freire’s pedagogy is a humble invitation to treat one another with more respect. It asks people to see the classroom not as a factory, but as a space where they can practice being

more fully human alongside one another. It also involves thinking, feeling, and even finding the courage to make their world a little better.

Freire's ideas could be intriguing. It is intriguing since it breaks the old paradigm of education in which it still exists today. Modern structure will only guarantee stability that is so exact that erupts little freedom for learners. Meanwhile, everyday life is full of uncertainty full of opportunities to move forward. It is indeed also intriguing since it underlines people's experience as source of knowledge (Gibson, 1999; Shor, 2002; Zhafirah et al, 2025). It may say no to what the teachers speak to their students, but they will feel that any understanding should be known deep in their hearts. Indeed, the controversial aspects of Freire's pedagogy is nothing but resistance towards modern structure. He speaks that everyone can always be resistant to any structure if it does not flourish freedom for their life.

#### **Education and its 4<sup>th</sup> SDG's Cruciality**

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) focuses on ensuring inclusive and quality education for everyone and promoting lifelong learning opportunities. At its heart, this goal recognizes that education is more than just going to educational institutions. Indeed, it is about empowering people, unlocking potential, and building a fairer and more sustainable world (Riza et al., 2025; Shor, 2002; Takona, 2025). When people have access to quality education, they gain the skills, knowledge, and confidence to improve their own lives and contribute positively to their communities.

Education is a basic human right and one of the most powerful tools for breaking the cycle of poverty. It opens doors to better job opportunities, improved health, and greater participation in society. However, around the world, millions of children and adults still lack access to quality learning (Pasopati et al., 2024; Riza et al., 2025; Shor, 2002; Takona, 2025). Many face barriers such as poverty, conflict, gender inequality, or disability, which prevent them from receiving the education they deserve. SDG 4 aims to remove these barriers and make education truly accessible and equitable for all, no matter who they are or where they live.

It is crucial to see that the goal of SDG 4 goes beyond getting children into classrooms. It points

to such focus about what happens once they are there. Learning must be meaningful and relevant to real life. Students should gain not only literacy and numeracy skills but also creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities (Gibson, 1999; Shor, 2002; Zhafirah et al, 2025). Teachers play a central role in this process, and that is why SDG 4 also emphasizes the need to train, support, and value educators. A good teacher can inspire curiosity, build confidence, and change lives. Moreover, its focal point is in students. In this case, such students are meant to be learners in which they work to focus in gaining better perspectives in everyday life.

SDG 4 has several targets that cover different stages of learning. It calls for free, quality primary and secondary education for every child and for access to early childhood education so that every child gets a strong start. It also highlights the importance of vocational and higher education, helping young people and adults gain the skills they need for decent work and entrepreneurship (Brass & Macedo, 1985; Mayo, 1993; Warsi, 2025). In today's fast-changing world, learning does not end at graduation. It is why lifelong learning is essential for adapting to new challenges and opportunities.

Then, SDG 4 is also about inclusion. The goal seeks to eliminate gender disparities and ensure that girls, children with disabilities, refugees, and other marginalized groups have equal opportunities to learn. Education should also promote global citizenship, sustainability, and respect for cultural diversity. In other words, educational institutions should not only teach facts and figures but also nurture compassion, understanding, and responsibility toward people and the planet (Brass & Macedo, 1985; Mayo, 1993; Warsi, 2025). Reaching this goal will require effort from everyone, including governments, teachers, families, communities, and international organizations. Investment in education is one of the smartest investments any country can make. It envisions a world where every person, regardless of background, has the chance to learn, grow, and shape their future. Quality education is not just a goal. It is such the foundation for a better world for all.

Through its indication, SDG 4 states that education must be accessible to everyone, especially those who have traditionally been left behind (girls

and women, children with disabilities, refugees, and people in rural or poor communities). Inclusivity means removing barriers such as poverty, discrimination, or lack of infrastructure that prevent people from learning (Pasopati et al., 2024; Shor, 2002; Takona, 2025). By stating so, education is about learning effectively including deeper competencies like problem-solving, creativity, communication, and critical thinking. Classrooms should encourage curiosity, collaboration, and innovation. It is done in preparing students to adapt to a rapidly changing world. Quality education also relies on well-trained, motivated teachers, safe learning environments, and relevant, engaging curricula.

#### **Freire's Contribution to SDG 4**

Central to Freire's philosophy is his criticism of "banking education," a phrase he created to depict the conventional teacher-centered method that views students as inactive receivers of information. Conversely, Freire suggested a liberating education model based on dialogue, critical awareness, and practice (Pasopati et al., 2024; Shor, 2002; Takona, 2025). Certainly, he suggests concepts that combine theory with practice. For him, any form of stability in education is not founded on control, but on the collaborative effort of each learner and teacher in understanding the contextual meanings of educational ideas. He thought that education is meant for everyone to engage with. He chooses to side with the underprivileged whom capitalism has pushed to the margins.

In 1968, he authored *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, urging educators to involve students as active contributors to their learning journey. It promotes education in encouraging critical thinking and societal change. Freire's educational philosophy critiques "banking education," a model where educators deposit knowledge into passive learners, viewing them as mere containers instead of engaged participants in the learning journey (McLaren, 2004; Pasopati et al., 2024; Shor, 2002; Takona, 2025). Freire critically opposed this dehumanizing method, advocating instead for a pedagogy based on dialogue, critical awareness, and practical action. The banking system will saturate the learner's mind with only information, lacking any sense of hope.

At the heart of his philosophy lies the idea of conscientization, through which individuals cultivate a critical understanding of their social circumstances and gain the power to enact change. Freire's concepts have significantly influenced both educational theories and practices in various settings. His support for literacy as a tool for empowerment, especially within marginalized groups, has impacted adult education initiatives worldwide (McLaren, 2004; Pasopati et al., 2024; Takona, 2025). Additionally, his focus on education as a means for social justice and democratic engagement has strongly resonated within movements fighting for equality and human rights. His focus on literacy as a means of empowerment and his support for a teaching approach that honors learners' experiences and cultures have established him as a guiding light for educators aiming to tackle disparities and foster democratic citizenship.

Freire's work is indeed related to SDG 4 at least in three main points. They are promoting inclusive and empowering education, fostering critical thinking and lifelong learning, and encouraging contextual and transformative learning. First, he believed that learning should not be something only "given" by teachers to students but something built together through respect and dialogue (McLaren, 2004; Pasopati et al., 2024; Takona, 2025). In this way, both teachers and learners share ideas and learn from each other. Freire's view helps create classrooms where every student feels valued, especially those from disadvantaged or marginalized backgrounds.

His philosophy also challenges the idea of education as a tool of control or domination. Instead, it becomes a path to freedom and equality. By encouraging open communication, understanding, and participation, Freire's approach supports the goals of SDG 4, which calls for equal access to quality education. It ensures that no one is left behind, regardless of gender, culture, or social class (Gibson, 1999; Shor, 2002; Zhafirah et al, 2025). Openness in education is a must. It is needed to give equality in which those who do not have much access should be given more. Those who already have access should help the have-nots. That is how education should work as desired by Freire and United Nations.

Second, Freire believed that real education is more than memorizing facts. It should be about learning to think critically and act wisely. He introduced what he called “problem-posing education. It is a situation where students are encouraged to question, reflect, and discuss real issues from their own lives and communities. This method helps learners develop curiosity, creativity, and independent thought (McLaren, 2004; Pasopati et al., 2024; Takona, 2025). Learners then are not taught to pursue quantities like what capitalism says. Education should give meanings to qualities that are essential for lifelong learning.

Instead of treating students as empty vessels to be filled with information, Freire saw them as active participants who can shape their own understanding of the world. This approach prepares learners not only for exams or jobs but also for thoughtful participation in society. It builds confidence and responsibility, allowing people to continue learning beyond the classroom (Brass & Macedo, 1985; Mayo, 1993; Warsi, 2025). In connection to SDG 4, Freire’s ideas support education that equips individuals with the skills and mindset needed for sustainable development, active citizenship, and meaningful work throughout their lives. His belief in education as a continuous, reflective process keeps the spirit of lifelong learning alive. Critical thinking is crucial in life as it pinpoints various criticisms in life without taking out human beings from their everyday life. People should think that life is what they live and they should be critical of finding more meanings rather than merely following trends.

Third, Freire emphasized that education should always be connected to real life. He believed that what people learn must relate to their daily experiences, culture, and community challenges. When learning is rooted in context, it becomes more meaningful and easier to apply in practice (Brass & Macedo, 1985; Mayo, 1993; Warsi, 2025). Freire’s approach helps students see the link between knowledge and the world around them, encouraging them to take part in improving their own lives and societies. This kind of education does not stop at personal success. It aims for transformation as an ongoing process. Learners should be pushed to be aware of issues like poverty,

inequality, and injustice, and are motivated to make positive changes.

In this way, education becomes a tool for both personal and social growth. Freire’s vision supports SDG 4 by making education relevant, inclusive, and purposeful. His ideas remind teachers to listen to students’ realities, use local examples, and inspire learners to become active agents of change (Gibson, 1999; Shor, 2002; Zhafirah et al, 2025). Through such education, people not only gain knowledge but also the confidence and compassion to create a more just and sustainable world. It is always better to see education as a contextual concept in which any idea should be earthly. It should aim like glocalization, not globalization. It should enhance any local value by enhancing knowledge of complexity of everyday life

## **Conclusions**

Modern education today shows great progress in its effort to place learners at the center of the learning process. It promotes creativity, critical thinking, and the use of technology to support learning. However, in practice, it still struggles with challenges such as rigid systems, standardized testing, and unequal access. Many educational institutions still emphasize grades over personal growth, while teachers often remain the main authority in the classroom. As a result, students’ voices and experiences sometimes receive less attention, limiting their ability to explore ideas freely and develop real independence in learning.

Freire’s ideas offer a meaningful reflection on how education could be more human and empowering. His view of learning as a dialogue between teachers and students emphasizes respect, curiosity, and shared understanding. He criticized what he called the “banking model” of education, where students are treated as empty vessels to be filled with information. Instead, he proposed a “problem-posing” model that invites learners to think critically about their own lives and society. Freire believed that true learning happens when people become aware of their reality, reflect on it, and take action to make it better.

Freire’s approach connects deeply with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which seeks

inclusive and quality education for all. The intersections are shown in ways of promoting inclusive and empowering education, fostering critical thinking and lifelong learning, and encouraging contextual and transformative learning. Education should build awareness, confidence, and compassion and help people understand themselves and their communities while inspiring them to contribute positively to the world. In this sense, Freire's ideas remind educators and learners alike that education is not only about academic success but also about nurturing humanity. It is about creating opportunities for everyone to learn, grow, and participate in building a more just, equal, and caring world.

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