The Transformative Power of Critical Consciousness Raising through Popular Education: An Autoethnographic Study

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ABSTRACT

The Transformative Power of Critical Consciousness Raising through Popular Education: An Autoethnographic Study

Vitor Atsushi Nozaki Yano

This autoethnographic study investigates the phenomenon of critical consciousness raising, as proposed by Freire, through popular education. Situated in the critical pedagogy field, it analyzes a personal transformative experience of *conscientização*, to explore how critical consciousness is developed in practice through popular education, what are the factors, conditions, and dispositions that can contribute to raising critical consciousness, and what can be the consequence of critical consciousness raising to one's life and one's communities. For that, a quick introduction of the main theoretical concepts is presented, and a literature review of 36 autoethnographic studies on critical consciousness was conducted. Employing a narrative method of inquiry and analysis, the methods for data collection and analysis are also discussed. The main findings of the study are that dialogue and praxis are main elements in the process of developing critical consciousness in popular education; desire for change and dialogical communication aligned with practice, are required for raising critical consciousness; the consequences of the process of *conscientização* including greater autonomy, responsibility, and leadership, fostering collective organization and social transformation. For further research, it is recommended to expand the questions approached in this study to a greater context, employing empirical research on the processes of critical consciousness raising among different people involved in one or more popular education initiatives within a community.

RESUMÉ

Le pouvoir transformateur du développement de la conscience critique par l'éducation populaire : Une étude autoethnographique

Vitor Atsushi Nozaki Yano

Cette étude autoethnographique examine le phénomène du développement de la conscience critique, tel que proposé par Freire, à travers l'éducation populaire. Situé dans le domaine de la pédagogie critique, l'étude analyse une expérience personnelle transformative de *conscientização*, afin d'explorer comment elle se développe dans la pratique à travers l'éducation populaire ; quels sont les facteurs, conditions et dispositions qui peuvent y contribuer ; et quelles peuvent être ses conséquences individuelles et communautaires. Pour ce faire, une brève introduction des principaux concepts théoriques est présentée, et une revue de littérature comprenant 36 autoethnographies sur la conscience critique a été réalisée. En utilisant une méthode narrative de recherche, la méthodologie de collecte et d'analyse des données est également discutée. Les principales conclusions indiquent que : le dialogue et la praxis sont les éléments principaux du processus de *conscientização* dans l'éducation populaire ; le désir de changement et la communication dialogique alignée sur la pratique sont nécessaires pour élever la conscience critique ; les conséquences de la conscientisation incluent une plus grande autonomie, responsabilité et leadership, favorisant l'organisation collective et la transformation sociale. Pour l'avenir, il est recommandé d'élargir les questions de cette étude, en appliquant des méthodes empiriques pour investiguer les processus de conscientisation de différentes personnes impliquées dans une ou plusieurs initiatives d'éducation populaire dans une communauté.

RESUMO

O Poder Transformador da Conscientização Através da Educação Popular:

Um Estudo Autoetnográfico

Vitor Atsushi Nozaki Yano

Este estudo autoetnográfico busca investigar o fenômento do desenvolvimento da consciência crítica, conforme proposto por Freire, através da educação popular. Situado no campo da pedagogia crítica, o estudo analisa uma experiência pessoal transformadora de conscientização, a fim de explorar: como a consciência crítica é desenvolvida na prática através da educação popular; quais são os fatores, condições e disposições que podem contribuir para isso; e quais podem ser suas consequências individuais e comunitárias. Para isso, uma breve introdução dos principais conceitos teóricos é apresentada, seguida de uma revisão de literatura compreendendo 36 estudos autoetnográficos sobre consciência crítica. Utilizando um método narrativo de pesquisa, o estudo também discute a methodologia empregada para coleta e análise de dados. Os principais achados indicam que: o diálogo e a práxis são os principais elementos no processo de conscientização na educação popular; o desejo por mudança e a comunicação dialógica alinhada à prática são necessários para o desenvolvimento da consciência crítica; consequências da conscientização incluem maior autonomia, responsabilidade e liderança, o que favorece a organização coletiva e a transformação social. Como pesquisa futura, recomenda-se expandir as questões abordadas neste estudo para um contexto mais amplo, aplicando métodos empíricos para investigar os processos de conscientização de diferentes pessoas envolvidas em uma ou mais iniciativas de educação popular em uma comunidade.

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Any thesis is a result of collective work, which includes the advice, discussions, and support of all professors and students throughout the program. But in writing an autoethnography, I can't help but think on how all the knowledge and reflections that I brought here were also built collectively along my whole life. Thus, I am grateful to my family who always encouraged me and trusted me on my decisions, and to all the members of the collectives and organizations in which I've been involved across the years, which allowed me to develop the critical consciousness that I describe here and that transformed my life.

Finally, I thank everyone who supported me in moving from Brazil to Canada and to Norway to complete this program, which was crucial for me to keep going and to finish it. In special, I would like to express my appreciation to Nara, Ian, Justine, and Gwen, who first provided me places to live in Montréal; to my friends from Brazil who were with me before and along this journey in the Master's program: Cami, Mari, Rubia, Noemi, Khalil, Marina, Josafá, Dai, Matheus, Sarah, Hellen, and Bianca; to my Brazilian friends in Montréal who became my family here: Patty, Martina, and Marina; to my friends in the department: Ellie, Erica, Geisa, Cindy, Jenna, Noga, and Ian; and to my multicultural study group friends who I met in Oslo: Francisco, Leonce, Mahmoona, Stephanie, Nicole, and Alicia. Thank you very much!

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my grandmother Mituko Yano and to my beloved parents Helena and Yoiti, who taught me so much and keep inspiring my life.

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Introduction

In July 2015, I was in the third year of the PhD program in Electrical Engineering at University of Campinas (Unicamp), considered to be one of the best universities in Latin America (Times Higher Education, 2024). At that time, I had already completed all the required credits with more than 90% average of grades and had even passed the PhD qualifying exam. I was living with my partner in Curitiba and our main source of income was my scholarship, with which we were paying our rent and expenses. I had recently published an article based on my master's thesis (Yano et al., 2015) and presented what would be part of my dissertation in an international IEEE conference (Boehmlaender et al., 2015), related to an international research internship I did in Germany in the previous year. My family was proud of me—I would be the first person in my family to earn a PhD degree. But on the 13th of July, I went to Unicamp—after traveling around 500 km from Curitiba to Campinas—and, after a short talk with my supervisor, I went to the student services centre to withdraw from my PhD. I dropped out of the program to study Pedagogy.

Over the past nine years, I have told the above story multiple times. Since then, I have moved to different places and began new activities in different institutions. Every time someone asks me how I came to education as a field of research, practice and pedagogy, I share the same opening narrative. Not surprisingly, people ask: "Why?". Indeed, a pure materialist analysis of the situation would not give a reasonable nor fulsome explanation. What led me to drop out of a well-established trajectory in which I have invested so much effort and time? The purpose of this study is to describe and interrogate the process of critical consciousness raising—a phenomenon

that I learned a few years before the opening reflection—and the encounters and sequence of events that led me to that decision.

About three years before that, in 2012, I was introduced to Freire's (1974, 1998, 2005) work. Through my participation in a popular education adult literacy project with the Homeless Workers' Movement, I had the opportunity to learn Freirean approaches concomitantly in theory and in practice. Since then, I have been interested in learning and reflecting on everything related to the field of education, from the individual cognitive process of learning to the historical development of policies, to its philosophical conceptualizations and sociological implications, from varied approaches and contexts. Taken together, this has led me to where I am today, reflecting on the importance of critical consciousness to transform education and society, also in how knowledge is produced. The interest in investigating the topic I am presenting in this proposal emerged from the suggestion of friends, who asked me to write about this transformative process that occurred in my life. In a hindsight, I realized that this could have been *conscientização* (the process of consciousness-raising), as conceptualized by Freire (1974).

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian popular educator and philosopher, considered one of the founders of the field of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2010). While his insights were developed through his reflections and practices in popular education and adult literacy, his radical approach became influential to different formal contexts, from elementary to higher education, and impacted other areas of knowledge, including social work, community development and community health. One important point of Freire's (2005) work is that the proposal for a liberating pedagogy was not limited to teaching methods, techniques, or to the curriculum. Rather, he questioned the very concept of education and how political and ideological relations

inherent aspects of any educational system and are capable of perpetuating domination, and oppression in societies.

Despite it having been 55 years since the first publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and all the impacts it made in educational systems around the globe, its contributions are still relevant and necessary, considering that the sectarianism and conditions of oppression that he denounced persist. As Apple (2019) argued, "we still have much to learn—and relearn—from Freire" (p. 370). Even though multiple books and articles were produced inspired by Freire's (2005) work, using his language and concepts, many of their authors did not actually engage in putting them into concrete practice, which is contradictory. For example, while the Freirean pedagogy was intended to overcome the teacher-student dichotomy, some works suggest that teachers can employ techniques to develop students' critical consciousness (e.g., Watts et al., 2011; Diemer et al., 2016). For Freire (2005), liberation cannot be a deposit made into people, and "[t]hose truly committed to the cause of liberation can accept neither the mechanistic concept of consciousness as an empty vessel to be filled, nor the use of banking methods of domination … in the name of liberation." (p. 79).

In the regard to misconceptions, contradictions, and the occasional depoliticization of Freire's work, Jemal (2017) demonstrated that there are theoretical inconsistencies in how critical consciousness is understood in the academic literature. There are divergences, for example, on whether it is an outcome or a developmental process, and if tools, strategies, and techniques are inherently part of the concept. Furthermore, there is no consensus on whether the concept of critical consciousness is appliable only for oppressed groups and if it also incorporates the notion of privileges (Jemal, 2017). Although this lack of consensus may appear to be a problem in terms of academic knowledge, in a critical perspective it means that the

critical pedagogy field is never finished, but always in the process of becoming, as pointed out by Apple (2019). Because of the importance he gave to the dialectical unity of objectivity and subjectivity, Freire (2005) was aware that there would be misinterpretations of his work—by those who he called "sectarians" (p. 39). Even so, through the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he proposed to open a dialogue.

Considering the incompleteness of the critical pedagogy field, in this study I investigated how *conscientização* occurs. I did not aim to investigate the raising of critical consciousness as a distant observer or to find an objective explanation for the phenomenon that can solve the mentioned inconsistencies. Instead, in alignment with the Freirean concept of education, I intended to analyze it from one perspective that is open to critiques. Through both my theoretical knowledge and my practical experience in the process of critical consciousness raising, I hope I can contribute to the advancement of the field through dialogue.

Research Questions

To describe and investigate the process of *conscientização*, I conducted an autoethnographic study where I bring my lived experience of taking part in popular education in conversation with previous research on critical consciousness raising. As such, my research questions are as follows:

1. How is critical consciousness developed in practice through popular education?
2. What are the factors, conditions, and dispositions that can contribute to raising critical consciousness?
3. What can be the consequence of critical consciousness raising to one's life and one's communities?

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is divided in five chapters. First, I briefly introduced the entry point to my current research on critical consciousness and how my theoretical knowledge and practical experience on the topic led me to choose to investigate it. In the second chapter, I describe some of the binding theories and concepts that were used in the development of this study and their overall relevance to my analysis. In addition, I present a literature review on studies that employed autoethnography as a methodology to investigate the process of critical consciousness raising by other authors. I did this to achieve a strong foundation of autoethnography and to situate my study and experience with the discursive communities and nexus of both autoethnography and critical consciousness. Following my literature review, the third chapter describes the autoethnographic methodology that I used in this study, how I grappled with its methodological shifts, and why I chose to use it. Then, in the fourth chapter, I narrate and analyze my experiences of critical consciousness raising as an autoethnography. Moving on to the fifth chapter, I discuss my main findings, their significance in autobiographical, relational, and cultural ways, and I provide responses to my research questions. Finally, I conclude this thesis by summarizing its contributions while concurrently pointing out limitations, recommendations for further research, and implications for practice.

Chapter Two: Reviewing Relevant Theories and Literature on Critical Pedagogy

In this chapter, I bring together relevant theories that have informed my research and recent literature that has informed how I have situated my own autoethnographic study. First, I introduce the theoretical approaches that led to the constitution of the critical pedagogy field. Next, I describe the concepts of critical consciousness and popular education as they were employed in this study. Then, I present a literature review on critical consciousness raising through other autoethnographic studies. The objective of this chapter is to clarify the concepts that I used in my analysis, and to situate my study in the field of critical pedagogy, allowing a better discussion on its contributions and implications.

Relevant Theories on Critical Pedagogy

This study is situated in the field of critical pedagogy, as developed by Freire (2005). As observed by Donaldo Macedo in the introduction of the 30th anniversary edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire's thinking was broadly influenced by a philosophical tradition that included Hegel, Marx, Gramsci, and Sartre, and is a critical theory applied to education. Ryoo and McLaren (2010) described critical theory as both a philosophy and a methodology within social sciences. As a philosophy, it originated from the need to historicize, criticize, and expose the power relations that maintain the conditions of domination and subordination between humans, and is usually associated to philosophers of the Frankfurt School. Through the critique of social constructs as a form of articulation for human liberation, other theories emerged from this broad perspective, including critical race theory (Crenshaw, 1989) and critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2010; Kincheloe, 2004). As noted by Mason (2010), critical theories essentially oppose positivism in its epistemology, for being both cognitive and reflective rather than objectifying.

As a methodology, critical theory engages in a relationship with society by presenting a need for a dialogical approach towards emancipatory practices (Ryoo & McLaren, 2010).

Although some of the thoughts that would constitute critical pedagogy were already published in previous texts (see Freire, 1974), his main ideas were synthesized and became widely known due to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published for the first time in 1968. Founded on existential and phenomenological grounds, his theorizing proposes that education is part of the process of becoming a human being and, therefore it is intrinsically political and cannot be neutral. Thus, a "banking concept of education" (Freire, 2005, p. 72), based on teachers making deposits into students, is an instrument for maintaining the condition of oppression, by dehumanizing them—both students and teachers—so they cannot be subjects of their own histories and lives. Otherwise, a liberating education based on dialogue and problem-posing would allow the development and exercise of critical thinking collectively, by overcoming the opposition teacher-student. This would allow people to raise consciousness on their own condition, to become aware of their incompleteness, to read the world, and ultimately to supersede the contradiction of the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy.

Critical pedagogy is an approach that challenges the traditional forms of formal education not only in methodological terms, but also epistemologically. For Freire (2005), knowledge of reality is produced through collective reflection and action and, therefore through a "dialectical unity" (p. 38) of subjectivity and objectivity. For his adult literacy method, for example, he proposed that literacy could not precede critical thinking, both should happen at the same time. In his words, "… reading the word implies continually reading the world. … [T]his movement from the world to the word and from the word to the world is always present" (Freire, 1983, p. 10). Thus, in his view, it is necessary that educational practices are based in the students' context

so they have concrete meaning, which can be achieved through dialogue and critical reflection on generative themes (Freire, 2005). Further, other scholars (e.g. hooks, 1994) also incorporated critical discussions on race and gender within the critical pedagogy theory. hooks (1994), for example, pointed out that Freire's (2005) concept of freedom is always linked to the experience of patriarchal manhood. However, at the same time, she identified herself in his work and linked the process of decolonization of black people to the process of conscientization. Her educational experiences in both racially segregated and desegregated schools in the United States were influential for her to propose the concept of engaged pedagogy.

Critical Consciousness and Conscientização

One of the most important concepts in Freire's (1974, 1998, 2005) philosophy of education is critical consciousness. The ultimate goal of his proposal for a liberation pedagogy is a social transformation through the raising of critical consciousness, in a process of *conscientização*. Although, for the author, the conception of critical consciousness is politically specific, as mentioned before, there have been distortions on how it is employed in the academic literature. Because the word consciousness can be considered a synonym for awareness, the concept of critical consciousness is often misinterpreted as a pure reflexive state, as the understanding or the realization of a condition of oppression.

For Freire (1974), there are two levels of apprehension of reality. The first one, which he called *prise de conscience*, is the awareness that we are people in the world, in a specific time and space, under a specific context. Critical consciousness is in a deeper level than the one of the *prise de conscience* (Freire, 1974)*:*

> This deepening of the prise de conscience which takes place through conscientization, is not and never can be an intellectual or an individualistic effort. Conscientization cannot

be arrived at by a psychological, idealist subjectivist road, nor through objectivism. (p. 131).

Thus, more than apprehending the reality as it is, critical consciousness means the people knowing themselves to be unfinished. And being unfinished means that human beings are historical beings, always in the process of becoming, and that the reality is not given or closed (Freire, 2005). This level of consciousness can only be achieved through praxis: the resolution of the dialectical contradiction objectivity-subjectivity. That means, critical consciousness is developed through action and reflection concomitantly.

Freire (1974) also differentiated forms of consciousness, which he called critical, naive, and fanatic consciousness: "′[c]ritical consciousness is integrated with reality; naive consciousness superimposes itself on reality; and fanatical consciousness, whose pathological naivete leads to the irrational, adapts to reality." (p. 39). That means that, while naive consciousness consider itself superior to the objective reality, and fanatical consciousness consider the objective reality as finished, through critical consciousness, people act in the world in a dialectical unity.

Popular Education

The concept of popular education has changed over the time, and it can still assume different interpretations. According to Tiana-Ferrer (2011), the term *éducation populaire* was already being used in France in the 1960s to describe proposals that can be traced back to the period of the Enlightenment in the 18th century, which aimed to making education universal, for all people at all ages. This notion centers the concept of the term on the word *popular*, which means *of the people*. In this sense, as noted by Kane (2010), the term has a strong class but very imprecise connotation, referring to *people* as ordinary people, as opposed to the elites. Thus, it

can include a variety of initiatives that have been developed along the last centuries over different contexts, such as the *Ferrer's Escuela Moderna*, the anarchist *rationalist schools*, and the university extension movement in Spain, but also different forms of non-formal education, continuing education, vocational training, popular libraries, and educational initiatives developed by trade unions, political associations, and religious institutions (Tiana-Ferrer, 2011).

In Latin America however, especially starting from the 1960s, popular education has a more specific connotation. As argued by Jara (2010), the idea of *people* in this context is based on the concepts of *social people*—those who are subject to forms of oppression, exploitation, exclusion, and other social injustices—and *political people*—those who struggle to overcome such injustices. Thus, popular education refers to political-pedagogical processes that are intentionally developed towards a progressive social change, with the end to eliminate social injustices such as relations of domination, discrimination, inequalities (Kane 2010; Jara, 2010).

The key differences between the two concepts of popular education lie in political, philosophical, and epistemological notions of education in each approach. In the first approach, it is seen as form of allowing popular classes *to have access* to a specialized knowledge, as a means for their social ascension. In the latter, knowledge is built *by* those popular classes, as a way of transforming the social structures of domination. It "is based on the belief that all people possess important knowledge arising from their own particular experiences and that education should consist of a dialogue between these different sets of knowledge." (Kane, 2010, p. 277).

The Latin American conception of popular education was mainly formed within social movements, where Freire (1974, 1998, 2005) played a significant role. He formulated the educational philosophy that was basis for the Movement for Grassroots Education (*Movimento de Educação de Base*) and the Popular Culture Centers (*Centros Populares de Cultura*) (Jara,

2010). Freire's practices did not take place in formal education, but through "culture circles," where the focus was on sharing and reflecting critically on the experience and knowledge of the students to demystify forms of false consciousness. Thus, popular education became associated to informal and non-formal practices of education, as one of the main characteristics of liberation pedagogies in Latin America is the resistance to incorporation into the apparatuses of the capitalist state (Torres, 1992).

Through the following decades, Freire's ideas spread out over Latin America, connecting different urban and rural social movements. The most important ones, the Landless Rural Workers Movement (*MST – Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra*) in Brazil, the Zapatista movement in Mexico, initiatives of municipal decentralization, participatory budgets, among others, incorporated processes of popular education as fundamental elements in their organizational methods (Jara, 2010).

Besides the foundational theories and concepts presented here, other autoethnographic studies in the critical pedagogy field informed this study. They helped me situating my research in the literature of the field, but also providing important methodological aspects to be considered in autoethnography. The process of literature review and a synthesis of the findings is presented in the following section.

Reviewing the Literature on Critical Consciousness

To better support the process of analysis of my process of *conscientização*, I carried out a systematic literature review, aiming to identify the findings of other autoethnographic studies that analyzed the process as experienced by the authors, in the role of teachers, educators, and/or researchers. Therefore, works that presented autoethnography as a methodological proposal for research or educational projects and those that reported recommendations for promoting critical

consciousness in students or participants were excluded. I did this because the purpose of this literature review was to be allow me to relate and compare my conscientization process to the personal experiences of others applying similar methods.

Using the terms *(autoethnography AND "critical consciousness")*, I looked up in six scholar databases on the 11th of November 2023, limiting the results to peer-reviewed journal articles. In the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), the equivalent terms in Portuguese and Spanish were also used to search for articles in those languages, but no results were found.

Following the steps recommended by the PRISMA statement (Page et al., 2021), I first removed the duplicate results, having a total of 293 articles identified. Then, through the assessment of the titles and abstracts, I performed an initial screening process, excluding other 237 results that did not match the inclusion criteria. Further, based on the 56 remaining article's full-text, I selected 36 as eligible to this review, justifying the exclusion of the other 20. Figure 1 shows the flow diagram of the process and Table 1 shows the justification for excluding the articles in the selection step.

Figure 1

Flow diagram of the systematic review process

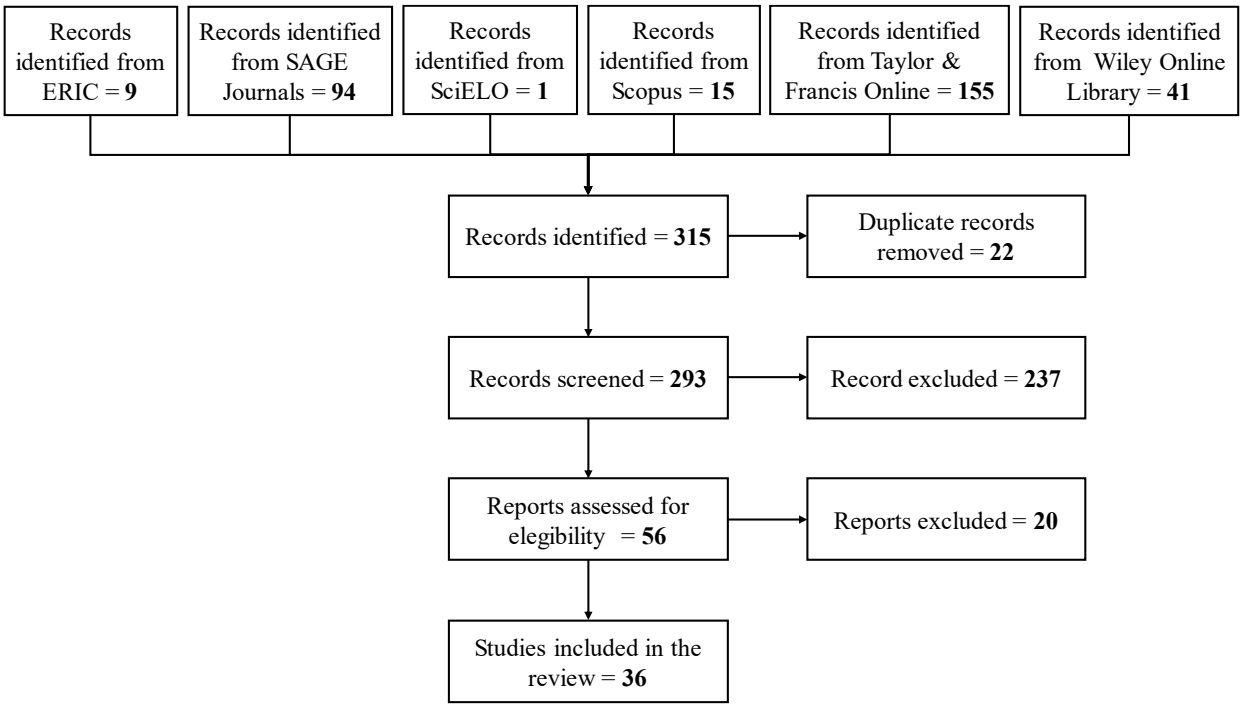

Table 1

Articles excluded after full-text reading with justification

Article	Reason for excluding
Barak (2020)	The author analyzes their childhood experiences in a neighborhood where a collective critical consciousness could have taken place due to its contradictions.
Brewster (2018)	The study relies on the experiences of participants of a course aimed to build student's critical consciousness.
Burgess (2020)	The author analyzes possibilities in teaching and learning and narrates her experiences on seeking to develop her students' critical consciousness.
Camangian et al. (2023)	The article proposes autoethnography as a critical race methodology and the authors employ it to illustrate how they can choose to and lift voices as an educational work.

Chen et al. (2019)	The authors use autoethnography to analyze the power dynamics in engineering education and their efforts on developing social justice and critical consciousness in the field.
Curtiss et al. (2023)	The authors employ duoethnography to analyze how the concept of cultural humility could improve their youth development program towards transformative social justice and raise consciousness on social inequalities.
Gatwiri (2018)	The author uses autoethnography to analyze an educational practice that can contribute to raise critical consciousness by students.
Gooden et al. (2020)	The article presents themes that emerged from an autoethnographic practice with mentors and doctoral students, finding that the critical consciousness of the mentor is important to enact it on students.
Hernandez et al. (2015)	The authors use a collective autoethnography to analyze their positions in American higher education and how they negotiate their roles in academia as foreign-born women of color.
Hickey & Austin (2007)	The authors propose autoethnography as a form of critical pedagogy to help raising critical consciousness among participants.
Lamichhane et al. (2023)	The authors propose postcolonial autoethnography as a political, historical, and cultural form of knowledge production against the imposition of Western-Eurocentric thought.
LeMaster et al. (2019)	The authors explore the use of autoethnography as a form of facilitating consciousness development, in the sense of raising awareness.
Luguetti & Oliver (2021)	The article reports the transformative experience of the first author as enacting activist approaches to physical education teacher education.
Poulos (2012)	The author uses autoethnography as a method to analyze the shifting in the vision of heroism, villainy, and violence in the American culture on screens along the years.

Rodriguez et al. (2023)	Through an autoethnographic study, the authors investigate how they position themselves as critical science teacher educators.
Shoemaker (2020)	The author describes her experience teaching in a prison education project, observing the potential it has as employing critical pedagogy practices to develop critical consciousness among the participants.
Strom & Martin (2013)	The authors focus more on the use of critical pedagogy and the concept of rhizome to raise critical consciousness in classroom through teaching practices.
Tsalach (2022)	The author presents her experience through an autoethnographic study to examine her relationship with higher education.
Williams & Zaini (2016)	As a teacher and a student, the authors reported a critical educational experience that was emancipatory to the latter by connecting to his previous life experience.
Yomantas (2021)	The author presents an interactive essay designed to be discussed and to open dialogues and promote new understandings and possibilities in teaching and learning.

The articles included in the review all narrate, through autoethnographic writings, the process in which their authors describe themselves as developing critical consciousness, although framing in a diversity of perspectives. I organized them in four different categories according to their emphasis: educational practices, privileges, gender, and race.

Critical Consciousness and Educational Practices

A common characteristic found in some of the articles is the mention to how conscientization occurred through experiences in their teaching and/or researching practices and how it informed them. In this sense, Burdick (2014) analyzed a past essay she wrote to conduct an autobiographical inquiry on why and how she became a critical educator and how she could

affect the same desire in others. She concluded by proposing that “the invention of critical engagement with the social world is rooted in locating and excavating the self that one has already been” (p. 131). Similarly, Cooper & Majumdar (2023) used autoethnography and critical pedagogy to analyze their experiences of raising critical consciousness as researchers and scholars in business schools. Through a dialogical process between the authors, they observed that critical thinking encompasses the whole being, involving feelings, emotions, memory, affects and mind. They recognized elements of dehumanization and systemic oppression in their experiences, but also their privileges and power. In a similar approach of writing a collective autoethnography, Latta et al. (2018) argued that critical service-learning approach could help them to reflect on their positionalities and develop their critical consciousness, but by involving the concept of achievement, moved their focus away from critical thinking towards the realization of a goal. Also reporting their own process of conscientization, Talbot and McCain (2023) narrated their trajectory into engaged citizenship, depicting how the space for dialogue and praxis in a scouting group and the exposure to injustice contributed to it, while Underhill (2021) narrated her process of learning from small acts of resistance beyond the classroom, observing the possibilities of lifelong learning in social movements and activist groups. Further, by reflecting on a language to articulate her discomfort through reading Freire's work she described her process of becoming an activist-scholar. Moreover, Skousen (2022) reported his experience as a school principal and his development of critical consciousness while a teacher, acknowledging the importance of it for being a school leader. Analyzing the elements involved in his continuous development of critical consciousness, Fienberg (2023) observed that the music, the academic literature, and the local community were fundamental for it. Finally, a more comprehensive narrative in terms of timeframe was presented by Guajardo and Guajardo (2017).

Based not only on their educational or professional story, but on their collective life story and relationship with their father, the authors presented a theory of change and action, demonstrating "how relationships, assets, stories, place, politic, and action come together" (p. 19). They reported how his life model inspired them to engage in academic activism. Taken together, the articles conveyed the connection between and amongst an educational trajectory, critical thinking, and the development of consciousness, with the latter being a defining element of their professions towards more active and socially engaged practices.

While the referred works described conscientization as a progressive and continuous process developed along the time, others include one or more specific transformative moments as important marks for the beginning or the realization of the process. For instance, Martinez (2014), after describing how her schooling experience affected her writings towards objective, standard, and mechanical forms, related how the reading of a text by Trinh Minh-ha on the power of writing and the woman of color positionality impacted on her as if a light turned off above her head. Dania (2021) passed through this transformative process to engage on critical pedagogy in her teaching practice. She also mentioned how game-based pedagogies and participatory action research led her to realize that the teaching practice could not be separated from her subjectivity and developed a desire to challenge the conventional physical education structures. In a similar manner, García Jr (2020) reflected on his journey as academic by examining transformative life experiences that shaped his trajectory, especially through educational practices that sustained dialogue, collective knowledge production, and community wisdom. Thus, these articles reported the significance of one or more methodological aspects of education that contributed to raise consciousness.

Critical Consciousness and Privileges

In some of the articles found, the authors also reported the importance of conscientization to them to become aware of their own privileges. Tilley-Lubbs (2018), for example, employed critical autoethnography to reflect on her positionality, realizing that many teachers and researchers tend to believe that they have reached a state of critical consciousness while not being aware of their invisible power and privileges. She observed that conscientization is an ongoing and continuous process, a fluid state that needs the constant confront with oneself. Participating in a family literacy program as a professor, Schoorman (2016) also developed an autoethnography narrating his learning with and from members of the community, yielding insights and consciousness about his privileges and position, which he described as a critical awakening to the institutional injustice. In a deeper retrospective, Cunninghan (2004) investigated through an autoethnographic process on his childhood how children immersed in the American culture begin to question and resist to it. He suggested that the exposure to critical alternatives and counterhegemonic narratives, and the cultivation of a critical sensibility are the two major social-contextual requirements for it. In another work focused on personal contradictions, Newman (2013) reflected on his process of critical consciousness raising. Contrasting with his earlier aspirations as a golf player and BMW driver, he reported hating himself when thinking on his contradictions. He described his conscientization through reflection on the knowledge he gained:

> I don’t know exactly when it happened, but I can certainly remember what was happening. Like Neo in the Matrix, I had, by choice or by habitus, taken the red pill. As I read contemporary social critics ... —I worked toward galvanizing what I came to believe

> was a sophisticated set of political sensibilities—an episteme that I could use to deconstruct the social world and my place in it (p. 255).

Still on the connection between critical consciousness and awareness of privileges, Bennett (2023) narrated his process of becoming conscious of his whiteness based on an experience he had with a Black colleague in a restaurant, and how it informed his teaching praxis. Similarly, using a series of conversations that developed through years, Magnet (2006) described her process of acknowledging her white privileges and realizing the racism within her. As she noted, she used to claim her minority identity as Jewish, while not recognizing her majority identity as white. Her relationships with other people revealed her privileges over the time, showing a continuous development of consciousness. DeMartino (2023) also recognized that in her past trajectory as a white teacher she did not really care about the students or build authentic relationships. Her connection with a teacher and other faculty, staff, students, families, and community members in a Mexican American Studies program changed her life into understanding education as a political act, the multiple systems of oppression, culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies. In a more personal and evocative approach, Dominguez (2019) employed critical pedagogy and feminist framework to analyze how the changing from the dominance of the white rationality to learning, teaching, and living critical social justice approaches transformed their nightmares. Finally, another related autoethnography was written by Locke (2017), where she examined her experiences in education as a first-generation white student from a low-income background. After a struggle in her educational trajectory with unmeaningful contents, uncaring teachers, and repressive environments, she described that her critical consciousness was developed during her graduate studies by learning about the systemic

and historical roots of educational disparities. She realized that marginalized people were oppressed in education systems, but also that she benefited from advantages for being white.

While the articles mentioned in this category were also mostly connected to the educational experiences of their authors, they emphasized one significant aspect of their process of conscientization, which is associated with realizing their own privileges and the dealing with their personal contradictions.

Critical Consciousness and Gender

Some authors of the articles included in the review employed feminist theories to analyze the relation between the process of critical consciousness raising and their gender and sexual identities. For example, Palmer et al. (2022) employed a collective autoethnography to analyze their experiences of socialization as doctoral students in a feminist focused research group. They reported that collaboration, community building and engagement with feminist epistemologies allowed them to reflect on their cultural and historical subjectivities and helped them in the development of critical thinking and consciousness. In a similar way, Yakushko et al. (2013) reflected through autoethnographic case examples about the transformative and empowering experiences of two of the authors through their personal life process of maternity and the study of feminist approaches to research. Additionally, Ledwith (2009) reported her initial trajectory in education, where she learned to be a teacher decontextualized from the real world, although an inner discomfort with injustice was already present. During her graduate studies, through contact with an adult educator, she got to know Antonio Gramsci's work and felt a fusion of reason and emotion, moving towards a synthesis of theory and practice, and realizing her false consciousness. Finally, Dore (2019) used past publications and his trajectory as a researcher as a source to analyze the changes on his own approaches to vulnerably position his identity, body,

and biography in his process of knowledge production. Once again, the articles in this category share with the other categories the connection with educational practices. However, in this set of works, critical consciousness raising is associated with notions of empowerment, vulnerability, gender, and sexual identity through the employment of feminist frameworks.

Critical Consciousness and Race

In the last category, I included articles that discussed the importance of critical consciousness for racial minority groups and how the oppression conditions are crucial for the development of the process. In this regard, Villanueva (2020) wrote a series of letters to his past self that reflected on the rethinking of his internal contradictions as an urban planner of color, which led him toward becoming more radically political in terms of recognizing the epistemic violence that can exist when planning gentrifying neighborhoods, for example. Along comparable lines, Shim (2021) who self describes as an Asian science teacher in the United States, underscored the development of her multicultural competence through the aspects of knowledge, awareness, and skills, also highlighting that, in addition to them, critical consciousness is necessary for teachers to become agents of change and help students to challenge the barriers and oppositions. In a more personal narrative, Broughton (2022) reported that, while the Eurocentric nature of curricula has always bothered him, he conformed to the white ideologies. He described that his liberation process occurred through the reading a text that presented Du Bois (1903) as a forerunner of critical pedagogy, affirming his position as a Black scholar that could be respected as producing official knowledge. Similarly, Cozart (2010) described her process of awakening to a calling as an academic through the learning of critical pedagogies proposed by hooks (1994), Ladson-Billings (1995), and Jennings and Lynn (2005), which together with Dilliard's (2006) notion of endarkened feminist epistemology, allowed her to

reconcile her spirituality to the academy. The importance of black scholars' references to conscientization is also highlighted by Seedat (2023). Through an evocative autoethnography in the form of a posthumous letter to his mother, the author described his critical consciousness raising process through both affectionate professional relationships and from interventions of Black activist scholars in knowledge production. More on a personal approach, Murray-Johnson (2013) employed autoethnography and critical race feminism to analyze how her personal interactions shaped the understanding of her identity as a Black Caribbean woman in the United States. She reported her memories of cultural frames of reference when she formed opinions about African Americans, which she further realized to be erroneous. She concluded by emphasizing the importance of engaging in open and honest dialogues, even when there was discomfort in developing critical consciousness and eradicate stereotypes. As a gifted Black man with dyslexia, Robinson (2017) explored his experiences of feeling othered in school because of his race and learning differences and without having a correct diagnosis. He related that his educational journey on learning to read changed his outlook on life, and on himself as an agent of change. He described his development of critical consciousness as the ability to critically analyze, reflect, and act upon inequalities. Still in a personal perspective, Garvey et al. (2023) used a collective autoethnography to analyze their experiences as minoritized academic scholars. They found out that their critical consciousness emerged from the motivation to act against collectively perceived injustices and developed through the reading of anti-racist scholarly literature, becoming embodied in their identities. Henhawk (2013) related his trajectory into graduate studies as an Indigenous person, depicting how it changed himself through studying and experiencing decolonial praxis, in a process he called critical awakening. In a comparable way, Rodriguez (2006) described how women of color develop critical skills as an emergence from

resistance to domination and oppression, with some of them choosing to situate themselves on the margins for them can be sites of resistance, empowerment, and transformation. Similarly, Ortega (2021) analyzed his internalized oppression which made him want to be white. He observed that the critical education he experienced in his graduate studies helped him to gain critical consciousness and to question inequalities, through a continuous process of shared engagement with his family, colleagues, and Latinx community. Finally, Evans-Winters and Esposito (2018) discussed the marginalization of scholars of color through personal narratives, observing that, through what they call sister circles, a triple consciousness emerges. When critical consciousness is developed, adding to the double consciousness that people of color have (Du Bois, 1903), they suggest that an ontological embodiment and reflection on their communities take place. One of the authors reported the importance of a high school teacher in her life trajectory to acquire the vocabulary to articulate about institutional racism and sexism. The articles in this category analyzed the critical consciousness raising using critical race theory, including the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and highlighted the significance of the process to resist and transform oppressions and inequalities within and outside of educational systems.

Conclusion

The articles reviewed focused on different processes of consciousness raising from the perspective of their respective authors. Through autoethnographic works, they connect the personal to the cultural, providing the possibility of producing knowledge with the relation between theory and experience (Mitchell, 2016). The articles included in this review, however, were generally written by higher education professors describing their experiences in formal education systems and institutions. Further, in some of the articles (e.g. Cooper & Majumdar,

2023; Talbot & McCain, 2023), the term critical consciousness is used as the awareness of self and others, restricted to what Freire (1974) called *prise de conscience*. As Tiley-Lubbs (2018) observed, even as researchers in critical pedagogy we can have a limited view on consciousness, "often completely unaware of the fact that we are performing in subtly oppressive ways toward the other participants" (p. 16). Nevertheless, all the authors reported experiences that involved components of action and reflection in the process of achieving some level of *conscientização*.

Taken together, the theories presented here, and the reviewed studies served as a starting point and a basis for analyzing my own experience and process of critical consciousness raising. The literature review assisted me in the methodological aspects of autoethnographic research, but also helped me to have an overview of the published work and situate the contributions of my study. For example, the divergences in the conceptions of critical consciousness made me consider the importance of the encounters that led me to this study, especially regarding my praxis. The different experiences reported by the authors of the reviewed articles revealed that the critical consciousness can be raised through various ways, but always involving both reflection and action. Moreover, *conscientização* is a continuous process, which can be developed in different paces and at different levels. In this sense, the review of critical pedagogy theories provided me the framework to gather these findings to analyze my own personal experience in a more informed and coherent manner, considering a conception that is more aligned with what Freire (1974, 1998, 2005) proposed, in a context that was closer to what he experienced.

In the next chapter, I present the methodological aspects of this study, describing how I used autoethnography to narrate and analyze my experience of critical consciousness raising through popular education.

Chapter Three: Methodological Aspects of this Study

In this chapter, I describe autoethnography as a critical research methodology, and the rationale of using it to my research problematic. Although the autoethnographic approach aligned well with the purpose of my study, theoretically and epistemologically, I grappled with its methodological shifts. Due to the relative novelty of autoethnography and to its transgressive characteristic in science and knowledge production, at first, I was not totally confident in employing it to develop my thesis. The need to learn how to conduct an autoethnographic study—including the processes of data collection, analysis, and writing—was just one of the challenges. My main concern was regarding the acceptance of this work as academic. Thinking about possible criticisms on the validity of this study, I questioned myself why and how the findings of this research could contribute to the field of critical pedagogy. Thus, reading other autoethnographies and the justifications of other autoethnographers, I was able to see their relevance in having narratives of personal experiences to the development of theories.

More than just a qualitative method of inquiry, autoethnography is an approach in which the researcher uses their own personal experiences to describe, interpret and analyze cultural experiences, beliefs, and practices (Ellis et al., 2011). Thus, as a critical methodology, it challenges conventional qualitative research methods by resisting to an absolute or objective truth in human and social sciences, and by recognizing the importance of self-reflectivity in knowledge production. Furthermore, it acknowledges the consequences of attempting to separate research from researcher and, rather than denying any possible subjectivities in research, consider them as a valuable form of knowledge.

As Bochner and Ellis (2022) argued, autoethnography acknowledges the intrinsic fallibilities of representation, in the sense that it always relies on an arbitrary choice on what to

include and what to exclude from the totality of what is represented. Thus, they "refuse to conform to the view that the human sciences should look like the natural sciences and that scholars must conduct research accordingly in distanced, objectifying, neutral, and value-free ways" (p. 9). Considering that ethnography is always an interpretative process (Geertz, 1993), autoethnography seeks for the lowest level of interpretation order—where the interpretation is done only by the subject of the experience, without intermediates. More than that, by challenging the western concept of science and knowledge production, autoethnography also presents a philosophical resistance to universalist concepts and theories in social sciences, allowing a greater diversity of voices and ways of narrating experiences (Silova et al., 2017).

Autoethnography is founded in a critical epistemology, pushing for a dialogical and a dialectic approach around a liberatory practice in knowledge production. As a transgressive movement, it intends to blur the boundaries of social sciences, arts, and humanities, with the purpose of directing research not only to an epistemological, but also to an ontological inquiry—questioning ways of being and not only ways of knowing.

Why Autoethnography?

Being a transgressive approach that challenges traditional research methods, autoethnography is not exempt of criticism from scholars and researchers. In the process of developing an autoethnographic study, I faced insecurities and even questioned myself whether it should be a legitimate method for conducting my research. Reflecting on education in a broad sense, however, science and knowledge production are also involved and must be discussed in the field. Thus, as a critical perspective towards qualitative research methods, autoethnography is also theoretically aligned with the objectives of this study. By refusing the scientific authority and endeavor of seeking for an objective and universal truth, presenting a more dialogical and

collective form of producing knowledge, autoethnography as a method can be understood as critical pedagogy applied to research, questioning dichotomies such as researcher-participant, author-reader, art-science, and objectivity-subjectivity.

Questions and critiques that are raised towards autoethnographic works are mainly related to their relevance, legitimacy, and ethics (Ellis et al., 2011; Wall, 2008; Edwards, 2021). However, as pointed out by Ellis et al. (2011), these discussions often consider that autoethnographers have the same point of view and goals of those employing other methodologies. The authors observe that, being part ethnography, autoethnography is considered insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, and analytical. On the other hand, being part autobiography, it is considered insufficiently artful, aesthetic, and literary. Autoethnography, however, is neither one nor the other, but a tentative synthesis that overcomes this distinction (Ellis et al., 2011):

> These criticisms erroneously position art and science at odds with each other, a condition that autoethnography seeks to correct. Autoethnography, as method, attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art. Autoethnographers believe research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena. (p. 11)

Therefore, autoethnography is proposed to be one of multiple possible methodologies that can contribute to knowledge production by its own approach. In an autoethnographic work, research and writing are considered socially-just acts and, rather than trying to solve the issues of different approaches to the subject matter of social science, it proposes they are differences to be lived with.

Relevance of Autoethnography

In terms of relevance, a question that may be arise is that a personal experience is too particular and cannot be generalized. Consequently, its findings would be relevant only for the autoethnographers themselves and not for the development of science, per se (Ellis et al., 2011). The same arguments can be used when discussing case-study research. As Flyvbjerg (2006) demonstrated, there are misunderstandings among researchers and scholars on this topic. He noted that, in human and social sciences, there is no hard theory to be proved, as universal laws cannot be stated. Thus, context-dependent knowledge is often more valuable than "the vain seeking for predictive theories and universals." (p. 224). Moreover, while it is indeed difficult to summarize case studies, especially concerning their processes, this is not usually desirable. Their contribution to knowledge development is made through their narratives rather than their results.

Furthermore, despite being mainly based on personal experience as a means, the end of autoethnographic research is to explore the social, cultural and/or political aspects and conditions of the experience that happened in a specific context, with a specific group or individual (emerald & Carpenter, 2017). Thus, autoethnography is conducted "first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of one's personal experience; then to look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739).

Legitimacy of Autoethnography

Another important concern about autoethnographic research regards its legitimacy, as the data is always supposedly biased. Walls (2006) offered an interesting example of this kind of questioning: as Sparkes (2000) published his own autoethnography, his students did not consider it to be research. But when asked whether it would be research if another researcher had

interviewed him, collected his personal documents and diary excerpts, and analysed them in the same way he did, they said yes. As argued by Flyvbjerg (2006), all methods of inquiry contain preconceived notions toward verification or falsification and are not exempt of biases. This obviously does not mean that there is no difference between different approaches in terms of how much or what kind of biases they are subject to. Because the autoethnographer is both the researcher and the participant, there can indeed be a conflict of interests that may influence their narratives.

Critiques on the fallibility of memory can be made to question the reliability of this methodology. In this sense, it is important to remark that autoethnographic research does not intend to be factually flawless. Ellis et al. (2011) observed that terms such as reliability and validity must be understood in context, as they have a specific meaning when applied to autoethnography. As aforementioned, because the purpose and approach of autoethnography is not the same as other traditional methods of inquiry, the preoccupation with accuracy is less important than with how an experience can reveal unfamiliar cultural processes. Validation is done in the process of reading, as readers can compare their own experiences and understand similarities and differences. Validity is related to the ability of the work to engage the reader to the subjective world of the author, as the experience is intended to be communicated through an evocative manner. In the same way as critical pedagogy, rather than imposing unquestionable authority of the objective knowledge, it proposes the building of knowledge by inviting the reader to a dialogical process.

Ethics in Autoethnography

In autoethnographic studies, there is no distinction between the roles of researcher and participant. This study, for example, did not involve any human subjects other than me, thus the

approval of a research ethics board was not a requirement. This does not mean that there is no ethical issues and challenges involved. As Couser (2004) noted, "… all *auto*biography is necessarily *hetero*biography as well because one can rarely if ever represent one's self without representing others." (p. x). Edwards (2021) highlighted the importance of being responsible when referring to others in autoethnographic research, giving examples of cases where the representation of others led to negative consequences for their authors and the represented ones, who felt betrayed when reading how they were described. The author also introduced the concept of *ethic of the self*—as "[t]he researcher has an obligation to describe and investigate their own experience authentically" (p. 3-4), they should consider the potential consequences of revealing it, including the career and reputation risks.

Considering this, when presenting my relationship with others, I used composite figures based on factual details to protect the identity and privacy of them (Chang, 2008). Even so, the identities of others connected to me can be tracked in some cases, and it "does not protect them from the shock of self-recognition" (Couser, 2004, p. 20). In the case of my former partner, who is individually mentioned in the upcoming chapter, I asked for her consent as a respect to her autonomy, informing her about the interactions and experiences that I wrote about and provided her with the opportunity to read it in advance. We discussed together and she agreed in what would be the best way to represent her participation and our relationship in the text.

Data Collection and Sources

In this study, I used mix strategies of data collection, having personal memory, self-reflective and external data as sources. As a practical choice to minimize the overlapping of data collection and analysis processes, I recorded myself speaking about my past experiences with popular education, as a form of self-interview. The reason why I decided to do that is because

when trying to write directly about them, I tend to focus on the style, grammar, and the physical process of writing, reducing my focus on my expression. According to Tagg (1997), writing is less natural and "makes us spread out the process of expressing ourselves." (para. 3). Especially when recalling memory, it flows more effectively with the spoken language than with the written one (Heesen, 2021). In this case, being both the researcher and the participant, one of the most important aspects of the data collection process was spontaneity, which is the main difference between spoken and written language (Yabuuchi, 1998). While writing I could be thinking about theoretical concepts and expected findings and influence my data, it was more difficult to make these arrangements during the speech—although I cannot deny it also happens in some degree. Also, to maximize the spontaneity, all the speech was done in my first language, Portuguese.

As a first step, on 6th of February 2024, I conducted a form of unstructured self-interview, speaking for around 160 minutes about my *personal memory*: my life story, my educational trajectory, my experiences in popular education, and my views on education in general. After listening to the recordings, I decided to add another step, as a structured self-interview, to collect *self-reflective data*. On 22nd of February 2024, I recorded myself answering three personal open-ended questions, also in Portuguese, to explore better my transformative experience without directly focusing on my research questions:

- How was the popular education experience different from other educational or general experiences?
- Which differences do you perceive in your worldview (ideologically, politically, socially) before and after this experience?
- Which differences do you perceive in your conceptions on education before and after this experience?

Both the personal memory and the self-reflective data were used to write the narrative of my process of critical consciousness raising through popular education. The process of refining the data involved organizing the sequence of events, merging my story with my reflections while observing ethical aspects, such as removing names and other forms of personal identification, and creating composite figures. In addition, I selected the events and situations that could portray and were more directly related with my process of *conscientização*, discarding specific details or other unrelated facts that I brought when collecting my personal memory data. Further, the discussions and feedback from my supervisor helped me to clarify some passages and thoughts that were implicit for me as the researcher and participant, and that should be explicit for the readers.

Finally, to confirm some factual details and to support my narrative, I gathered *external data*, such as personal communication, documents, and past writings related the periods mentioned in the recordings.

Data Analysis

After transcribing all the recordings, I used MAXQDA 2024 (VERBI Software, 2023) as a tool to assist in coding, classification, and analysis of the qualitative data. Considering the autoethnographic approach I chose to employ in my study and the nature of the data, I used narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) as a method do interpret it. First, I read all the transcriptions to find the main topics and themes. After that, I started the coding process with an initial set of topics, but open to add, rename, or remove some of them, ending up with a set of 14 topics: *childhood*, *education*, *popular education*, *identity*, *autonomy*, *leadership*, *worldview*, *work*, *political engagement*, *transformation*, *praxis, social relations, collectiveness,* and *relationship.*

I refined the set of topics and organized them in themes to focus on the research questions that I proposed to investigate, which I present in the next chapter in a narrative format. For example, the topics of *popular education*, *transformation*, and *social relations*, helped me to answer the first research question, while *childhood*, *education*, and *identity* helped me on the second research question, and *autonomy*, *leadership*, and *political engagement* were useful for the third research question.

While writing the story, I followed Chang's (2008) recommendations, observing the cultural themes present in it, making connections between the past and the present and in my relationships with others, and comparing my case with other people's cases as surveyed in the literature review process to broadly contextualize it. The writing was done in a dialogical format: each excerpt of my story, presented *in italic in a closed box*—like the first paragraph of the Introduction chapter—, is followed by comments and analysis based on the critical pedagogy theory and concepts. I chose to do this as a visual resource to separate the story, which can be read continuously, from the analysis that is presented as a parallel voice. The same method was used by Silova et al. (2017), to which the authors referred as "juxta" (p. 78). This allows two forms of reading it: following the sequence in which the narrative and the analysis are presented, or first reading the full story throughout the boxes and then going to the analysis. At the end, I discussed the findings to provide answers to my research questions.

Closing Remarks

As a critical research methodology, autoethnography fitted well the purpose of this study. Thus, following the process described in the sections above, I used my transformative experience of participation in popular education initiatives to analyze how critical consciousness was raised, aiming to answer my research questions. Even after deciding to employ this approach, there were

a few challenges in the process of data collection and writing, especially regarding ethics. Therefore, the process of writing involved a refinement of the narrative, removing possible individual identifications whenever possible, and discussing with my former partner in her case. In the coming chapter, I present the narrative of my personal experience, using critical pedagogy theories and concepts (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1974, 1998, 2005) to analyze it, following the autoethnographic methods that I discussed here.

Chapter Four: My Transformative Experience with Popular Education

I was born in Brasilia, Brazil, in 1986. My parents had recently moved from the state of São Paulo because of their jobs. Both children of Japanese immigrants, they became migrants themselves within the country—living around 1,000 km away from their families. Three years later, we all moved again, to São José dos Pinhais, in Southern Brazil.

Since I can remember, "scholarly education" was one of the central aspects of my life. Indeed, the first memory I can recall in my life is at school—a daycare in Brasilia, to be more accurate. I was almost 3 years old and, while playing with other kids, I fell and hurt my mouth. A few years later, in São José dos Pinhais, I had the first experience of feeling different and not belonging, for two reasons: first, because of my visible Japanese background, and second, because of my regional accent. In the new city, I rarely ever saw any Japanese descendants apart from myself, my parents, and my siblings. Classmates, teachers, and even unknown people at the streets used to call me names and to make questions and comments that I did not like. I started to avoid speaking because I was ashamed of my accent and, most of the times, I wanted to be invisible or not to be in public spaces.

At the same time, I always liked to study. I enjoyed being seen as an intelligent person. And for me, that meant to study a lot and to achieve the best grades. During my childhood, I felt a sort of pride of people seeing me as more intelligent than them. I used to love testing my knowledge and to try solving logical and mathematical puzzles. This consequently led me to get interested in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) field. During high school, I took a professional program in Information Technology (IT). Following that, I started working in the energy company of the Paraná state as IT technician, then as a trainee in one of the biggest multinational oil and gas corporation. I graduated as a Bachelor in

Telecommunication Systems, then as M.Sc. in Electrical Engineering. During my graduate studies, I also worked as a part-time lecturer at the Federal University of Technology – Paraná (UTFPR). Finally, I entered the Ph.D. program in Electrical Engineering. For me, this was the peak of my trajectory. After earning my doctoral degree, I would have completed my objective of reaching the highest level of my educational trajectory. This was crucial for me at that moment. In a certain way, it was what defined me.

The experiences I had in my childhood influenced my ambiguous relationship with education, similarly to what hooks (1994) described about her own educational experience: like her, although I had a great interest in studying and learning, the school environment was hostile, and I felt that I did not belong there. However, while the author recognized two different experiences of education—one as the practice of freedom and other that reinforces domination—I only knew the latter. hooks (1994) described her first school experience in a segregated school as a place where she felt part of the community and had her teacher as a role model. In my trajectory, since my first school years, the feeling that I did not belong to the school environment made me try to fit by adapting, aiming to succeed in that place.

On the other hand, my interest in studying had also a distinct motivation from hook's (1994). As a black girl, when studying in a desegrated school, the author and her peers "… were always having to counter white racist assumptions that we were genetically inferior, never as capable as white peers, even unable to learn." (hooks, 1994, p. 4). While also belonging to a racial minority group in my home country, my case was almost the opposite.

As a Japanese-Brazilian, I experienced the *perpetual foreigner syndrome* (Wu, 2002; Shu, 2012). As Shu (2012) described, it is a common phenomenon among the Japanese descendants in

Brazil: the feeling of being an outsider in the own birth country—not being recognized as a truly Brazilian. Being part of this minority group and feeling like I did not belong to the place where I used to live was influential to my educational trajectory. The underrepresentation of Asian Brazilians in general, and Japanese Brazil specifically, and their misrepresentation with stereotypical roles in the mainstream media contributed to the development of the *model minority stereotype* (Zhang, 2010; Kurade, 2023). According to Kurade (2023), the preconceived generalization of Japanese people as hardworking, intelligent, and polite, perpetuates the stereotype of Japanese-Brazilian people to "being seen as quiet, nerdy, and passive." (p. 44), putting a significant amount of pressure to match expected results, while associating personal achievements with our ethnicity rather than with individual efforts (Zhang, 2010).

Roth (2003) observed that the sense of the Japanese ethnicity as a model minority in Brazil is different from that in the United States. In the United States, Asian Americans became a model for other minorities to emulate—and used to suggest to African Americans that hard work and a positive attitude were the way to improve life rather than civil discord. "In Brazil, the Japanese were a model not for other minorities but for Brazilian society in general." (p. 114-115).

In my childhood and youth, my dedication to the studies were motivated by the expectations of others, but also to find a place where I could belong, and where I could be perceived as smarter and more successful than the others. I was hosting the role of oppressor, living "in the duality in which *to be* is *to be like*, and *to be like* is *to be like the oppressor*" (Freire, 2005, p. 48). I learned that, as the only education I knew was the one that reinforces domination (hooks, 1994), or the *banking education*, in Freirean terms. On this matter, Freire (1974) noted that this serves as form of adaptation: "the adapted man, neither dialoguing nor

participating, accommodates to conditions imposed upon him and thereby acquires an authoritarian and acritical frame of mind." (Freire, 1974, p. 21). To adapt to the conditions, I learned to be silent, which "… does not signify an absence of response, but rather a response which lacks a critical quality." (p. 21). The lack of critical thinking leads to what Freire (2005) called the "fear of freedom" (p. 46). This, according to the author, maintains one of the main elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed: *prescription*. Through it, one person's consciousness is conformed with the preservers' consciousness, leading to the imposition of one individual's choice upon another. In this sense, my desire to achieve the expectations of others reflected the imposition of others' choices as mine. By constantly trying to affirm my intellectual skills, entering the STEM field, avoiding expressing my opinions, and accepting my life trajectory as predetermined, I was reinforcing the model minority stereotype: being quiet, nerdy, and passive.

In the following sections, I divided the particularities of my experience with popular education in three different themes, named after the sentences of a quote that is commonly attributed to Freire (e.g. UNESCO Brasil, 2016; Bianchessi, 2023): "*Educação não transforma o mundo. Educação muda pessoas. Pessoas transformam o mundo.*" (In English: "Education does not transform the world. Education changes people. People transform the world.") Although I could not find the exact source where he wrote or spoke it, the quote reflects well his thoughts. Therefore, in the first section, *Education Does not Transform the World*, I present how I got introduced to popular education and what were my thoughts and worldview at that moment. Next, in the second section, *Education Changes People*, I unpack my experience participating in popular education and how it changed myself. Then, in the third section, *People Transform the World*, I describe events after my transformative experience and how my actions and interactions

impacted collectively my relationships and communities. Finally, in the last section I reflect on my praxis in the present, during the writing of this thesis and the analysis of my past experiences.

Education Does not Transform the World

Until entering the Ph.D. program, in 2012, what I considered to be education was only formal and institutional education. Grades, degrees, diplomas, and credentials were important for me, as they represented how much "education" a person had obtained or achieved. Because of how I valued and perceived education and due the importance I had placed on graduate school and becoming a part-time lecturer, I began to think about a career as a full-time university professor.

When I entered the doctoral program at Unicamp, I was living with my partner in Curitiba, with whom I had a relationship since 2008. We moved together to Campinas. At this moment in our relationship, we had well-defined plans for our lives. After finishing our studies, we were planning to find stable jobs, get married, buy an apartment, and have children at some point.

The beginning of our lives in Campinas was lonely. It was the first time living far from our families, friends, places, and activities that we were used to. Although we were with each other, we did not have a support network and our only social activity was going to classes. Then, on 22nd March 2012, I got an email in the mailing list of graduate students at Unicamp that caught my attention (Figure 2). It was an invitation to participate as a volunteer in a university outreach project to teach illiterate adults who didn't have opportunity to go to school to read and write. The classes took place at an occupation of the Homeless Workers' Movement in Sumaré, a neighbor town. The invitation was to take care of the students' children so they could participate in the project. I talked to my partner, and we decided to volunteer together in the project. In my

view, it was a way of using the free time I had to help people, as a form of service to the new city we had moved to, almost like a form of charity. Interestingly, in the email the term popular education was not mentioned. Furthermore, their political views and precise pedagogical methods were also not mentioned.

Figure 2

Reproduction of the Invitation Email to Participate in the Popular Education Project

Subject: FWD INVITATION
To: *[Graduate students at Unicamp]*
Date: March 22, 2012, 8:17 PM

Invitation: do you like kids? Would you like to play with some of them and yet help adults that didn't have the opportunity to go to school?
Do you have a free evening between Monday and Thursday?

Contact us!

We are students from several programs at Unicamp, and we're developing a university outreach project to literate adults that didn't have the chance to go to school. However, many of these adults have children and, as they don't have where to keep them, they bring them to the class. So, we provide toys, the wife of one of the students takes care of the children of the other students, but she urgently needs help!
The place is an occupation in Sumaré, but it's close to Barão. Except on Thursdays, everyday there are people going there by car here from Barão.
We leave around 18:15-18:30 and come back at 22:15 (except on Thursdays, when people leave earlier because they go by bus).

If you can, contact us!
If you can't, forward to your friends!
Thank you very much!

CONTACT:
[Name 1]: [e-mail address 1]
[Name 2]: [e-mail address 2]
[Phone number 1]
[Phone number 2]

Note. This is a reproduction of the message translated from Portuguese to English. Even though it was posted in public mailing lists, I chose to remove personal information from it.

In the first meetings we had with the group—which is usually called "collective" in Brazilian universities – they said that the objective of that work was not to do charity. The discourse was something like: "we are not doing this because we are good people who want to

assist those people in need, we are not donating our time to help vulnerable people." I was confused because I didn't understand the intended message. The group was formed all by Unicamp students, from different programs like Economics, Geography, Pedagogy, Medicine, Social Sciences, Fine Arts, Physical Education, and so on. In my point of view, we were all privileged people who had opportunities that illiterate adults didn't have, and we were trying to compensate it, at least a little bit, with our work. Listening to the other members of the collective, I thought that they were being demagogical, trying to pretend that it was not what was happening there.

My life plans were mostly already prescribed before I became part of the collective. Here, two important elements were crucial for me to get involved in the popular education project. First, the intention of helping other people—which Freire (2005) called "an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism" (p. 54). And second, the form of communication they used in the invitation email, which seemed to be "politically neutral" and did not cause any resistance from my end in terms of getting to know them.

As I reflect on the desire to help people through this project, I notice that it was perhaps linked to how much I valued education in general, and how I believed in it as a means for social mobility. Freire (2005) remarked that banking education can mythicize the reality, making it—even when perceived objectively—not recognized in its deeper implications. In other words, my consciousness was isolated from the world and, without critically recognizing people in the process of becoming, I saw them "as objects of assistance" (p. 83). After all, it was through education that I had done most in my life: I got admiration from my family, respect from others, good jobs, and could even move to another state. Through education I was able to follow my life

path successfully as expected. As it worked for me, I thought it should work for others too. It was only a matter of opportunities, and I could assist them on that. For Freire (2005), charity in this form is a domestication that in reality maintains the condition of oppression, because it keeps people's consciousness conformed. Nevertheless, this was the main reason that led me to get involved in the project.

The other reason that contributed for me to engage in the project was the form of communication. As reproduced in Figure 2, the invitation email did not mention political positions or even pedagogical methods, while the language was also informal and open—I could participate in how many days I wanted. Thus, on one side, it sounded "politically neutral", which is how I thought education was and should be at that time. On the other hand, because I was ignorant in the education as a field of research practice and pedagogy, this allowed me to establish a dialogue and, further, to reflect on the practice. Further, not only the email, but the response that I got after contacting the collective had the same characteristics: very casual and dialogical.

As Freire (2005) asserted, true liberation does not occur through "libertarian propaganda" (p. 67), because it is a banking method of domination and alienation. Even when the intention is to convince the oppressed to struggle for their liberation, the use of the oppressor methods ends up reinforcing dehumanization. Thus, the possibility to constantly discuss, to disagree, and to dialogue was also essential for our formation as a group. As Freire (2005) noted:

> Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education. Education which is able to resolve the contradiction between

> teacher and student takes place in a situation in which both address their act of cognition to the object by which they are mediated. (pp. 92-93)

While I was not aware at the time, popular education was already happening at that very moment. Different from the notion of education that I was used to, there was no need of specific roles, place, or time. All of us were learning with each other all the time, from our previous knowledges, experiences, and points of view. We were building knowledge together in dialogue, starting to read the world as it was being.

Education Changes People

It took me a while—and a lot of insightful discussions—to grasp what the collective members meant when they said that it was not a charity project. At first my partner and I were not taking part in the actual literacy classes. Instead, we took care of the children in a separate space. Nonetheless, we interacted a lot with all the group members during the meetings. One day, while driving from Campinas to Sumaré, a remarkable discussion happened after we saw a woman who was living in the occupation giving yogurt and sandwich cookies to her children. One of the collective members said:

"I think it's an absurd that these people who don't have housing are buying these things for their children. They should learn to save money. When I was a child, we never had these things at home, because my family was saving as much as possible to build our house."

Another person responded:

"I understand that it was tough for you. But do you think it's fair that only rich people are allowed to have these little pleasures? Those people, to whom even basic needs such as housing have been denied, can't even eat a sandwich cookie?"

Listening to this discussion forced me think a lot. At that moment, I also believed that people who have less money should use it only for basic needs, and those who have more money could spend it on superfluous things. I had a very individualist and meritocratic point of view. Even though I was aware that some people had more opportunities in life than others, I was convinced that I deserved everything I had. And that one should not spend money until they had enough to satisfy their needs—then they would deserve to consume more. Otherwise, their condition would be their own responsibility. Back then, I did not consider the immense complexity of the differing and disproportionate political, social, and economic relations.

Months later, having had many other discussions, and having been introduced to Freire's work, I began to understand better the connections between economic relations and educational systems. I eventually started to participate in the literacy classes. This was particularly interesting to me because I got to know Freire's work while participating in a popular education project. Thus, everything that I read became visible in the workshops. For example, almost all of those who were learning to read and write used self-depreciative expressions when referring to studying, as if there was an objective individual condition that led them to that situation. "My head doesn't work well", "My brain is slow", "We're not smart as you." But when we talked about their life experiences, about their struggles, or even their work, they could teach us for hours. With a real meaning they were started reading and writing. It was not just theory or philosophy that referred to situations that we didn't live. While some "highly literate academics" (Macedo, 2005, p. 23) find Freire's writings difficult to read, I felt as if I was having a conversation with him. When I read about his banking concept of education, I could see my whole school experience described there.

In the collective, we took our decisions communally. As a group, we mutually agreed on how learning would unfold. We collectively decided how the space would be structured and who would clean up and when. These responsibilities were shared. Both teacher and students worked together to build the space where we had our encounters, to maintain, to clean up, to cook. There weren't the ones who decided and the ones who did. Schedules, contents, activities, reforms, everything was decided together. When we built or reformed the space, the students were the ones who taught the teachers how to do it. They all had built their own houses at the Occupation, while some of the teachers had never hit a nail before. The relations that developed at that time were beyond formal, professional, or institutional relationships. They were horizontal, communitarian, and affective. This was new to everyone there.

I was finally in a place where I felt belonging without the need of affirming my intellectual competences or attending others' expectations. Through non-hierarchical and affective relationships, education started to have a different meaning and purpose for me. It was not an instrument that provide social and economic opportunities anymore. It became a process of humanization. In the relationships I had in the Occupation, I felt loved. I felt human.

I finally understood why the project was not a charity work where "we" were donating our times and efforts to help "them" when I stopped viewing a division between "us" and "them." Of course there was an objective criterion that differentiate two groups: there were higher education students in one of the most prestigious universities in Brazil, and there were people experiencing homelessness, and participating in a social movement for housing justice. But subjectively, I realized that defining all our subjectivities based on this single criterion started to sound too simplistic. While it was obviously an important material difference, when I learned the experiences of each participant, I noticed that some of the people living in the

Occupation had life stories that were more similar to people studying at Unicamp—and very they were diverse among each group. Not only in terms of past opportunities, resources, and life choices, but there were also many ideological similarities between the student volunteers of Unicamp and the participants of the Occupation. After more than two months participating in the collective, I finally came to realize that the objective of that project was to make a social transformation. While it indeed had individual consequences for those who were taking part in it, ultimately, we wanted to change the system in which we all were. A remarkable quote that someone in the collective said then made sense for me: "We're all in the same shit, but some of us don't even have access to basic sanitation."

The continued discussions within the collective—a dialogical process—were fundamental for me to become conscious about the relationship between our reflections and our actions. In the Occupation, education as a practice of freedom was constantly occurring. We learned during our encounters, meetings, assemblies, commutes, and social gatherings. It was through casual conversations with people living in the Occupation that I learned about the history of the main social movements in Brazil, their structures, their achievements, and the processes of negotiation with the government. And it was totally different from what I learned before in school or through the mainstream media, which used to depict them as lazy people who do not want to work.

Although the focus of this thesis is on my individual process of consciousness—and because I cannot write on behalf of the others with whom I partnered—the liberation, and consequently the raising of critical consciousness was occurring *collectively*. As Freire (2005) proposed, "we cannot say that … someone liberates someone else, nor yet that someone liberates himself, but rather that human beings in communion liberate each other." (p. 133). Even though

the collective was already established when I started to take part, all the members began the project just one month before the invitation email (Figure 2). Thus, although some people already had read Freire's works, and others already knew the Occupation and other social movements, we were all learning together. There was not any "expert" training the others, we were all building our knowledge and our critical consciousnesses.

In relation to my work in the Occupation as being charitable, Freire (2005) established a distinction between what he called *true* and *false* generosity, which I understood months after joining the collective. He wrote:

> Any attempt to "soften" the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. … True generosity lies in striving so that these hands—whether of individuals or entire peoples—need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world. (Freire, 2005, p. 45)

Because of the simultaneous action and reflection, my participation in the project allowed me to comprehend the importance of both subjectivity and objectivity, both consciousness and world, and not one or the other. Freire (2005) suggested that the radical demand for objective transformation cannot be conceived by dismissing the role of subjectivity in changing structures. On the other hand, denying objectivity in analysis is denying the action itself.

The affective relations that we established between and amongst all the people involved in the project were key to developing my critical consciousness. They allowed me to recognize that, although the material conditions were objectively different between us, we were all subjects in the condition of oppressed, while also "hosts of the oppressor" (Freire, 2005, p. 48). For

example, in a discussion about meritocracy, some of the people living in the Occupation argued that we live in a fair economic system, and it is a matter of finding and taking the right opportunities. On the other side, I found myself trying to impose that it was not true. The dialogical practice that we had as a group, however, allowed us all to reflect, to pose questions about the subject and reach a common knowledge: opportunities are not equally distributed.

For Freire (2005), only those who are conscious of the duality oppressor-oppressed within themselves can contribute to a liberating pedagogy. He noted that only realizing the condition of oppressed or discovering to be an oppressor is not sufficient for liberation or for true solidarity. For the oppressed, it is necessary to get conscious that the reality of oppression is not a closed world, it can be transformed through liberating action. In contrast, for the oppressor to come to consciousness requires a radical posture of stopping to see the oppressed as an abstract category and starting to see them as human beings. For Freire (2005), "[t]rue solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis." (p. 50). Taken together, the process of liberation would be like a painful childbirth. It is only viable as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people: "no longer oppressor nor longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom." (p. 49).

For Freire (2005), a fundamental element of critical consciousness raising, dialogue, "cannot exist … in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people." (p. 89). According to the author, love is the basis of dialogue and dialogue itself. In this sense, love is not sentimental, neither can serve for submission or manipulation. It is an act of courage, of commitment to others. "If I do not love the world—if I do not love life—if I do not love people—I cannot enter into dialogue" (p. 90). The sense of belonging that I experienced through

dialogical and affective relationships were, in this sense, a process of humanization and love for people.

In the period that I was part of the collective in the adult literacy project, my concept of progressively education changed, and education changed me. Rather than just thinking that formal education could provide individual benefits—either for me or for others—I realized that education could humanize and liberate people. And liberated humans can change the world.

People Transform the World

In the end of 2012, I finished all the required credits for my PhD program. Because of my partner's studies, which were on hold during that year, we decided to move back to Curitiba. I could continue my research and dissertation at distance and agreed to go to Campinas once a month to meet my supervisor. Back in Curitiba, in 2013, my partner and I wanted to keep working in popular education, as we did in Sumaré. At the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR), where she studied, we got to know about a preparatory course for the university entrance exam that had a very similar approach. It was run by a collective that had an assumed anarchist perspective—this was explicit in their announces and invitations. I was not aware of what that meant, but this time I was open to see and dialogue. Indeed, the course worked similarly to the literacy project: non-hierarchical roles, collective decisions, discussions based on the experience of the participants, and methods based on Freire (2005). Even as a preparatory course, in the classes we all used to discuss the problem of having an entrance exam for Brazilian public universities, which can be compared to a qualifying race. To enter a program at a public university, people needed to achieve a certain score and compete to be among the highest in the ranking. In Brazil, obtaining a place in a public university likened to an award, due to the merit of dedication to the studies to pass a test. Prior to working in the

Occupation, I didn't question the politics of entrance exams, even when I was the one taking the test.

Through the collective that organized the preparatory course, I got to know their other works, such as a community garden, and the student movements at UFPR. The collective was also one of the main actors in the local organization of the mass protests in Brazil in June 2013 (Saad-Filho, 2013). The protests began as a movement against the rising of public transport fares in São Paulo, but the indignation caused by the violent repression of the military police caused the movement to grow and to incorporate other demands. During this period, I got very involved in the collective, participating in the meetings, actions, and protests. In October, I participated in the occupation of the Curitiba city hall for 24 hours in protest of the rising of public transport fares in the city (Neves & Rieger, 2013).

In November 2013, as part of my PhD project, I went to Ingolstadt, Germany, for a 5-months research internship at the Technische Hochschule Ingolstadt (THI) (Bavarian Center for Applied Research and Technology with Latin America, 2020). My partner came with me, and we approached a local anti-fascist organization there, establishing contact between the collective in Curitiba and the organization in Ingolstadt. I went back to Curitiba in April 2014 and then continued participating in the collective there. By the end of the year, being so connected and affectively involved with all those UFPR students and reflecting on education and its social implications, I decided to enter the Pedagogy program at UFPR. I took the entrance exam and started the program in March 2015. My objective was purely to learn—I was not concerned about grades, or about the degree. I wasn't even sure if I would graduate. I wanted to learn what people were discussing, planning, proposing about education, what were the theories, the methods, the concepts.

My participation in the program was totally different from any other educational experience I had before. In 2015, the 35th National Meeting of Pedagogy Students (ENEPe – Encontro Nacional de Estudantes de Pedagogia) would take place in Curitiba at UFPR (Encontro Nacional de Estudantes de Pedagogia, 2015). It was a huge event, with around 1,500 participants from across Brazil. Although it was my first few months in the program, I became involved with the student association and was one of the main organizers of the event. It was the first time where I felt that I was assuming leadership among a collective of students.

During the ENEPe, which was held from the 12th to the 19th of July 2015, I dropped out of my PhD program at Unicamp. The decision was already made weeks before, but the process was not easy. I realized that I was not involved or interested in my research project anymore. For some months, every time I went to Campinas to talk to my supervisor, I got anxious because had not have advanced my research. The program and project felt less relevant than when I first began my doctorate. I was bothered and feeling guilty because I was developing a new technology that would contribute for the automotive industry and raise the profits of multinational corporations. I realized that I was aiming to finish my PhD to attend to the expectations of others, and not for myself. At least not for my new self. Education was not the same for me anymore, and I was not the same as well.

This is the point in the story where the event narrated in the Introduction chapter happened, which I reproduce here to facilitate the reading:

In July 2015, I was in the third year of the PhD program in Electrical Engineering at University of Campinas (Unicamp), considered to be one of the best universities in Latin America (Times Higher Education, 2024). At that time, I had already completed all the required

credits with more than 90% average of grades and had even passed the PhD qualifying exam. I was living with my partner in Curitiba and our main source of income was my scholarship, with which we were paying our rent and expenses. I had recently published an article based on my master's thesis (Yano et al., 2015) and presented what would be part of my dissertation in an international IEEE conference (Boehmlaender et al., 2015), related to an international research internship I did in Germany in the previous year. My family was proud of me—I would be the first person in my family to earn a PhD degree. But on the 13th of July, I went to Unicamp—after traveling around 500 km from Curitiba to Campinas—and, after a short talk with my supervisor, I went to the student services centre to withdraw from my PhD. I dropped out of the program to study Pedagogy.

I was in a "limit-situation" (Freire, 2005, p. 99), a situation where I was facing a barrier to my own liberation. Abandoning my doctoral program was a *limit-act*, to negate and overcome that obstacle, instead of passively accepting it. It was a turning point when I could say that critical consciousness became evident for me. The experience that I lived during my participation in the adult literacy project in Sumaré allowed me to develop a critical reflection and awareness of greater social and economic relations that affected my life and those of others. In this sense, my critical consciousness was starting to be developed, and I was already transformed subjectively. But dropping out my PhD was the radical action that I needed to surpass that limit-situation and objectively transform my life trajectory. The process of critical consciousness raising does not happen only in reflection if there is no action (Freire, 2005):

> Obviously, *conscientização* does not stop at the level of mere subjective perception of a situation, but through action prepares men for the struggle against the obstacles to their humanization. (p. 119)

Conscientização requires praxis: action and reflection, theory, and practice. According to Freire (2005), praxis cannot be dichotomously divided into a stage of reflection and a stage of action. They occur simultaneously.

After going back to Curitiba to continue participating in the ENEPe, I never felt so relieved in my life. I still think that this was the most important decision I ever took. It was the moment where I think that I became protagonist of my life. After that, I began to participate in the organizational committees at the university, while also being part of the university's student association. With a critical view on the different activities that I was taking part, I saw that the greater is the separation between discourse and practice, the lower is the possibility of changes.

At the same time, the collective that organized the preparatory course expanded beyond the university and became a social movement, based in an occupation in the periphery of Curitiba. Other popular education initiatives started there, including an adult literacy project where I devoted a lot of my time, effort, and intent. As I changed, my relationship with my former partner also changed and ended.

In October 2016, after the announcement of a federal neoliberal educational reform that would impact mainly public high school students in Brazil, a student movement of occupation of schools started in São José dos Pinhais and quickly spread all over the country. Higher education students also began to occupy their campuses in support to the high school movement. At UFPR, the resistance emerged in our Pedagogy course, and later students from other programs joined it. As the local press began to request interviews, it was proposed during a

general assembly that a spokesperson should be nominated, to avoid diverging and contradictory discourses. Everyone looked at me and many students suggested my name. I was unanimously chosen to be the spokesperson of the occupation, which came as a massive surprise for me. I didn't ask for that, yet all the people present trusted in me to express our collective interests. I accepted the role, certain that I wouldn't say anything that hadn't been previously agreed with everyone. Nonetheless, it was a great responsibility and risk. For a great part of my life, I felt that I didn't have a voice and then, I was the spokesperson of a movement, giving a press conference (Hoshino, 2016; Denk & Luciano, 2016). I was back to an educational institution, but this time I felt I belonged there. After all, as a movement, we were changing the reality.

In 2017, due to other neoliberal federal reforms, a mass protest was organized to be held in Brasilia, the federal capital. I went back to my birthplace for the first time in almost 30 years with the UFPR Professors Union (APUFPR – Associação dos Professores da Universidade Federal do Paraná). Together with other unions, student movements, and social movements all over the country gathered in front of the National Congress where a voting session for the reform was being held. I was willing to act and not to just stay there expecting that something would change. I went to the front line of the movement, where some people were trying to invade the National Congress, but I was shot by the military police with a rubber bullet (Vetorazzo et al., 2017; Associação dos Professores da UFPR, 2017). I was removed from the protest by the paramedics and taken to a hospital. Although frustrated, I felt alive. Once again, I took a risk that made me feel human.

Since then, I have been moving over countries and participating in different movements. In 2018, I took a 3-months research internship at University of Victoria, where I also took part in an anarchist study group. In 2019, after a decision of limiting the parking lot at a new UFPR

campus to faculty members, I spread pamphlets around all the campus, which made the chair of the faculty call an assembly with students, staff, and faculty members of two of the university institutes. I talked with many other students at the campus and all of them supported my position, but none wanted to express it to the professors. My willingness to confront this situation was also based in the dissatisfaction I had with the faculty committee, which had a discourse totally detached from their actions. Having been part of the committee as a student representative, I saw many times other members saying how much they cared about the students, while deciding always on their own interests. During the assembly, I felt as a lonely student voice confronting the authority of the professors. But, at the end, they reverted the decision, allowing students to use the parking lot.

More recently, in 2022, while working as a pedagogical coordinator in a public state school in Curitiba, I oriented and assisted high school students to organize their own student association. In the same year, I moved to Montréal to take the Master program in Educational Studies. In 2023, I started reactivating the Department of Education Interdisciplinary Graduate Students Association (DOEIGSA) at Concordia and, in the same year, I took an exchange semester at the Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet), where I became a representative of my faculty at the Student Parliament, advocating for a greater accessibility for the participation of international students. In 2024, back in Montréal, I co-organized the Graduate Student Symposium of the Department of Education (GSDE). In all these cases, talking to other students I heard the desire that these organizations or changes happened, however without further action. Thus, I tried to create space for the participation and organization of other students. From my past experiences, I learned that if I want something to happen, I can't just wait for it. I must keep acting.

After dropping out of the PhD program, I experienced freedom. Indeed, taking the decision involved confronting the fear of freedom. In this sense, Freire (2005) contended that

> [t]he oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion. (p. 47)

One of the main transformations that happened to me was the emergence of a greater autonomy. At first, I participated in different movements with the support of a group, not assuming great risk or responsibility. Later, it became clearer to me, in each decision I make, that I must think critically on the relations involved, and I can assume greater risks, and be responsible for the consequences of confronting my fears. The risk of being alone, of failing, of being exposed, ridiculed, or even physically harmed. For Freire (2005), to achieve freedom it is necessary to take risks. He contended that by quoting Hegel (1967):

> It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; . . . the individual who has not staked his or her life may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person; but he or she has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness. (p. 233 as cited by Freire, 2005, p. 36)

This also affected greatly the relationship I had, because the transformation happened both to me and to my partner in that period. Without enough autonomy and self-consciousness, we used to do everything together, including moving, studying, and participating in the different

activities. After that, we became more independent as individuals, and this is why we eventually grew apart.

Another noteworthy transformation that I noticed was in terms of leadership. At first, some of the risky decisions I took had an individual impact—such as moving to another country without financial stability. Further, the consequences were collective, especially when I started or led organizations. Here, I mean leadership not in hierarchical terms, but in the sense that Freire (2005) conceptualized *revolutionary leadership*: with its authentic conviction of the necessity of struggle, with its own involvement that led me to criticize a situation and to want to transform it. In the most recent cases reported, I saw that the dissatisfaction was not only mine, but among other students, there was either hopelessness that things can change, or waiting for someone to do something. In this regard, Freire (2005) wrote:

> Hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it. The dehumanization resulting from an unjust order is not a cause for despair but for hope, leading to the incessant pursuit of the humanity denied by injustice. Hope, however, does not consist in crossing one's arms and waiting. As long as I fight, I am moved by hope; and if I fight with hope, then I can wait. (pp. 91-21)

Through dialogue with myself and all others along the trajectory narrated in this chapter, I sensed *conscientização* not as a moment in my life, but rather as a continuous process of being in life, in constant exercise of praxis.

Revisiting Praxis as I Write this Thesis

In this chapter, I narrated and analyzed how my experience in popular education allowed the raising of critical consciousness, describing it in three phases. First, I presented my educational background prior to that experience, observing how all the years and levels of study

did not promote any structural changes to my life path, but rather reinforced dominant norms. Even being aware of social injustices and having a desire to help, I was not able to act effectively, due to a large separation between reflection and action.

Then, I described the process of getting involved in a popular education initiative, and how it changed me, leading me to eventually abandon a PhD program in Electrical Engineering. At this point, I was getting more involved in different organizations and willing to act towards social changes.

Further, I kept participating in popular education initiatives but, moving across different cultural contexts, I gradually started to engage less in grassroots movements to become more involved in institutionalized organizations. Reflecting on this as I write this thesis, I take this in two different ways. On one side, as I realized that I could effectively act towards social changes, I moved from excessive reflection to excessive action. From a condition of subjectivism to objectivism (Freire, 2005). In a certain degree, this could be seen as fanaticism, or sectarianism, in Freirean terms. Then, I gradually started to recognize reality, reflect on it, and adopt a more dialogical approach.

On the other hand, I cannot deny that my actions became less radical. In terms of risk-taking, there is obviously fewer risks involved in institutional organizations. However, there are other important elements to consider in this. Praxis, so as critical consciousness and liberation, happen in communion (Freire, 2005). Being in a different country and cultural context means not only greater risks involved, but also that it takes more time to build relationships, community, and organization.

Other important reflection on my current actions relates to my involvement in formal education. In writing this autoethnography, I am acting in the production of critical knowledge

while reflecting on my present reality. In the opening paragraph of this thesis, I narrated the moment when I dropped out of a PhD program in Electrical Engineering as a liberating action. While I write this thesis, after all the events described in this chapter, I am preparing to start a new PhD program, now in Education. “Why?”, one might ask. It may sound as a contradiction. After all, all of this happened and I am back to the same point. In some sense, it is true: I am still following an academic path in an institution that reinforces and perpetuates inequal social structures. On the other hand, there are key differences from the situation I was 12 years ago. I am not the same person anymore. I chose and am constantly choosing this pathway over that other, assessing and reflecting on my actions and how can I act where I am. *Conscientização* is not a state that is reached in definite, it is a process in which one can advance and fall back. This is why the continuous exercise of praxis is necessary, as a dialetical unity of reflective action and active reflection.

Chapter Five: Discussing Critical Consciousness in Popular Education

Through the analysis of my personal experience, I concluded that it was indeed an experience of critical consciousness raising according to Freire's (2005) dialogical theory of action. In this theory, the author proposed essential elements of an authentical and critical consciousness, which include (Freire, 2005)

> *consistency* between words and actions; *boldness* which urges the witnesses to confront existence as a permanent risk; *radicalization* (not sectarianism) leading … to increasing action; *courage to love* …; and *faith in the people* (p. 176).

All these elements were present in the process I narrated in this autoethnography. It is also worth noting that, for the author, liberation and domination, humanization and dehumanization are permanent and ongoing processes, so is *conscientização*. This means that there is not a simple binary of having or having not achieved critical consciousness. Since my first participation in a popular education project, there were situations throughout the years in which my actions could be considered more radical, but at the same time may have been more sectarian. To keep raising critical consciousness always involves critical reflection with radical action. It requires freedom, and freedom is praxis.

In the following sections, I review the main topics that I observed in the analysis to provide answers to my research questions.

Critical Consciousness in Popular Education

For the first research question (How is critical consciousness developed in practice through popular education?), I identify that dialogue and praxis were fundamental for my *conscientização*. Since my first experience with popular education, it was the unity of reflection and action that allowed me to be open to establish dialogical relationships and, consequently, to

feel more human. And, as mentioned before, although I am focusing on my individual experience in this thesis, the process of raising critical consciousness is always collective.

Through dialogue, I was able to have a better reading of the objective reality of the world, while I also became aware of the subjectivity of other human experiences. It is worth remarking that, while the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* may be interpreted as a method for adult literacy to liberate students from their condition of oppressed, one of the main characteristics of its philosophy is the overcoming of the contradiction teacher-student, oppressor-oppressed. Thus, true liberation—and consequently, critical consciousness—only occurs collectively, with all people involved. This means that an authentic popular education work must involve all the elements of dialogical action in its whole process, not only "in class." According to Freire (2005), consciousness cannot be another deposit made in people. And, as the author also emphasized, dialogue can only happen if there is love. Love for the humanity and love for the world. Establishing affective relations through dialogue, I became able to see human beings as human beings and to love them.

Through praxis, I started to see that reality is unfinished. That, with critical reflection and radical action, transformation occurs. One interesting discussion we had among the participants of the adult literacy project was about the capitalist relations within the Occupation. We observed people who were part of the housing movement fighting because one of them had put a personal belonging on the other's space in the Occupation. The movement being founded on a socialist perspective did not change their notions of private property, even though they were all occupying and sharing a land that legally belonged to a third party. Nonetheless, through the radical action of establishing affective relations, we were able to transform it and maintain shared collective properties in the same Occupation. As Freire (1998) asserted, "[t]he reading and writing of the

word would always imply a more critical rereading of the world as a *route* to the *rewriting*—the transformation—of that world" (p. 34). While any social movement is already an attempt to rewrite the world, the reading of the world is a continuous process that requires a progressive criticality. Being unfinished, reality has to be constantly reread, with authentic praxis.

Conditions for Critical Consciousness

For the second research question (What are the factors, conditions, and dispositions that can contribute to raising critical consciousness?), popular education caught my attention and interest because I have been giving great value to education my entire life. However, the conditions that led me to the process of *conscientização* were mainly the anguish and desire to restore the creative power, and a dialogical communication aligned with the practice. Then, a continuous process of collective reflection and action—which means authentic praxis.

I have always experienced a form of anguish because of the unfairness of the world. I thought it was unfair to be discriminated because of my ethnic background and found my way to deal with it by adapting. Getting to know other social injustices, I thought that I could assist other people with what worked for me. According to Freire (2005), this is rooted in the inhibition of humans' creative power, in the frustration of the efforts to act responsibly. Although I was in a privileged social situation when I got to know the popular education project and did not think much about the greater political and economic relations, I had the "biophily" (p. 77), the interest in life. At first, I joined the adult literacy project because I wanted to help people to have more opportunities through education.

Before taking part in the project, I was in a limit-situation. Until that moment in my life, most choices in my life were prescribed. I took my master's degree as a natural pathway to continue my studies, and the PhD was a continuation of the same pathway. Then, feeling lonely

and anguished by my inability to act made me want to reject my impotence. In 2012, still before getting to know the popular education project, I participated for the first time in a demonstration. It was a populist manifestation against corruption, without a specific objective or audience in mind. In some way, I was already desiring to act, but without dialogue and critical reflection, it was not effective, even for any individual transformation. That was a key difference to the popular education project. Through dialogical methods, and a coordination between reflection and action, I could see transformation happening in the life of all the participants of the project, both objectively and subjectively. Further, I realized that what I really wanted was a social change—to transform the world.

Consequences of Critical Consciousness

In responding to the third research question (What can be the consequence of critical consciousness raising to one's life and one's communities?) can be divided into two parts: the individual and the collective consequences.

For the first part, the main consequence to my life was a personal transformation in terms of autonomy and responsibility. As mentioned in the previous chapter, I have experienced a transformation in my capacity for taking risks. Before 2012, most of my life was guided by trying to attend others' expectations to feel a sense of belonging. More recently, this has changed. In Freire's (2005) terms, I started to seek to become increasingly "fully human" (p. 92)—to make and remake, to create and re-create, to transform situations rather than adapting to them. Before, I preferred to remain silent and wanted to be invisible. After that, as popular education changed me, I want to be part of changing. Now it is my turn to transform the world.

This leads to the second part of the question. To be part of changing means that I am aware that no real transformation happens only individually. To change situations means

impacting collectively, and collective impacts require collective action and collective reflection. I observed that another important consequence to my life was assuming a leadership role in different situations, not hierarchically but as a means for collective organization. As Freire (2005) pointed out, critical consciousness cannot be egoistic. It restores the power of transformation of the world for the increasing liberation of humankind. Once again, I want to reinforce that this thesis focuses on my individual case for ethical reasons, but my most radical actions were always collective. Thus, the process of *conscientização* always has communitarian impacts.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I employed autoethnographic research to investigate the development of critical consciousness in practice, based on a personal experience. Through a narrative analysis, I identified the conditions, how the process occurs, and the consequences of *conscientização* as conceptualized by Freire (1974). As the main points, I pointed out that dialogue and praxis were the most important elements in my process, and that autonomy, responsibility and leadership were the most important consequences of it, producing collective impacts.

The process of developing the study and writing the thesis was challenging especially because of the use of the autoethnography methodology which is new to me. At first, I did not feel confident to employ this approach. Having had my first experience writing a thesis in the engineering field, I have learned that the researcher should take distance from the research, that I could never write in first person. However, as a transgressive movement in research and knowledge production, doing autoethnography is also a form of practice and reflection. It also requires critical thinking and consciousness on the action and the risks one is taking when doing it. For me, it involved a continuous reflection on the reasons and the consequences of exposing my history, while also making it through this work. The critical analysis of my own experience allowed me to get more aware on my own incompleteness.

The main contribution of this study was to provide practical evidence of concepts proposed by Freire (1974, 1998, 2005), not only objectively, but mainly subjectively. By not separating research from researcher, I was able to inform the point of view of a subject that experienced the process. Although the facts narrated can be insightful for readers to understand how the process was developed, the main purpose of the autoethnographic study is to provide a perspective on the subjective aspects of the experience and to inspire reflection and action.

Limitations and Further Research

The case explored in this thesis must be considered in context—my experience as a post-graduate Japanese-Brazilian man, moving to a different state within Brazil in the years 2010. As an autoethnography, it has no purpose of generalization, what would need the use of other approaches for investigating the phenomenon. Furthermore, for being written more than ten years after the experience, it was not feasible to collaborate with all the people that were involved in the project. Due to the nature of the phenomenon investigated, my individual process of critical consciousness raising is not completely described as I had to omit information that could led to the identification of other people, for ethical reasons. Nevertheless, the relevance of the study relies on the unique perspective that was adopted in narrating this autoethnography.

As one of multiple approaches to study the phenomenon of critical consciousness raising, autoethnography can provide one perspective of the process, but it is complementary to other methodologies. For further research, I recommend expanding the questions that I approached here to a greater context, by employing empirical research on the processes of critical consciousness raising among different people involved in one or more popular education initiatives within a community. This could reveal common elements and particularities in distinct processes of *conscientização*, considering different organizational approaches and individual life stories.

Implications for Praxis

Considering the findings presented in this study, I offer a few suggestions for those who want to engage with Freire's work and the process of *conscientização*. If Freire's work is to continue to be employed across educational courses for the purpose of fostering critical consciousness, then I recommend that educators consider being open to dialogue with students

and to promote spaces where they can engage in action while critically assessing the world around them. To be coherent to the purpose, practice cannot be detached from reflection, it must happen in authentic praxis. Indeed, if educators want that critical consciousness is raised, then they need to be aware that it is a collective process that involves both students and them, and that requires concomitant reflection and action towards social transformation. Because if Freire's concept of *conscientização* is taken as a process that can be developed on someone else, then it will be serving to the opposite purpose of domination. It will be just another deposit of a prescribed reality into them, which prevents liberation by dehumanizing them.

Finally, if reality is unfinished and humanity is incomplete, then all those who anguish for social transformation should keep critically and collectively reading the world to rewrite it through praxis, rather than sticking to find the most accurate interpretation of the words that Freire wrote more than 50 years ago.

In this autoethnography, I divided my story in three moments to show the evidence of Freire's philosophy in my own personal trajectory. Culturally, education on its own does not do anything without the people. However, depending on their education, people can reinforce domination or liberate themselves. By engaging with my own story, this autoethnography was also an exercise of reflection that showed me that I acted in both ways—upholding the status quo and working toward transformation. My transformative experience in and through popular education allowed me to progressively follow the path towards liberation. While I concede that education may not transform the world, my research revealed that popular education changed me and, at least in some minor ways, I keep working to transform the world.

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