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(2014)

Striving for a better world: Lessons from Freire in Grenada, Jamaica and Australia.

International Review of Education, 60(4), pp. 523-543.

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<http://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-014-9434-0>

Striving for a better world: Lessons from Freire in Grenada, Jamaica and Australia

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International Review of Education, Vol 60, Issue 4, pp. 523 - 543

DOI 10.1007/s11159-014-9434-0

Paper available electronically on SpringerLink:

<http://www.springerlink.com/openurl.asp?genre=article&id=doi:10.1007/s11159-014-9434-0>

Abstract The author of this paper considers the influence of Paulo Freire's pedagogical philosophy on educational practice in three different geographical/political settings. She begins with reflections on her experience as a facilitator at Freire's seminar, held in Grenada in 1980 for teachers and community educators, on the integration of work and study. This case demonstrates how Freire's method of dialogic education achieved outcomes for the group of thoughtful collaboration leading to conscientisation in terms of deep reflection on their lives as teachers in Grenada and strategies for decolonising education and society. The second case under consideration is the arts-based pedagogy shaping the work of the Area Youth Foundation (AYF) in Kingston, Jamaica. Young participants, many of them from tough socio-economic backgrounds, are empowered by learning how to articulate their own experiences and relate these to social change. They express this conscientisation by creating stage performances, murals, photo-novella booklets and other artistic products. The third case study describes and evaluates the *Honey Ant Reader* project in Alice Springs, Australia. Aboriginal children, as well as the adults in their community, learn to read in their local language as well as Australian Standard English, using booklets created from indigenous stories told by community Elders, featuring local customs and traditions. The author analyses how the "Freirean" pedagogy in all three cases exemplifies the process of encouraging the creation of knowledge for progressive social change, rather than teaching preconceived knowledge. This supports her discussion of the extent to which this is authentic to the spirit of the scholar/teacher Paulo Freire, who maintained that in our search for a better society, the world has to be made and remade. Her second, related aim is to raise questions about how education aligned with Freirean pedagogy can contribute to moving social change from the culture circle to the public sphere.

Keywords Paulo Freire; Freirean pedagogical practice; dialogic education; work-study concept; Theatre arts education, Area Youth Foundation (AYF); indigenous education; *Honey Ant Readers*, Grenada; Jamaica; Australia

Résumé Lutter pour une vie meilleure : enseignements freiriens à Grenade, en Jamaïque et en Australie – L'auteure de cet article examine l'influence de la philosophie pédagogique de Paulo Freire sur la pratique éducative appliquée dans trois environnements géopolitiques différents. Elle débute par une réflexion sur sa propre expérience d'animatrice lors d'un séminaire freirien tenu en 1980 à Grenade pour des enseignants et éducateurs communautaires sur l'association de la théorie et de la pratique. Son analyse atteste que la méthode freirienne de l'éducation dialogique a obtenu des résultats auprès d'un groupe de collaboration attentive menant à une conscientisation, en termes de réflexion approfondie sur la vie d'enseignants à Grenade, ainsi que de stratégies en vue de la décolonisation de l'éducation et de la société. Le second sujet d'étude concerne la pédagogie fondée sur l'art qui détermine le travail de la fondation pour la jeunesse *Area*

Youth Foundation (AYF) à Kingston (Jamaïque). Les jeunes participants, issus en majorité de contextes socioéconomiques difficiles, acquièrent au cours de l'apprentissage la capacité d'exprimer leurs expériences et de les relier au changement social. Ils manifestent cette prise de conscience par la création de spectacles, de peintures murales, de romans-photos et d'autres réalisations artistiques. La troisième étude décrit et évalue le projet *Honey Ant Reader* à Alice Springs (Australie). Des enfants aborigènes et les adultes de leur communauté apprennent à écrire à la fois dans leur langue locale et en anglais australien standard, à l'aide de brochures reproduisant les récits autochtones transmis par les anciens de la collectivité et relatant les coutumes et traditions locales. L'auteure démontre que la pédagogie « freirienne » illustre dans chacune de ces trois situations la démarche de stimuler la création de savoirs en vue d'un changement social progressif, qui remplacent les connaissances enseignées préétablies. Cette démonstration soutient son analyse sur le degré de fidélité à l'esprit du chercheur et enseignant Paulo Freire, qui affirmait que dans notre recherche d'une société meilleure, nous devons inventer et réinventer le monde. Le second objectif de l'auteure, connexe au premier, consiste à soulever des questions sur la contribution éventuelle d'une éducation alignée sur la pédagogie freirienne à extraire le changement social du cercle de la culture pour l'élargir à la sphère publique.

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Introduction

In this paper, my aim is to add to the discussion about the pedagogical philosophy of Paulo Freire with a focus on how we might understand his influence on pedagogical practice in three different geographical/political settings. I am interested in the extent to which the “Freirean” pedagogy in three specific examples is authentic to the spirit of Freire, a scholar/teacher who maintained that in our search for a better society, the world has to be made and remade. My second, related aim is to raise questions about how education aligned with Freirean pedagogy can contribute to social change.

My reflections on Freirean pedagogy are centred around the following three aspects, illustrated in three specific case studies:

- 1) learning through dialogic education: Paulo Freire's 1980 workshop on educational change in revolutionary Grenada;
- 2) empowerment for young adults through Theatre Arts education: the Area Youth Foundation, Kingston, Jamaica; and
- 3) drawing on the knowledge of Aboriginal Elders to teach school literacy: developing the *Honey Ant Readers* in indigenous communities, Northern Territory, Australia.

Points selected from a paper presented by Carlos Torres (2013)¹ are useful for my goal of analysing how pedagogy influenced by Freire played out in three geographical sites, and how such pedagogy can contribute to social change. Torres outlines Freire's experience of setting up and implementing the literacy programme in Angicos, Brazil in 1963. From this he traces the development of Freire's thinking, showing how Freire's pedagogical model evolved through a combination of his experience of adult education in Angicos, his deeply held philosophy, and his study of human behaviour and social institutions. Torres focuses on the nature of the education that Freire developed in Angicos, and subsequently in other adult education sites. He reminds us that Freire's pedagogy was characterised by his striving for all participants in the teaching/learning process to learn through critical conscientisation. Learning in this education process is characterised not by individualism, but by fellowship and solidarity, for example, through "culture circles" practising a collective, dialogic exchange of reflections. This collective learning takes the form of *praxis* – the cycle of conscientisation/action/reflection/action. A key aim of this kind of learning is to reflect on, challenge and act on the terrible material conditions endured by the poor – including malnutrition, unemployment, poverty, illness. As Torres points out, Freire was concerned with the role of popular education for transforming the public sphere into a space of increased equity.

My analysis utilises these important features to discuss how a Freirean approach to collective, popular education pulls it in the direction of critical *praxis* in the public sphere. I outline the case studies in Grenada, Jamaica and Australia to ask how this approach can help to forge public opinion and mobilise it as a political force.

Dialogic education for teachers: Paulo Freire's workshop on educational change in the Grenada revolution

In 1980, Paulo Freire was invited to run a two-week teacher education workshop with 50 teachers on the Caribbean island of Grenada. In my first case study, I will revisit an earlier article that I wrote describing the experience that I had in working with Freire as one of the facilitators who assisted him in this workshop (Hickling-Hudson 1988). It was a unique setting in that it was not a workshop to train adult literacy facilitators, which was usually Freire's main sphere of interest. Instead, it was a professional development workshop for

¹ The paper I am referring to was presented by Carlos Torres at the XV Comparative Education World Congress (WCCES) held in Buenos Aires 24–28 June 2013.

teachers and a few community workers. For me, it provided “insider” light not only on the critical *praxis* core of Freire’s pedagogy, but also on its social implications.

The political context of the workshop was the end of the first year of the popular revolutionary regime led by Maurice Bishop and his colleagues in the New Jewel Movement (NJM).² It was a time of new possibilities. A corrupt former regime had been overthrown and the new, youthful and idealistic leaders of the revolution set out a vision that would decolonise Grenada, not only in the sense of modernisation, but also in the sense of a radical, socialist-oriented rethinking and restructuring of relationships. Grenada, a small society of just over 100,000 people, had obtained independence from Britain in 1976, a decade or more after independence had been won by some of the other, larger societies of the Caribbean. The socio-economic structure was still colonial, characterised by poverty for the majority, social division and a dependent economy. In the four and a half years of the revolution, the People’s Revolutionary Government (PRG) laid foundations for social transformation. Moving towards decolonising and postcolonial goals included improving the economic structure, in this case with an expanded role for the public sector, enhanced opportunities for the dominant private sector, and a small new sector comprising economic cooperatives. The country was galvanised into becoming involved in planning and implementing many new projects in agriculture, small business and education (see Hickling-Hudson 1995, 2012).

Grenadians saw the education and upgrading of teachers as an important method of urging along change. Many of the teachers were an enthusiastic part of the revolution. In the 18 months before Freire arrived, they had met in workshops to discuss their role as change agents, and it was in these workshops that they had emphasised the necessity of adopting a work-study concept³ in education. The work-study approach was to counter the dysfunctional educational system left by British colonialism. As in other British colonies, high-status learning in elite schools was theoretical, divorced from practical matters and

² The New Jewel Movement (NJM) was the acronym for the New Joint Endeavour for Welfare, Education and Liberation, a coalition of socialist-oriented groups emerging in the 1970s in Grenada. The NJM dedicated itself to replacing the existing government, which was seen as corrupt, dictatorial, and perpetuating some of the most negative patterns of colonialism. In 1979, the NJM overthrew the government and formed the People’s Revolutionary Government (PRG), which launched revolutionary change in the economy, social services, education, cultural expression, and governance of the island. The PRG was in power for four and a half years until October 1983, when the revolutionary coalition imploded politically with fratricidal killings culminating in the execution of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop and others by some of their colleagues. Combined forces led by the United States supported by some Caribbean governments then invaded Grenada, and eventually the pre-revolutionary Grenadian constitution was re-established.

³ A work-study concept of education combines formal theoretical elements with practical vocational elements.

Anglocentric, while education for the masses was vocational in emphasis, minimalist, and divorced from theory.⁴ How would teachers re-frame education for the new society in a manner that would see practical work informing study and vice versa? The Freire seminar was intended to give them a forum to sort out their many questions and work out a strategy for changing education.

The seminar group consisted of 51 participants (47 Grenadian teachers and 4 agricultural officers), together with Paulo Freire and his team of 4 facilitators. As a Caribbean teacher-educator who had also had some experience in non-formal adult education, I was invited by the Grenadian PRG to be one of these facilitators. I was the only woman and the only Caribbean native English-speaker in Freire's team.⁵ Our task was to help participants consider how to develop a model or models of "work-study" that would pursue the vision of the Revolution to develop the society by forging strong and mutually enriching links between school and community. Together with the officers of Grenada's Ministry of Education, I expected that the seminar would be structured around a timetable which included lectures, discussion groups and prepared readings. However, this did not accord with the dialogic style of Freirean pedagogy. Neither timetable nor readings were provided, because Freire wanted the group to draw on their own mental and cultural knowledge in discussing the problems of education and working out solutions and alternatives.

Freire organised the 51 participants into five study circles which engaged in collaborative learning. Each circle had a member of the teaching team as a facilitator. The study circles, including the facilitators, discussed topics during the mornings. Each afternoon the whole group met for plenary discussion and sharing, when the facilitators added more comments and questions. Extensive notes were made of the discussions, both by the learners and by the facilitators. Contrary to my misgivings, this dialogic structure did not imply lack of preparation on the part of the facilitators. Before the seminar started we spent a few days preparing for it by visiting workplaces and institutions, talking with personnel, and studying the nature of the educational and social changes that were taking place in Grenada. Each day after the seminar, we met and prepared for the next day by discussing topics which had been raised and which were likely to be discussed on the

⁴ Problems and possibilities of Caribbean education within a development context are discussed in Hickling-Hudson (2004).

⁵ Freire's colleagues were three Spanish speakers who were fluent in English. Freire's English was not strong enough to convey complex ideas, so he usually spoke in Spanish, which his colleagues translated into English.

following day (see Hickling-Hudson 1988, pp. 15–16). We were building up a picture of the local circumstances, contextualising this with knowledge from our rich and varied experience as educators in different settings, and expanding our knowledge and understanding by the daily discussions and debates with the Grenadian teachers.

As facilitators, we utilised guiding questions to orient the thoughts of participants towards the goal of analysing the changes needed in the education system. Our guiding questions were along the lines Freire remembers in his book *Pedagogy of Hope* (1995), asking the study circle members to describe the schools in which they taught, the best and worst aspects of the relationships between teachers and students, and what they thought was good or bad “about a rural school in whose programmatic content there is nothing, or almost nothing, about rural life?” (Freire 1995, pp. 173–174.) Once the groups started to talk, our responses helped to deepen the dialogue. At first they saw work-study as the timetabling of practical subjects into the curriculum – agriculture, handicraft, school games, festivals. The facilitators asked them to diagnose the deeper meanings of concepts of work, study, community, programme and approach. After intense discussion both in small groups and plenary sessions, they decided to abandon the concept of a work-study programme, and replace it with that of a more holistic work-study *approach*. An approach did not consist of discrete subjects. An approach was a philosophy that would pervade the whole learning experience of school and community. The production goals and projects of the revolution would be the basis of the work-study approach.

In Freirean terms, the learners were naming their world and interrogating their reality. In the cycle of communications *praxis* they sought solutions to the problems they raised, discussed how the solutions would be tested, shared ideas in the plenary group, modified their ideas and deepened them through further dialogue each day. In the culminating activity of the workshop, the teachers co-wrote and produced a manuscript⁶ of their deliberations, describing how their thinking had developed in setting out a concept of work-study for Grenada’s schools and communities.

Freire’s belief, shared with us at several points of the workshop, was that “The thinking subject cannot think alone [...] it is the ‘We think’ that establishes the ‘I think’ and not vice versa”. Evaluation of the discussion is jointly pursued, as the learners deepen the historical context of their knowledge, and as they think about their thinking. The

⁶ After the collapse of the revolution and the US invasion of Grenada in 1983, many of the educational materials developed and produced during the 1979 to 1983 period were destroyed. It is not known whether any copies of the manuscripts from the Freire workshop still exist in Grenada.

process leads people towards conscientisation, or a state of being able to engage in an informed critique of their world, which raises political literacy. This can enhance the confidence that is a step towards collectively challenging the status quo to bring about transformative action “to change the present to create the future” (Hickling-Hudson 1988, pp. 14–15).

Another important principle that Freire shared with the workshop participants is that a group needs a theory of transformative action, in order to move from critically analysing a situation to envisaging how to change it. The discussion groups reorganised themselves into workshops, and each of these produced a booklet on the goals, practice and methods of the work-study approach, based on their deliberations so far. This work took them two days. Then a committee was elected to combine the five booklets into one. The final manuscript included: a report on the deliberations of the seminar, a theoretical explanation of work-study and its objectives, illustrations of procedure and techniques for facilitators assisting development projects in local communities. It ended with a hypothetical illustration of a facilitator’s work in a rural community. The group had an anxious discussion about where the school and its students would fit into the change process. Then someone made the point that “The children live in the same reality as their parents. We deal with each at their particular stage.” Children in school and parents in the community would be constantly interacting, at their own levels, in the adventure of practising social change as well as learning about it.

The entire group – participants and facilitators – had experienced a process of conscientization (Hickling-Hudson 1988, p. 23). This meant that we had moved slowly towards an informed, analytical articulation of the challenges for a decolonising Grenada, and of the possibilities of change. The workshop’s production of the booklet represented the first stage of transformative action. The next stage should have been for the group to organise its members to carry the new approach into their communities and implement it there – to take it into the public sphere.

But this was not exactly what happened. The seminar group did not stay together as a collective, since many of them moved on to other careers or study programmes. Therefore, they could not work together to implement and monitor the changes they had envisioned in the workshop (see Hickling-Hudson 1988). Yet, although most of the participants were not in a position to carry out, as an activist collective, the process of school-community educational change in the manner envisaged in the workshop, they undoubtedly helped to contribute to change in education. The Freirean learning process influenced the thinking

and orientation of the participants and all the facilitators, many of whom devoted their careers to working for radical reform in educational as well as other social settings.

The educational programmes of the four and a half years of the revolution (both before and after the Freire workshop) had a firmly postcolonial ethos that resonated with the philosophy and teaching of Freire and the broader tradition of socialist-oriented popular democracy. The revolutionary leaders followed policies which freed people's voices to articulate social concerns, draw on their cultural roots and collectively design local problem-solving strategies (see Hickling-Hudson 2013a). In the education system, the reforms introduced included the upgrading of the most neglected schools, the training of teachers, and preparation for taking school-leaving examinations set by the Caribbean Examinations Council rather than British examination syndicates (see Hickling-Hudson 2012). The pedagogy of the adult literacy programme in the new Centre for Popular Education (CPE) was based on pre-designed textbooks or reading primers, which is not a method advocated by Freire (Walker 1980). However, a pedagogy based on primers was what was possible at the time, as few of the volunteer literacy teachers could have carried out a fully dialogical teaching programme along Freirean lines.⁷ The Grenadian adult literacy primers were part of the broader programme of the CPE, which was an ambitious and innovative structure designed to suit the circumstances of the society (see Hickling-Hudson 1988, 2013a).

The Freire workshop, in my view, made a unique contribution to Grenada's struggles for a better society. It was an example of an interactive and affirming pedagogical model that was hitherto little known, or perhaps even completely unknown, to educators from the English-speaking Caribbean. The approach demonstrated to more than fifty Caribbean participants the effectiveness of dialogic and interactive pedagogy in the search for informed practical strategies that would move marginalised communities forward.

The Grenada revolution achieved four and a half successful years of important, positive change in many key areas of the economy, society and education system. But because of the inadequacies of its model of political organisation, the NJM, the party of the revolution, was unable to manage internal conflict and degenerated into fighting amongst party members in what Layne (2014:186) describes as a 'lose-lose situation'. This led to

⁷ The Grenada Centre for Popular Education (CPE) was set up in 1980 to combat adult illiteracy. Its adult literacy programme was based on a Cuban-style model of "Each one teach one". Volunteers were given basic training through the CPE, and went into the homes of people who requested classes. Their main pedagogical tool was the set of reading primers, which were designed by Grenadian adult educators and printed with the assistance of the Cuban government.

events that culminated in horrific violence and killings of leaders and members. It exposed the society to the U.S. invasion in October 1983, the killing by invading forces of a number of Grenadians, the imprisonment for two decades of many of the political leaders, and the reversal of many of the social changes put in place by the revolution (see Ambursley and Dunkerley 1984, Payne et al. 1984, Lewis 1987, chapter 7, Thorndike 1991, Henry 1991, Bigelow 2013). Yet, some of the educational changes endured, and have provided the basis for people to continue striving for a better society (Hickling-Hudson 2012).

Theatre arts pedagogy – the Area Youth Foundation, Jamaica

A few years after the U.S. invasion of Grenada, my trajectory as an educator took me to Australia, where I continued my career in teacher education and where, in 1995, I completed a doctoral dissertation on Grenada's adult education programme. Continuing my research focus on adult education, I became interested in the work of the Area Youth Foundation (AYF) in Jamaica.⁸ The AYF works with young adults from marginalised communities of Kingston, providing young people from some of the most neglected and disadvantaged sections of Kingston with new opportunities, and putting them on a path that in many cases leads to skilled and creative careers. Across seventeen years, the programme has involved over 1,000 young people. What particularly interested me was not only the Freirean pedagogy consciously used in this project, but also the way in which the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach was deepened by combining it with the transformative power of the creative arts. This is expressed in an interactive dramatic mode drawing on the work of Augusto Boal among other drama educators. As I have argued in an article providing a detailed analysis of the AYF (Hickling-Hudson 2013b), this pedagogical model has achieved significant success in strengthening the participants in their struggles to improve their own and their society's circumstances.

The genesis of the AYF project was the decision of "The Company", an innovative amateur theatre group led by dramatist and cultural activist Sheila Graham, to experiment with using drama-in-education methods to help challenge the damaging effects of political conflict on the lives of young people (see Graham 2007). In

⁸ According to its homepage, "AYF is a charitable, non-governmental organization which, since 1997, has been working with young people in the inner cities to assist them in developing additional life skills and business training. AYF often uses an arts-based approach and focuses on building bridges of friendship between the divided, marginalized communities of Kingston" (<http://www.areayouthfoundation.com/> [accessed 2 May 2014]).

interviews that I carried out with Graham over a ten-year period (2003–2013), and in observations, with her permission, of AYF workshops on occasional visits to Jamaica, I learnt how the group developed and operated. Graham explained its genesis: “Our overall goal was to give youths in rival zones of the city an opportunity to work together – to create understanding across chasms of misunderstanding that were literally deadly: cross the street and you could be dead” (interview with S. Graham, 2003). This refers to the situation of warring two-party politics that was blighting the lives of many people in Jamaica, particularly those from areas of the society which are socially and economically disadvantaged (Levy 2009). The young people in the AYF project come from the section of the society affected by problems such as a 20.1 per cent illiteracy rate (JFLL 2008), a high unemployment rate of 14.2 per cent in 2012, a high poverty rate, a high rate of crime, and a high rate of homicide, particularly in poorer communities. Many of these problems are exacerbated by a low rate of educational success for the majority of students in the island’s socially stratified school system (see Hickling-Hudson 2013b, pp. 16, 30).

Educated Jamaicans from professional backgrounds and a socially influential section of the society crossed the social class divide to work in this project with youths from disadvantaged Jamaican communities in a sustained and systematic way. The founders and leaders of the AYF, Sheila Graham and her colleagues Winston Bell and Owen Ellis, combine learner-centred pedagogy with the creative arts.

The bedrock of all of the arts-based work in the AYF is the pedagogical process that helps the young people to develop their life skills and their educational competence. The interaction between learners and teachers in AYF workshops vividly illustrates topics from Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). It is based on a view of knowledge as a process of critical *praxis*, made and remade after reflection of themes critical to the lives of learners. The AYF participants are organised into Freirean-style “culture circles” engaging in intense dialogue and discussion about the issues that matter to them. This is followed by extended learning that builds on the discussion. The young people move on from their dialogic learning to take on the intense learning journey of expressing their newly developed insights in the form of drama, music, film, visual art and print text. Their dramatic expression is influenced by the approach taken by the Brazilian dramatist, Augusto Boal, who shaped a method that gave creative voice to Freire’s dialogical pedagogy and political philosophy. In this technique, expressed in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal 1993), actors, during the course of the play, invite

audiences to engage directly with them in representing or finding solutions to the problems being acted out on stage. Boal's methods in turn influenced the technique of process-drama, an interactive, improvisational, problem-posing drama teaching method now utilised by many drama educators (see O'Neill 1995, Neelands and Goode 2000). It is the process-drama method of exploring a situation or theme through unscripted drama and reflection-in-action that is utilised in AYF pedagogy.

The AYF teaching team helps the young people to articulate their own experiences and turn these into creative works. In the process, the youths encounter many aspects of the education that they have missed. In spite of the non-formal setting of the AYF, there is a carefully structured curriculum, taught by the AYF leader plus at least two additional tutors and regular guest speakers who extend knowledge of particular topics. Working through the curriculum takes approximately nine months, but some members stay on indefinitely as AYF associates, who help when needed as facilitators or assistants in artistic productions. The topics centre around issues such as sexuality, parenting and family life, gender and group relations, conflict resolution, psychology and the development of Jamaica and its social structure and tensions.

AYF leader Sheila Graham expresses the teaching/learning significance of the process in this way:

The discussions with the participants give us the basis for teaching and working with them. We now know who they are, what they are thinking, what is important to them. Everything flows from that. Our building blocks are who they are and what they already know. Everything they create comes out of this – they write a poem, create a dance, or a song, or do a small skit.⁹ Then we can further develop the storyline from that material. It can even become a musical stage show that develops as we rehearse it. The group talks about the story expressed in the skit, poem or song they created. Who is the hero? The protagonist and antagonist? What are some of the ways in which it could end? We, the facilitators, become directors who will make it work as a work of art. We might say: that piece doesn't work there, let's try it somewhere else (2012 interview with S. Graham).

The four outcomes briefly described below particularly illustrate the effectiveness of the work of the AYF teaching team in developing the education, social understanding, practical skills and career-orientation of the young AYF members.

⁹ A skit is a short theatrical sketch, usually comic, dramatising a situation, concept or character.

The design and staging of musical theatre shows

The first musical theatre show created by the group was *Border Connection*. This musical revue became so popular that it was performed for several years in communities around Jamaica, attracting large audiences as well as requests for it to be performed again and again. The theme of *Border Connection* addressed the violence and social decay of neglected communities, asking, in the first half: “How we come to this?” The second half of the revue projected positive solutions: “Yes, there is better way”.

Family, another musical theatre production written and staged by the group, emerged from workshop sessions in which the young people explored the intimate side of what happens at home. This opened social sores, such as lack of love and care, and social as well as sexual abuse. The AYF youths became so recognised for staging challenging and thought-provoking performances that they received several invitations to travel and perform overseas. They developed *Border Connection* into another version of a musical revue that they called *Link Up*, maintaining and extending the theme of healing the divisions between hostile local communities. The AYF performed *Link Up* to popular acclaim and sold-out houses in several locations in England and Italy.

The design and production of a series of photo-novella booklets

In the *All in Pictures* project, group members produce stories in a series of “photo-novella” booklets in comic-book style about issues that deeply concern young people (HIV awareness, unemployment, violence, drug abuse and child abuse). The AYF members are taught the skills of constructing and writing stories – learning about plot, protagonist, antagonist, problem, resolution, conclusion. They enact dramatic improvisations on the topics that they select, design costumes and sets, act out and photograph each scene for the booklets, select photos and up-link them into a computer graphics programme, write conversation “bubbles” in a combination of Jamaican Creole and Standard English, edit the booklets for final production, publish and finally market them. The teaching/learning process involved in producing these photo-novellas is as intense as that involved in developing musical theatre shows. The comic books were self-published by AYF in Kingston, 2005. They were entitled: *Di Crack and Di Whip*, *Di Test of Love*, *Dun Di War* and *No Vacancy*.

The involvement of AYF members as apprentices and assistants in theatre and media work

Some AYF members have worked as apprentices and assistants on film sets such as with the film *Third World Cop*.¹⁰ Some of them made video productions of local docu-dramas and documentaries. Their music videos, made in-house with songs of their own creation, have been played on TV and cinema screens, and two of them have been used in national peace-building public education campaigns. This led the young people to develop skills and competence as film and media production assistants in the entertainment industry. Several of them have progressed to obtaining jobs in these fields.

The contribution of AYF members to working with troubled communities in peace-building efforts

An important part of the work of the AYF has been to contribute to peace-building in troubled communities. It organised “Peace Boat”,¹¹ an unprecedented community sports and cultural celebration which brought hostile communities together after violent local elections in 2003, and initiated collective mural creations in some of these communities.

The lives of the AYF learners are stabilised through the facilitators’ skilful use of Freirean-style pedagogy in the culture circle, which enables them to interrogate their reality. Their lives are also transformed – not only individually through the new career-oriented skills and attitudes that are nurtured by their work in the AYF, but also collectively through their work in the public sphere. These young people have helped to create new community cultures in a variety of ways. Their music-theatre performances have raised awareness of their deep-seated longing for peace and equity, their photo-novellas have sparked debate of pressing social issues among adolescent groups, and their artistic mural projects and social “Peace Boat” activities have contributed to healing, peace and friendships within warring communities. Some of them are motivated to pursue their formal school and post-school education, and many are now working in skilled, influential and satisfying careers (see Graham 2007, Hickling-Hudson 2013b).

¹⁰ *Third World Cop* is a 1999 action-crime film set in Kingston, Jamaica, produced by Chris Blackwell’s company ‘Palm Pictures’.

¹¹ The name is derived from Jamaican popular culture in which people in some collaborative situations ‘run-a-boat’, that is, pool their resources to make a meal.

The success of the work of AYF members contrasts with the marginalisation they suffered while growing up in divided and troubled inner city communities. The topic “transforming lives” (Yard Edge blog 2008) relates aptly to the lives of many of them. For young adults who have been disadvantaged by a substandard schooling, the powerful learning experiences provided by the AYF help them to have a chance of becoming successful and effective, not only in their careers and social relationships, but also in their ability to challenge and change entrenched public injustices, as is suggested by their success in reducing antagonism and violence among different community groups.

Curriculum development in an Australian indigenous community: The *Honey Ant Readers* and the ethos of Freire

My work as a teacher-educator in Australia brought me into contact with a sphere of knowledge that I had never before encountered, that of issues in the education of Indigenous “First Peoples”. From the perspective of my experience in radical, de-colonising education in the Caribbean, it seemed to me that one of the most intractable problems in the education provided for Indigenous people in Australia was the imposition by the dominant Anglo-Australian majority of neo-colonial norms and expectations. What I have seen and read of the education provided by Anglo-Australia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students confirms my view that it is usually Anglocentric in content, and assimilatory rather than cross-cultural in ethos (see Hickling-Hudson and Ahlquist 2003 and 2004). Despite much rhetoric about the need for change, it appears to be extremely difficult for meaningful change to take place.

In this example of educational work with radical potential for changing the public sphere, my particular interest lies in the cultural significance of the creation of an innovative programme of early literacy materials, the *Honey Ant Readers*, within an Indigenous school-community partnership at the Yipirinya School in Alice Springs, a town in Australia’s Northern Territory. I have selected it as an example of curriculum development which exemplifies Freirean principles, since it utilises a method of conscientisation, co-learning, co-development of the materials, and *praxis* in terms of how they are tried out and improved. The potentially powerful impact of this project is that it is an example of one means of achieving culturally authentic Indigenous educational progress in Australian society.

The Yipirinya School is independent, not in the sense that parents pay fees, but in that it is controlled by an independent board of elders. The school was founded in 1979 on the initiative of the Indigenous Elders of the camps on the margins of Alice Springs, a site in which Indigenous people and families live in a situation of socio-economic disadvantage. The school's website explains that Elders struggled to establish it, in the face of resistance, as "a school where Indigenous Languages and Culture were prominent, where there was a strong Aboriginal presence and where their children felt comfortable". Eventually the school was given government support including buildings, teachers and resources.¹²

Margaret James, a lecturer in Education, with a background in linguistics, at an indigenous tertiary institution in Australia, works with Aboriginal Elders as well as with Aboriginal teachers and teacher aides to develop the *Honey Ant Readers* to promote literacy. This project is implemented both inside and outside of the Yipirinya school. The school curriculum is a nurturing setting that promotes bi-lingual and bi-cultural education, and provides tuition in English as well as in four Aboriginal languages. The *Honey Ant Readers* literacy team, coordinated by Margaret James, develops texts – reading primers – which utilise a vocabulary based on the everyday life experiences and cultural context of the school and its community. The language style is Aboriginal English. The children relate well to this material, as they learn through the concepts surrounding them and the stories that are familiar.

In this project, James' work with Aboriginal Elders is central in her co-development of material for the *Honey Ant Readers*. In discussion circles, she describes to the Elders how the reading primers utilise stories to develop early literacy, and asks them to decide what stories they would like to tell and what concepts they would like to be emphasised in the readers. Then the Elders lead the discussion. She stresses that she never takes control of their decisions. In her words: "I don't argue with their decisions. If they want a story used in the readers, I use it. You'll notice *Honey Ant Reader 14* isn't what a mainstream teacher would normally use, but they want me to, and the children and adults love it" (interview with M. James, 17 June 2013).

¹² "In the 1970's the town camp Elders wanted a school of their own. They felt that the Government Schools did not properly cater for their children because traditional Languages and Culture were ignored, and because their children felt that they were outsiders and were frequently teased." The elders wanted a school where Indigenous languages, culture and people were respected. "In 1978 the Yipirinya School Council was formed and in 1979 the first classes were started in the town camps. In 1981 the Council applied for registration of the School but this was originally rejected. After an appeal to the Supreme Court the School was finally registered in September 1983" (Yipirinya School n. d.; History section).

Honey Ant Reader No. 14 is indeed a surprise to an educator used to safer stories in early-reading primers. It is called “A Big Man Grabs Sister”, and words and pictures recount the tale of how a man stalked two young sisters as they went hunting for goanna and honey ants, some distance from their family camp. When night came and both sisters slept under a mulga tree, the man grabbed Big Sister and carried her away. When Little Sister woke up, she realised what had happened from looking at the tracks in the desert sands, and ran back to the family to raise the alarm. The family went searching for Big Sister, and eventually rescued her from the man’s camp while he was out hunting. They walked for a whole day to set up their camp at a new spot, far away from the man who had taken Big Sister, and warned the sisters never to get separated from each other while they were hunting. Several of the *Honey Ant Readers* portray equally dramatic tales, for example: No. 12, “Drowned Him, Drowned Him”, and No. 13 “Gotta Get the Baby”. The very earliest readers use familiar words and pictures in stories such as “Stop the Bus”, “Wet Baby”, “Nana Dig in Red Sand”, and “Honey Ants Yum”.

After recording the stories told by the Elders, Margaret James designs the readers so that they present these stories in a way that gradually develops ten levels of reading competence suitable for the first two or three years of school. The bright illustrations of the stories add to the Indigenous contextualisation and attractiveness of the text.¹³ The words of the stories relate to a specific word list for each reading level. Different and new sounds and concepts, as well as mathematics and music activities are systematically introduced. Numbers and counting games are incorporated in some of the stories. For example, in the tale of “A Big Man Grabs Sister”, the sisters find honey ants after they have walked a long way, and dig up 14 honey ants to put on the sand in their *coolamons* [bowls carved out of wood], “7 for big sister and 7 for little sister ($7+7=14$)” (page 7). Singing, too, is incorporated into this reader, in that when the sisters continue next morning to look for honey ants, they sing a tune of “Dig for honey ants” to music written in staves, clefs and notes in the text (page 8). Notated songs and rhymes are included in all of the books, as they can be effectively used to teach Standard English and reinforce the four macro skills of language learning: reading, writing, speaking and listening. The songs are part of a series of learning activities that include word and number games and puzzles relating to the particular reader.

¹³ Illustrated information on the *Honey Ant Reader* project is available both on the Yipirina school website at http://www.yipirinya.com.au/education/honey_ant_readers.phtml and on the project’s own website at <http://honeyant.com.au/>. Margaret James (2104) describes the project and analyses its theoretical context.

In 2013, this literacy method was evaluated as being very successful by a team of independent university evaluators. Citing comments from their impact evaluation report (Broughton and Gahan 2013), I will skip the technical points about literacy method (phonics, phonemes, decoding, encoding etc.), focusing instead on their cultural points. These relate to my observation that the project resonates with Freirean-style pedagogy in its method of drawing on and enhancing the cultural consciousness and articulateness of all the project participants. The evaluators assessed the *Honey Ant Readers* as having a high level of cultural relevance. They observed the children responding with excitement and enthusiasm to the stories, relating to their cultural and family significance. They noted the examples of children's progress in literacy learning. Particularly important are the points made by the evaluators about the language of the readers, and the connections that the reading project facilitates between school and community.

The evaluators state that “The *Honey Ant Readers* create a symbolic bridge between [...] home and school languages” (ibid., p. 13). The vital importance of this language strategy must be understood in a context of a fierce debate on language teaching methods for Australian Indigenous children in communities where English is not the first language. The old view is that children should be immersed in Standard English from their earliest years, even those who do not speak it at home. Bilingual learning is either not catered for, or given a subordinate role. The *Honey Ant Readers* take a different approach. They aim to meet the needs of “Aboriginal children who speak multiple languages and Aboriginal English, but [who] may not be adept in Standard Australian English” (ibid., p. 15). Thus, they make distinctive use of:

- (1) “Aboriginal English that matches children’s oral language, thus validating their home culture and language and facilitating the earliest stages of reading”;
- (2) “Gradual progressions from Aboriginal English to Standard Australian English [SAE], providing a learning pathway towards reading a wider range of texts in SAE, essential for ongoing learning at school”; and
- (3) “Culturally relevant illustrations reflecting the environments of children’s lives; inviting engagement; encouraging prediction of the written text; supporting comprehension and providing motivation for reading.”

(ibid., p. 3)

An important feature is that Readers are being translated into Aboriginal languages to meet the desire of Indigenous people to have children learn to read their own languages. In the 3rd edition, Books 1 to 3 have been translated into 6 Aboriginal languages: Luritja,

Western Arrente, Central Arrente, Warlpiri, Pitjantjatjara and Yakunytjatjara.¹⁴ The use of Aboriginal English and the translation into Aboriginal languages in these books is of special significance in Australia, where the majority of basal texts available in schools fail to recognise and represent the culture of Indigenous learners. When texts devalue, distort or render invisible the Indigenous world, this can generate the impression that reading is “a ritual practice of the school that has no pleasurable or communicative function” (Rose et al, 1999, p.29). In the bi-dialectical approach of the *Honey Ant Readers*, learning in the home language makes learning to read more accessible, values home culture, and also offers a bridge to reading in the official language, Standard Australian English. When learners master reading in one dialect or language, they can transfer their reading skills to reading in other dialects and languages (see Bialystok 1991, Baker 1993). By the 20th *Honey Ant Reader*, learners are expected to be able to navigate the textual conventions of Standard Australian English. Margaret James points out that

The books build in vocabulary and complexity of words, pictures (from simple, to complex multi-actor events) and grammar as they scaffold learners from AE (Australian English) to SAE (Standard Australian English). Over 650 words are progressively introduced into the series, repeated frequently. [...] These words are listed at the back of each reader for review [...] In the *HARs* scaffolding takes the form of supporting learners along a spectrum of language structures from AE structures towards SAE academic discourse required for, and rewarded by, schooling (James 2014, p. 84).

The second area of cultural significance is that the *Honey Ants* project is fostering significant interaction between the school and its community.

The *Honey Ant Readers* create a symbolic bridge between school and community [...] supporting a genuine two-way exchange of ideas and information [...] Significantly, elders and community members have been central to the development of the *Honey Ant Readers* [HAR] from the beginning, and the HAR project remains a catalyst for connecting the school and community in many ways. Community members who have a formal, acknowledged role in the development and production of the *Honey Ant Readers* are involved in telling traditional stories, providing evaluative comments on drafts of books, and translating and recording books in language (Broughton and Gahan, p. 13).

The *Honey Ants* project is indeed a bridge between school and community, but it is more than that. The books are a means of preserving stories and languages that face steep

¹⁴ For pictures see: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Honey-Ant-Readers/201066696622268>

decline. Of 250 known Aboriginal languages, only 20 are still in daily use (Gamble 2011).¹⁵ This is of vital importance in a context in which only 11 per cent of indigenous children are involved in indigenous language programmes in Australian schools (see Obata and Lee 2012). Not only are the *Honey Ant Readers* for the children being translated into several Indigenous languages, as pointed out above, but additional material is also being produced that prints the stories as stories, not as a series of reading texts. As Margaret James explains: “I am also putting out an edition which is exactly the way the stories were told to me, in the language of the speaker, in most cases Aboriginal English” (interview with M. James, 17 June 2013). “The book printed from these is a direct transcript. This delights the adults. It is print literacy in their words, unedited by anyone” (written communication from M. James, 3 November 2013).

The process of translating the stories from Aboriginal English into Aboriginal languages is significant. Different language groups deal with translating in their individual ways. In James’ account:

The Warlpiri people, for example, translated page 1, book 1, “nana” as “*Jajangka karrimi karlangu kurlu*”, (literally: “Nana is running with the digging stick”). The Luritja just wrote “*kami*” (literally: “Nana”) [...] Some of the translators translated the songs and rhymes, and others chose not to [...] In this way these books in traditional languages are no longer a progressive reading series, but a set of books. The translations have been a huge success in terms of communities wanting them. Many communities have asked us to print more books in their languages. We printed 660 in each language. Bearing in mind the small numbers of speakers, that is a significant show of hands (James, written communication, 3 November 2013).

This aspect of the project shows potential for improving literacy levels among the adults who use the books – literacy in English as well as in indigenous languages. “Many adults in the community are not print literate, but they read the environment and pictures. While their children learn to read via the *Honey Ant Readers*, many of the parents learn to read too, also the crèche carers and the Aboriginal classroom assistants” (M. James, written communication, 19 June 2013). The project also contributes to making a record of oral language pronunciation. “We made an audio CD for each book, with elders reading the books. That has been a great addition as it means that adults and children alike can enjoy the books, whether they can read or not. Also this way the pronunciation is preserved, as

¹⁵ “Indigenous language endangerment in Australia is clearly illustrated by the decline of Indigenous language speakers among all age groups of the Indigenous population aged 5 years and over. At the 1996 Census, 12.1% of the Indigenous population were Indigenous language speakers, declining to 11.1% at 2001 and 9.2% at 2006” (Obata and Lee 2012).

we know that it changes once a language is written and read, rather than just oral” (M. James, written communication, 3 November 2013).

The project of the *Honey Ant Readers* allows us to reflect on the postcolonial significance of working with adults to transform education for children in their communities. Indigenous education has been held back under the regime of internal colonialism imposed by Anglo Australia, and the consequences of that regime still linger. Although the levels of school success, school completion and tertiary education of indigenous Australians have recently started to improve, they are still extremely low compared to those of non-indigenous Australians (Mellor and Corrigan 2004). Levels of indigenous adult literacy and school literacy are still relatively low. Projects such as the *Honey Ant Readers*, which develop modern skills based on the authentic cultures of indigenous communities, are vital to help turn around this situation.

Margaret James notes the powerful impact

of giving minority people from ancient, living cultures written, modern, material in their language and about their world. There’s no doubt it draws them towards the books. They feel part of the story, even saying things like “That’s my nana; that’s me in the green shirt!” They feel proud and also of course as they know the stories so well they feel comfortable and I guess “in control” (they can predict what’s next) in an otherwise rather “out of control” world. They seem to “grow”, especially when recognised for the work. I notice this at conferences and other places I visit with Elders. They start off shy, then gradually realise they are supported and people are interested in what they have to say [...] and they really do seem to grow in stature & confidence (James, written communication, 19 June 2013).

Concluding discussion: the contribution of education to social change

Practitioners of pedagogy influenced by Freire are committed to moving education from the culture circle to the public sphere. A question that would lead to a deeper understanding of the social potential of this pedagogy is: How can education as *praxis* contribute to societal change?

Freire’s epistemology is central to his teaching. He views knowledge as an active process that is made and remade. Learners must create knowledge by engaging in collaborative thinking and self-reflection, probing their collective and individual situations and relating them to each other. The teacher’s role is twofold: (a) to help them do this through dialogue and mutual clarification of themes and questions and (b) to help them to relate this new knowledge to working out strategies of action that could tackle particular

problems. It is a process diametrically opposite to what Freire famously called “banking education”, in which teachers not only determine the topics and questions, but also “deposit” answers in the students without listening to their questions. This approach usually fails to tackle the problems that matter to the students.

The three case studies in this paper exemplify the process of encouraging the creation of knowledge rather than teaching preconceived knowledge. In the workshop implemented by Freire and his colleagues in Grenada, learners, through intense deliberation, developed a unique understanding of how students and workers could combine study and work in the new frameworks being put in place by the revolution. These new conceptualisations of knowledge, although they were not applied in exactly the ways envisaged by the workshop’s culture circle, percolated in modified ways into the public sphere. They were seen in the adult education activities of the Centre for Popular Education, the community-school day programme in elementary schools, the dialogues between communities and politicians, and the new encouragement of the Creole voice of the people. However, the revolution collapsed in October 1983. The short period of four and a half years of opportunity was not enough to cement the changes initiated. Did communication *praxis* – the action/reflection/action cycle amongst a group of educators achieved during the revolution – contribute to wider social change here?

The second example, that of the Jamaican Area Youth Foundation project, shows how pedagogy can combine the ethos of the philosophy of Paulo Freire and the drama techniques of Augusto Boal. For AYF participants, knowledge shaped by interactive reflections on self and society was further deepened through skills learned in the creative Arts. The exploration of life stories in relation to socio-political environments enabled young people in the AYF to challenge the borders that had been dividing them, and to cross these borders by working intensely and creatively together. Having crossed dangerous political borderlines, they created collaborative and unique cultural expressions in musical theatre shows, music videos, short movies, photo-novella booklets on social issues, and peace-seeking projects in divided communities. All of these moved education from the culture circle to the public sphere, but the AYF is only one project. It symbolises the vast educational needs of a society in which many thousands of young people, marginalised by the society’s inadequate economic and education structures, need the sort of cultural and educational support provided by such a programme. However, the very existence of the AYF is precarious because it is entirely dependent on applying for and winning non-government grants, which is often a difficult and unreliable process. How then can the

praxis – the knowledge/action/reflection – achieved by the AYF youths and their teachers bring about wider social change?

In my third case study, the *Honey Ant Reader* project in central Australia, facilitators are working with indigenous adults to record and preserve their stories while teaching their children to read. This is a version of the Freirean approach to adult literacy, in which adults are encouraged to learn to read by facilitators who draw out from them a vocabulary based on things that are culturally significant in their lives. Their reading skills develop through discussing the concepts and stories embedded in their culture. The goal is for this to build up their confidence and skills to take action to challenge and change the situations that oppress them. In the *Honey Ant Reader* process, both children and adults learn to read in English, and may choose to continue their literary development by putting their own languages into writing. An approach like this, respecting the people and their culture, is an important part of the journey of postcolonial change. It is wresting education out of the colonial context that has so disrespected and dispossessed non-European peoples. It is helping Aboriginal adults to have a significant voice in shaping “both-ways” education in ways that they desire, and this has strong potential for strengthening the public voice to challenge the ongoing injustices they are suffering in Australian society. However, like the AYF project in Jamaica, the *Honey Ant* project is on such a small, local scale that it can have an impact on only relatively small numbers of indigenous people within the larger society.

The central aim of all projects that exemplify the pedagogy of Paulo Freire is that they will strengthen the confidence, courage and skill of people to push for transformative developments in their societies. The most powerful impact of my three case study projects is in their strengthening of the culture and societal knowledge of the participants in a manner that leads to *praxis* – reflective activism. However, in the dialectics of real life, pockets of *praxis* are not enough to bring about the social change that is necessary to halt and turn around the conditions that continue to oppress and marginalise large numbers of people. Material, political and educational changes need to be combined to achieve transformation towards equity. As long ago as 1988, I quoted Freire as sharing with the participants in the Grenada workshop his deep insights on the dialectical nature of social change:

- Let us identify three mistakes.
- One: that education can be a lever for revolution.
- Two: that consciousness is enough to stimulate change.

- Three: that changing concrete reality and the modes of production is enough to change the system [...]
- “How did the bourgeoisie get power? It was not bourgeois education that gave them power. They obtained power, and at the same time developed bourgeois education to reproduce the system (Paulo Freire, quoted in Hickling-Hudson 1988).

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