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# Early childhood education and cultural identity: the Paulo Freire way to an humanizing education

*Educação infantil e identidade cultural: caminhos freireanos para uma educação humanizadora*

*Educación infantil e identidad cultural: vías freireanas para una educación humanizadora*

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Bruna Thais Rodrigues Furyama <sup>[a]</sup>   
Maringá, PR, Brasil  
Universidade Estadual de Maringá (UEM)

Heloisa Toshie Irie Saito <sup>[b]</sup>   
Maringá, PR, Brasil  
Universidade Estadual de Maringá (UEM)

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## Abstract

*The reflection presented in the following article comes from a finalized research proposition developed in a Graduate Program in Education, at a Masters level. Its objective is to present Paulo Freire's contributions on the importance of valuing children's cultural identity for the humanization process, investigating in which way teaching may consider and recognize the different cultural identities in classrooms of Early Childhood Education institutions. This is a bibliographical and qualitative research, based on Freirean theory. The investigative scope is Early Childhood Education, mainly on the importance of valuing children's cultural identity in the teaching, learning and humanizing process. The results express the importance of valuing*

<sup>[a]</sup> Doutoranda e Mestre em Educação pela Universidade Estadual de Maringá (UEM), e-mail: bruna.btr23@gmail.com

<sup>[b]</sup> Doutora em Educação pela Universidade de São Paulo (USP), e-mail: htisaito@uem.br

*children's cultural identity, as from this valuation, along with new knowledge, the child can develop intellectually, understand the world around her, the different cultures it contains, perceive herself and others, becoming an active human being, an autonomous and emancipated adult. In this way, the conclusion is that an Early Childhood Education that considers multiple cultural identities of children is a possible way to an education regarding humanization and liberation.*

**Keywords:** *Early Childhood Education. Human Formation. Cultural Identity. Paulo Freire.*

## Resumo

A reflexão apresentada neste artigo decorre de uma proposta de pesquisa finalizada, desenvolvida no âmbito de um Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação, a nível de mestrado. Possui como objetivo apresentar as contribuições de Paulo Freire sobre a importância da valorização da identidade cultural das crianças para o processo formação humana, investigando de que forma o ensino pode considerar e reconhecer as diferentes identidades culturais nas salas das instituições de Educação Infantil. Trata-se de uma pesquisa bibliográfica, de caráter qualitativo, com fundamentação nos pressupostos da Teoria Freireana. O recorte investigativo se delimita na etapa da Educação Infantil, focando na importância da valorização da identidade cultural das crianças no processo de ensino, aprendizagem e formação humana. Os resultados alcançados demonstram a importância da valorização da identidade cultural das crianças, pois a partir dessa valorização, somada aos novos conhecimentos, a criança pode desenvolver-se intelectualmente, compreender o mundo à sua volta, as diferentes culturas, perceber a si mesma e aos outros, tornando-se um ser humano atuante no mundo, se constituindo um adulto autônomo e emancipado. Desse modo, conclui-se que uma Educação Infantil que considera as múltiplas identidades culturais das crianças torna-se um caminho possível para uma educação voltada à humanização e libertação.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação Infantil. Formação Humana. Identidade Cultural. Paulo Freire.

## Resumen

*La reflexión que se presenta en este artículo surge de una propuesta de investigación finalizada, desarrollada en el marco de un Programa de Postgrado en Educación, a nivel de maestría. Su objetivo es presentar los aportes de Paulo Freire sobre la importancia de valorar la identidad cultural de los niños en el proceso de formación humana, investigando cómo la enseñanza puede considerar y reconocer las diferentes identidades culturales en las aulas de las instituciones de educación infantil. Se trata de un estudio bibliográfico cualitativo basado en los presupuestos de la teoría freireana. El foco de la investigación se sitúa en la etapa de Educación Infantil, centrándose en la importancia de valorar la identidad cultural de los niños en el proceso de enseñanza, aprendizaje y desarrollo humano. Los resultados muestran la importancia de la valoración de la identidad cultural infantil, ya que ésta, junto con los nuevos conocimientos, permite al niño desarrollarse intelectualmente, comprender el mundo que le rodea, las diferentes culturas, percibirse a sí mismo y a los demás, convirtiéndose en un ser humano que actúa en el mundo, llegando a ser un adulto autónomo y emancipado. De este modo, podemos concluir que una educación infantil que tenga en cuenta las múltiples identidades culturales de los niños se convierte en un camino posible hacia una educación orientada a la humanización y la liberación.*

**Palabras clave:** Educación Infantil. Formación Humana. Identidad Cultural. Paulo Freire.

## Introduction

The reflection presented in this article stems from a completed research project developed within a Graduate Program in Education at the master's level, at a public university located in the northern region of the state of Paraná, Brazil. The concerns that motivated this research arise from the weaknesses and gaps in the current model of early childhood education, which still bears traces of assistentialist approaches and mechanistic, naturalized practices that often overlook the child as an active subject in the educational process. In light of this, the study advocates for an early childhood education built upon intentional, organized, and structured teaching, aiming at the humanization of the child through an educational process that also fosters human development. This includes the arrangement of educational spaces that take into account the specificities of childhood and the cultural knowledge children bring from their everyday experiences, which should be integrated with scientific knowledge. Furthermore, it envisions a learning environment in which the child is engaged in thought processes and is recognized as an active and eager participant in the exchange of knowledge related to the content being taught.

This article is based on a bibliographic, qualitative research approach, grounded in the principles of Freirean Theory, and developed from previously published materials such as books, theses, dissertations, and scholarly articles (Gil, 2008). In order to provide a solid theoretical foundation for the investigation, a literature review was conducted, drawing on the works of Paulo Freire and authors who engage with his critical and humanizing perspective on education. According to Lakatos and Marconi (2003), bibliographic research involves eight distinct phases: topic selection, work plan development, identification, location, compilation, note-taking, analysis and interpretation, and writing.

Following this rationale, the bibliographic review presented in this article aimed to identify, analyze, and articulate key concepts found in Freire's work, such as dialogue, attentive listening, the valuing of human cultural identity, conscientization, liberating praxis, and education as the practice of freedom. In addition to Freire's own contributions, studies by contemporary scholars who deepen and update his theory were selected, allowing for an understanding of how his principles remain relevant to current educational challenges. This review made it possible not only to theoretically contextualize the object of study but also to highlight the transformative potential of an educational practice based on respect for the learner's knowledge, active listening, and the collective construction of knowledge.

The investigative focus is limited to the first stage of basic education—Early Childhood Education—emphasizing the importance of valuing children's cultural identity in the teaching and learning process. In light of this, the following question arises: How can early childhood education enable teaching practices that take children's cultural identity into account? Does Paulo Freire offer contributions toward a kind of teaching that promotes the humanization and socialization of children's diverse cultural identities in CMEIs<sup>1</sup> and preschool classrooms? With the intention of discussing these questions, this article aims to present Paulo Freire's contributions regarding the importance of valuing children's cultural identity in their process of human development, investigating how teaching in Early Childhood Education can consider and acknowledge the different cultural identities present in early education institutions.

Based on the theoretical review, it was possible to understand how Freirean theory contributes significantly to a form of teaching that respects and values children's cultural identity, recognizing them as historical and social human beings who are in a continuous process of learning and development. This valuing of cultural identity enables teaching practices that move beyond hegemonic and standardized approaches, which still characterize much of early childhood education. Freirean theory offers powerful support for an educational practice that is committed to the comprehensive and plural development of childhoods, treating the appreciation of children's culture not merely as an element of the pedagogical proposal, but as a political and ethical act.

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<sup>1</sup> Centros Municipais de Educação Infantil – Public Early Childhood Education Centers

Early Childhood Education is the first stage of basic education in Brazil and plays a crucial role in the development of children from 0 to 6 years old<sup>2</sup>, as it is responsible for fostering their cognitive, critical, emotional, and social development. It is an environment that requires organization and structure, offering opportunities for engaging in problem-posing activities that encourage children to think, as well as promote discovery and peer interaction. It is in Early Childhood Education that children need to experience the world in its various contexts, have access to language in different forms, and engage with the knowledge historically developed by human beings over time (Saito, 2018).

In this regard, it is important to emphasize that the child goes through a developmental trajectory marked by particularities that require the careful attention of adults. These adults play a fundamental role in the construction and humanization of childhood by providing opportunities for interaction with the environment and with others, thereby facilitating the appropriation of sociocultural aspects and the full development of the child (Saito, 2011). The choice to investigate Paulo Freire's contributions to Early Childhood Education is grounded in the hope that the oppressed will not become oppressors, thus avoiding the perpetuation of the cycle of oppression present in society. When this critical consciousness is awakened from early childhood, the possibility emerges of building a more just future—one marked by equity, freedom of expression, respect for human rights, appreciation for diverse cultures and their ethical principles, as well as respect for different opinions. This approach enables children to understand the importance of fighting for justice and human dignity, contributing to better living conditions (Furyama, 2025).

Providing problem-posing education from an early age allows children to develop critical consciousness and empathy, learn to put themselves in others' shoes, collaborate with peers, and question the norms and demands imposed by society. For this to occur, pedagogical activities must be collaborative and spark curiosity, encouraging active participation through questions and personal opinions. Additionally, it is essential to foster accountability and autonomy, which requires an environment that supports decision-making, negotiation, and learning from mistakes. The teacher plays a fundamental role in this process by demonstrating that human actions have positive or negative social impacts and by helping children understand their responsibility in the world. In this way, they grow as conscious, critical individuals committed to social transformation (Furyama, 2025).

Although Paulo Freire did not directly address Early Childhood Education in his works, this does not mean that this educational stage was absent from his concerns. As Angelo and Rebelo (2022) point out, during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, the education of young children outside the family was not a dominant concern in Latin America. Even so, his ideas provoke deep reflections on the current reality experienced in Early Childhood Education institutions and remain highly relevant for thinking about transformative pedagogical practices from the earliest years.

## Defining the Concept of the Child and Early Childhood Education

In order to reflect on the concept of the child, it is necessary to consider the global history of childhood in connection with the development of Early Childhood Education in Brazil, as the country was strongly influenced by these global movements in shaping an approach to education that acknowledges children's unique characteristics (Takahashi, 2021). According to the author, childhood is a concept that was established relatively late. In this sense, it is important to examine key historical events that shaped views of the child—such as the absence of a defined notion of childhood and the prevalence of assistentialist and compensatory models of education.

<sup>2</sup> Law No. 11.274/2006, which amended Law No. 9.394/96 (the LDB – Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education), established a nine-year duration for elementary education and made enrollment mandatory for children at the age of six, marking the beginning of the second stage of basic education. The age cutoff refers to the determination of the age at which a child is considered to have reached six years, using March 31 as the reference date. Therefore, children who turn six after this reference date remain in Early Childhood Education

In the Middle Ages, children were viewed as miniature adults who learned everyday tasks and assisted older family members with work. As Ariès (1986) points out, children were considered different from adults only in size and strength; in all other aspects, they were seen as the same. Postman (2011) discusses how, in Antiquity, little attention was given to children, and their specific needs were largely ignored. Supporting this view, Ariès (1986) emphasizes that society lacked a sensitive perspective on childhood. Children often had short life spans due to high mortality rates, as they were assigned to dangerous labor tasks typically performed by adults and were frequently left alone while their families worked far from home.

These circumstances were seen as a negative factor in establishing emotional bonds between adults and children, as children were, above all, treated as objects—and such treatment was entirely “normal” for that time (Tacahashi, 2021). This concept of the child and childhood began to shift in the 15th century with the invention of the printing press and, consequently, the emergence of printed materials that required reading and textual interpretation. These developments created a divide between those who could read and those who needed to learn how to read: “[...] In order to understand them, a good level of reading and interpretation was necessary—that is, such understanding was limited to literate adults, while in the early years of life, children still had to acquire that skill” (Tacahashi, 2021, p. 26). In this new context, children began to be seen differently by society; children’s language itself started to gain recognition, as did their style of dress, which became another key factor that set them apart from adults.

All of these events were outward signs of the emergence of a new social class. These were individuals who spoke differently from adults, spent their days differently, dressed differently, learned differently, and, ultimately, thought differently. What had occurred—the underlying structural change—was that, through typography and its servant, the school, adults gained unprecedented control over the symbolic environment of the young and were therefore able and invited to establish the conditions under which a child would become an adult. (Postman, 2011, p. 59, *our translation*).

Even in the face of this progress, the spaces designated for teaching children were not adequate, and the content was neither organized nor formalized in any way. “[...] It is worth noting that the notion of childhood was triggered by a specific context, characterized by high child mortality rates, the growing need to portray childhood, and the division between those who could read and those who could not” (Tacahashi, 2021, p. 33, *our translation*). The author further emphasizes that the first signs of formal institutions for child care emerged during the period of industrialization, when individuals began to take on the responsibility of caring for the children of workers—an initiative rooted in assistentialism, with a focus on caregiving.

These markers of childhood are important for early childhood teachers to understand that, despite the historical advances in the concepts of the child and Early Childhood Education, remnants of the past still persist in this first stage of basic education—especially in the teaching process. One of the most prominent is the assistentialist view of the child, inherited from a time when daycare centers were seen merely as spaces for caregiving, disregarding the child as a subject of rights and learning (Tacahashi, 2021). In addition, mechanical and decontextualized pedagogical practices continue to prevail, ignoring the importance of play, creativity, and children’s culture in the educational process (Saito, 2018). Although current guidelines recognize play as a core element of early education, many teachers still treat it as mere entertainment. Compounding this is the devaluation of children’s cultural identity and the persistence of school organization based on traditional models, with rigid routines that are poorly adapted to the needs and specificities of childhood. In light of this scenario, it is essential to value the cultural identity of children within the classroom, making them active participants in their own processes of human development. Beyond this, however, the teacher must also value her own childhood as a professional—recognizing how her own experiences as a child have shaped the adult and educator they have become.

**Given this historical background**, we can affirm that, in terms of formal schooling in Brazil, public education began in the 20th century. Over the course of several decades, numerous changes occurred:



preschool did not have a formal character, teachers lacked the necessary qualifications to assume their roles, and their work was often carried out on a voluntary basis. Early Childhood Education was only established as a child's right with the Federal Constitution of 1988 and was formally recognized as an educational stage through the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB – Law No. 9394/96), which identifies it as the first stage of basic education, crucial for the child's holistic development—physical, psychological, and intellectual—while complementing the role of the family and the community. Another important milestone in shaping the concept of the child in the 1990s was the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA), which defines the child as a subject of rights, under the responsibility of the family, the community, society at large, and the State.

In 1998, the Brazilian Ministry of Education and Culture published the National Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Education (RCNEI), which broadly discussed the role of Early Childhood Education in the child's school life, distinguishing it from other educational stages. Among the key documents in this area is the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC), approved by the Ministry of Education (MEC) in 2017, with the aim of guiding instruction in both public and private schools across Brazil. The BNCC outlines learning objectives for each stage of formal education, including Early Childhood Education.

However, although its purpose is to establish common guidelines for education, it is extremely important to engage in critical and in-depth reflection on its directives. Among the points that warrant attention are: excessive standardization, which undermines the autonomy of early childhood educators and institutions; a lack of alignment with other educational policies; the presence of neoliberal conceptions; and the lack of clarity in the proposed objectives and competencies.

Barbosa, Silveira, and Soares (2019, p. 82) emphasize that “organized entities and universities, social movements, researchers, and teachers took a stand against the methodology by which the BNCC was developed [...]”. According to the authors, the BNCC addresses children's knowledge, needs, and skills in a segmented, graded, and hierarchical manner. Furthermore, it employs language that reinforces the notion of preschool as merely a preparatory stage for elementary education, which runs counter to the principles of Early Childhood Education—an educational stage that should be recognized as having its own identity, focused on the holistic development of the child.

In this regard, Saito, Furiyama, and Vicentini (2023) emphasize that the education offered in the first stage of basic education must respect the specific characteristics of childhood, taking into account children's lived experiences as essential to their intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and affective development. For this process of holistic learning to occur meaningfully, it is essential that the teacher creates opportunities for children to think, interact, and construct knowledge alongside their peers, in an environment that values listening, play, and the collective construction of knowledge.

According to Paschoal and Brandão (2015), educational services for children have advanced significantly in terms of legislation and public policies related to Early Childhood Education in Brazil. Examining, understanding, and reflecting on this theoretical perspective and the historical background of Early Childhood Education transforms the course of teaching and learning, as it enables the teacher to organize their practice in a thoughtful, non-immediate way, with actions intentionally aimed at the child's development.

Considering the history of assistentialism that, for a long time, characterized Early Childhood Education both globally and in Brazil—and which, to some extent, still persists—it is essential that teachers at this stage possess critical and historical awareness of their role and the context in which they work. It is also crucial that they are familiar with the legal and pedagogical documents that guide Early Childhood Education and that they understand the importance of an educational practice that humanizes children and goes beyond common sense, avoiding mechanical or decontextualized approaches.

By highlighting the importance of the reader understanding what childhood represented in past centuries and what it represents in the 21st century—so that one may grasp the reasons why Early Childhood Education holds its current conditions and essential character—we conclude this section of the article by

emphasizing that teaching in Early Childhood Education must be grounded in consistent theoretical and methodological foundations. It must regard the child as a being with an essence that distinguishes them from adults, as well as a biological, historical, and social being. Given that the historical context long disregarded the nuances of childhood, it is crucial that teachers develop an awareness of who the child is and what childhood represents, as well as an understanding of the historical processes that have shaped this field up to the present moment.

Raising awareness among Early Childhood Education professionals is of utmost importance in order to narrow the gap left by the lingering “adult-centered” and “assistentialist” remnants still present in the educational context. It is therefore necessary to reflect on the fact that the individuals attending Early Childhood Education are human beings who are already active in society and who, in adulthood, will occupy important professional roles. For this reason, it is essential to critically examine the hegemonic conditions and ideals that often limit children's full development. When the work of teachers in daycare centers and preschools is guided by a merely functional logic, it tends to overlook children's specificities and reproduce outdated patterns that foster alienation rather than the formation of critical and conscious individuals.

## Cultural Identity: Unity in Diversity

It is necessary to understand the concept of the child and the historical development of Early Childhood Education in order to analyze and reflect—as educators—on the essential role of valuing children's cultural identity in the first stage of basic education. As discussed previously, children were, for a long time, neither valued nor taken into consideration. Over time, however, the specificities of childhood began to be acknowledged in educational thinking, although many gaps, weaknesses, and challenges still remain. Within this context, Paulo Freire is brought into the discussion to explore the humanization of the child through education and the importance of valuing cultural identity in the teaching and learning process in Early Childhood Education.

Paulo Freire (2022a) defines cultural identity as the set of values, customs, behaviors, beliefs, and symbols that characterize and distinguish human beings from one another. According to the author, it is through cultural identity that each person recognizes themselves, transmits knowledge, and builds a sense of belonging in the world. Moreover, cultural identity is a fundamental element in human development, as it represents not only one's place in the world, but also one's way of seeing and living in it. In this sense, recognizing and valuing children's cultural identity in Early Childhood Education becomes essential, since this action, according to Freire, ensures a more humanizing, inclusive, and meaningful pedagogical practice.

From birth, children begin to construct their worldview through interactions with adults, grounded in the various experiences they live at home and in society. Therefore, they arrive at educational institutions carrying experiences that can meaningfully enrich the scientific content to be taught. These concrete life experiences enable them to assimilate new knowledge more meaningfully, with greater depth and quality.

Reinforcing the need to consider the cultural identity of human beings, in his first letter, “Teaching-learning. Reading the world. Reading the word,” from the book “*Professora, sim; tia, não*”, Freire (2022a) affirms that the act of teaching must necessarily be connected to the reading of the world. He further emphasizes this process in his book “*Pedagogia da autonomia*”, stating that “[...] more than merely being in the world, human beings have become a presence in the world, with the world and with others. A presence that, in recognizing the other as a ‘not I,’ recognizes itself as ‘self’” (Freire, 2022b, p. 20).

By considering this aspect in children's education, the teacher contributes to the development of respect, empathy, collaboration, listening, care, and voice—based on the understanding that the child is a knowing subject, capable of learning, who enters the early childhood educational environment carrying a rich cultural background that belongs uniquely to them. “It is precisely because we are programmed but not determined, conditioned and yet aware of our conditioning, that we become capable of fighting for freedom as a process [...]” (Freire, 2022a, p. 94). Freire refers to human conditioning and programming as something

not fixed, but accompanied by a degree of freedom, through which the subject has the potential to expand what he calls their cultural framework. In this light, he emphasizes that through education—as a cultural expression—great possibilities can be explored.

The importance of each individual's identity—as subject, educator, or learner—within educational practice becomes clear. And identity, as understood in this contradictory relationship, is what makes us who we are: a dynamic interplay between what we inherit and what we acquire. This is a contradictory relationship in which, at times, what we acquire through our social, cultural, class-based, and ideological experiences strongly influences us—shaped by the power of interests, emotions, feelings, desires, and what is often referred to as “the strength of the heart”—within the framework of what we inherit. We are, therefore, neither solely one thing nor the other. Not only, let us repeat, what is innate, nor merely what is acquired (Freire, 2022a, p. 95, *our translation*).

For this reason, Freire portrays the child's opportunities for development as part of a teaching and learning process that involves the search for new understandings through lived experiences in the world, through creations historically developed by human beings, through dialogue and language. This necessarily connects teaching to the pursuit of knowledge, highlighting the human struggle not only to exist in the world but to truly be part of it. In this sense, Freire (2022a) underscores in his writings the urgency for the child to understand that they live in a world where the process of knowing more through one's own practice is a necessity. As the child becomes aware of their presence in the world and of the possibilities to expand their knowledge—what Freire calls “knowing more”—the world ceases to be merely a backdrop and becomes a space of human engagement: “[...] the mere handling of the world was transformed into acting within it. It is in this way that practice became action upon the world, carried out by subjects gradually gaining awareness of their doing in the world” (Freire, 2022a, p. 104, *our translation*).

According to Freire (2022a), there would be no practice—only interaction with the world—if human beings, in acting upon it, were not conscious of and capable of applying the knowledge they have about what they do and why they do it. In this regard, he emphasizes the importance of teachers understanding the need to forge paths with learners that allow them to think critically and grasp the complexities of the world. Through this shared journey, both bodies of knowledge become intertwined, allowing new understandings to emerge—understandings that are never final or complete. To engage in this evolving process, it is essential to value the knowledge already acquired (Freire, 1997, p. 31, *our translation*).

The educator must understand that their “here” and “now” are almost always the learner's “there.” Even if the educator's dream is not only to make their own “here-now”—their knowledge—accessible to the learner, but also to go beyond that “here-now” with them, or to joyfully witness the learner surpassing their own “here,” for that dream to become reality, it must begin from the learner's “here,” not the educator's. At the very least, it must take into account the existence of the learner's “here” and respect it. Ultimately, no one arrives “there” by starting from “there,” but rather from a particular “here.” This means, fundamentally, that educators cannot disregard, underestimate, or deny the “knowledge born of lived experience” that learners bring with them to school.

That said, the development of critical awareness in educational practice is directly linked to the process of making science. For this to occur, it is necessary for the teacher to take a step back from their own practice in order to critically reflect on it and to recognize the theory that underlies it—a theory that is often forgotten or only superficially understood. According to Freire's perspective, such reflection is essential, as doing science precisely involves investigating what surrounds and inhabits the reality in which we live, assigning meaning and direction to the gaps that emerge in social practice. This is because conscious practice not only requires science but also produces it.

Accordingly, Freire (2022a) reinforces in his work that the teacher must be a lifelong learner, so that they are capable of critically analyzing their own practice and becoming a learner of the very content they are responsible for teaching. For Freire, studying is a critical act, in which the teacher finds opportunities to create and recreate their teaching practice. However, for this to happen, it is necessary to be aware when



pedagogical actions do not unfold as expected, resulting in unachieved objectives. In highlighting the importance of teachers being scholars of the content they will teach, Freire (2022a) establishes a relationship between reading and study, since for him, reading goes far beyond memorization—there is no value in reading without understanding the meaning of the text and knowing how to synthesize it. Freire refers to reading as an intelligent operation, which therefore demands critical awareness in its execution.

Building on this, Freire's theory emphasizes that teaching, learning, and knowledge are not bound to mechanistic or spontaneous pedagogical practices. He stresses that early childhood educators must be attentive to the world of the children they work with, understanding and recognizing each child's cultural identity. This understanding is fundamental, as interacting with these children allows for the appreciation of the knowledge they bring from their lived experiences. Even if that knowledge is not expressed through formal language, it holds great value, as it was constructed from the child's concrete reality. For this reason, a structured and well-organized approach to teaching that seeks to value this rich cultural knowledge will not only foster the learning of new content but also promote the exchange of experiences among children, creating a space in which they feel seen and heard—ultimately leading to a conscious, critical, sensitive, and respectful formation.

Lending legitimacy to the discussion at hand, Vicente, Vieira, and Silva (2020) reinforce the importance of recognizing the child as a social agent, emphasizing their voice and advocating for the need to be heard in matters that concern them. This listening takes place through access to an emancipatory education that fosters opportunities for inquiry and questioning—emerging from the process of developing critical awareness, which Freire views as essential. It is through this conscious action that children become thinking, engaged adults capable of transforming social spaces. Supporting these claims, Oliveira (2021, p. 16) affirms that “[...] in dialogics, the Freirean proposal of a problem-posing and liberating education is grounded in the effectiveness of communication—not from a sender-receiver perspective, but from an interactive, dialogical one.” Thus, this is an educational perspective rooted in political and epistemological dimensions that guide learners toward the essential knowledge needed to understand the world, make informed choices, and promote social change through dialogue in different contexts and with different people (Oliveira, 2021).

Dialogue is not limited to the mere exchange of knowledge, as Freire (2008, p. 12) emphasizes. The author stresses that the dialogical process offers those involved the opportunity to establish a communicative relationship that enables the critical engagement with knowledge objects—through analysis, reflection, evaluation, and the incorporation of new theoretical and practical insights. In dialogical situations, communication between peers expands the dimensions of what is possible to know about the object under investigation. In light of Freirean thought, dialogue is configured as an essential epistemological attitude, insofar as individuals recognize themselves as historically and socially situated beings in constant transformation, and thus committed to a critical and liberating form of communication, guided by reflection on the reality they construct and continually reconstruct.

The articulation between dialogue as a pedagogical practice and the valuing of children's knowledge is essential from a Freirean perspective. The same dialogical principle that supports the critical problematization of knowledge must also guide the pedagogical actions of teachers in Early Childhood Education—especially in recognizing the multiple forms of expression and knowledge that children bring from their lived contexts. Thus, dialogue should not occur only among teachers and other professionals working in Early Childhood Education but also between adults and children, in a relationship grounded in active listening, respect, and the appreciation of cultural identities. Overcoming mechanical and meaningless practices therefore demands a pedagogical stance committed to the collective construction of knowledge, the stimulation of critical thinking from the earliest years of life, and the promotion of a truly humanizing education (Furyama, 2025).

According to Freire (2022a), it is the teacher's role to show children in Early Childhood Education that the language they acquire outside the school context is just as rich as the one taught within educational institutions. At the same time, it is essential to emphasize that learning the correct pronunciation and

meaning of certain words is important and necessary in order to reduce disadvantages in life, since “[...] language problems always involve ideological issues, and with them, questions of power” (Freire, 2022a, p. 101, our translation).

Freire’s reflection reinforces the defense of an Early Childhood Education with its own identity—one that must not be reduced to spontaneous practices or unprepared, non-scientific teaching. At this stage, it is essential for children to have access to a range of meaningful experiences. However, pedagogical practices based on mechanical activities still prevail, such as tracing dotted lines, coloring meaningless holiday-themed drawings, and reproducing worksheets without intentionality. These practices often promote decontextualized literacy and numeracy, disregarding both cultural identity and the alignment with goals related to the development of critical thinking and holistic human formation—elements that Freire considers fundamental to human existence.

The valuing of cultural identity within the context of Early Childhood Education, as emphasized by Freire, fosters the recognition of diversity, respect for others and for the world, and enables the critical awareness necessary to resist oppression and challenge hegemonic social norms. It is through the recognition of different cultural identities in educational settings that a dialogical and critical teaching emerges—one that provides access to diverse forms of knowledge. As Freire states in his work, a child’s assumption of self does not entail the exclusion of others, but rather the ability to accept oneself and others with their distinct origins and cultures.

Silva and Mafra (2020) clarify that incorporating Paulo Freire’s theory into reflections on children’s education—valuing and recognizing them as active subjects in the educational process and engaging in dialogue with them—constitutes a significant act of resistance. It also requires study and deep understanding. According to the authors, applying Freirean teachings strengthens the conception of the child as a subject of rights, among which the fundamental right to express their voice stands out: to articulate their thoughts, knowledge, and experiences, regardless of their young age. For Freire, childhood goes beyond a mere age range—it is an existential condition, marked by an active, eager, and vital force that drives the child toward life and must not be overlooked or underestimated. Thus, understanding childhood as a biological time and space marked by inquisitive curiosity reinforces Freire’s view that the human being is programmed to learn.

This approach runs counter to the “banking model” of education, which Freire strongly criticizes—a model in which “[...] a subject, transformed into an object, passively and docilely receives the contents that another gives or imposes” (Freire, 1968, p. 27). Almeida, Martins, and Gonçalves (2022) explain that this vertical or banking model of education, as critiqued by Freire, does not provide teachers with the necessary conditions to recognize the educational context and the lived reality of children. Instead, it reinforces a teaching practice centered solely on what is assumed children should learn. For this reason, Freire advocates for a problem-posing education—one that values the cultural identity of children.

In light of these principles, it is understood that Paulo Freire’s contributions and advocacy for education enable fruitful discussions for early childhood teaching practice and teacher education. His thought addresses the weaknesses that must be overcome in Early Childhood Education, as it is grounded in a political, continuous, and ethical approach to education.

Therefore, when early childhood teachers respect and value children’s identities in the organization and development of the teaching process—fostering an educational practice grounded in respect, regardless of children’s social class, gender, or race—they help narrow the gap between discourse and action, contributing to the strengthening of democratic experiences, the advancement of citizenship, and the pursuit of both intellectual and political discipline—not only for the children but also for themselves. Silva (2021) emphasizes that it is essential for teachers to engage in daily reflection on their practice with children and to seek the knowledge necessary to overcome the assistentialist view historically constructed within the field of early childhood education. According to the author, Freire offers significant contributions toward legitimizing the work of early childhood educators, breaking with socially rooted common sense assumptions.

## Concluding Remarks

Based on the issues presented and discussed throughout this article, it becomes clear that early childhood educators must recognize and value children's cultural identity in Early Childhood Education. It is essential to integrate this cultural diversity into the teaching and learning process so that children feel a sense of belonging. The teacher's role in children's lives is of great importance, as their knowledge intertwines with that of the child, enabling critical reflections on the world, social interactions, power relations, and the pursuit of human emancipation. It is the teacher's responsibility to teach through a pedagogy that promotes knowledge while upholding freedom, thereby contributing to the development of children's critical thinking so they may strive for more just social conditions.

In this sense, when we approach Early Childhood Education from a Freirean perspective—one that values children's cultural identity—we understand that daycare centers and preschools must become democratic and dialogical spaces. These should acknowledge the cultural knowledge children bring and provide opportunities for them to engage in activities that stimulate thinking, thus supporting their holistic development. It is important that these environments allow for the exploration of cultural knowledge in its diverse forms, promoting humanization, autonomy, play, peer interaction, dialogue, respect, humility, and multiple opportunities for meaningful learning.

For Freire, the act of learning is a continuous process of the building and rebuilding of the human being, involving the exchange of knowledge between teacher and child through a liberating education that fosters ethical awareness. In everyday educational practice, Freire (2022a) emphasizes the importance of engaging in dialogue with children and listening attentively to them, regardless of their young age, stressing that this is a fundamental gesture within a truly democratic teaching practice.

An Early Childhood Education that takes into account the multiple cultural identities of children becomes a viable pathway toward an education oriented toward liberation. It is through such an approach that children can develop intellectually, understand the world around them and its diverse cultures, perceive themselves and others, and become engaged and participatory human beings in that world. There is a clear need to provide children with access to the scientific knowledge they need to acquire in Early Childhood Education, as this affirms a pedagogical structure based on problem-posing, organized, and intentional teaching, grounded in critical and reflective practice. Such an approach enables children to think, to participate in discussions by expressing their understandings of the topic being studied (cultural identity), and to engage in activities that encourage collaborative thinking with their peers to solve small problems. Teaching strategies should stimulate children's curiosity and critical thinking through practical experiences, including simple experiments and playful exploration of each topic—whether through reading books or using digital resources.

Despite the importance of valuing children's cultural identity in Early Childhood Education, as discussed throughout this article, it is important to acknowledge the limitations that this approach still faces. One such challenge is the resistance to Freirean theory within the Brazilian educational context, often fueled by fake news that portray the theory as fraudulent (Paim, 2024). Another limitation is linked to pedagogical practices that retain assistentialist remnants—prioritizing care over education—and the reproduction of hegemonic content and knowledge in the first stage of basic education. Early Childhood Education institutions often lack teacher training that effectively integrates theory and practice from a Freirean perspective, which hinders the implementation of a truly critical, dialogical approach that values children's cultural identities. Additionally, the excessive bureaucratic demands placed on teachers and the limited time available for collaborative planning among peers restrict the development of practices that embrace and honor the diversity of children's cultures.

Given these limitations, future research could explore how teacher education programs can be enhanced to practically and critically incorporate the principles of Freirean pedagogy into the daily routines of Early Childhood Education. Another urgent area of inquiry involves studies that highlight the significance

and global impact of Paulo Freire's theory—not only in Brazil but in various countries where his work is highly respected and valued. A further relevant line of investigation would be to examine how children perceive and express their cultural identities in different Early Childhood Education contexts, and how their voices can be more effectively included in the educational processes of this foundational stage.

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