

Popular Education: Its Contribution to the Call of "Reaching New Frontiers," (Chapter 2016); A way of being an educator in relation to the vision and daring boldness of Philippine

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Introduction

In this space, we will try to share with you an educational construct that has a conceptual framework and a foundation in theory. One concept that arose in Latin America which has key principles sustaining it is a positioning that takes a critical look at reality in order to transform it into a reality of justice for everyone. From this idea, we will look at Saint Rose Philippine Duchesne, a woman engaged with her reality and that bore within her the bold courage to reach new frontiers: *"When I came to America I thought that I would have no further ambition.. Now, I feel strongly attracted to Peru."*¹

What was the search for justice in Philippine's mission? What educational challenges do her life and mission suggest to us for our times? What are the new educational frontiers seen from this Latin American concept?

A concept with a history

All people have a story, life experience and an educational experience as well. Our communities also have their stories shaped from the history of each person, each social group. These histories are the roots of our way of acting and thinking about who we are. This is our make-up and the educational concept we each have and that our communities have. Popular education recovers Latin American roots that in many cases were forgotten or excluded when other educational models, other histories and horizons, were imposed.

Key mentors have been recouping the stories, the feeling, the thinking, of the Latin American people, building their own educational model that does not go against other educational processes but rather puts forth a model that we believe to be liberating for our communities. From the dawn of popular education with Simón Rodríguez who suggested that we needed to create a style of education that made us Americans and not Europeans and passing through Elizardo Pérez, who proposed that architecture should be in accord with the project to which it pertains, and onto Paulo Freire who taught us that the basic element of his proposed methodology was learning to read reality, Popular Education has comprised a proposal where given places, at the local level, dictate that the practice of education is always contextualized.

A concept within which there are no educational and pedagogical actions apart from context

For the celebration of Easter this year, we, along with the catechists, wanted to work with the death-dealing realities in the low-income areas like Villa Jardín, a neighborhood on the periphery in Buenos Aires, Argentina. We recount the story of a boy, Cristian, who found himself in the middle of an event in which he was accused of having stolen a cell phone. The neighbors where Cristian lived brutally beat him. Afterward, they brought him to the police station and it is still unclear whether he was beaten while there too. What is certain is that Cristian died a week later.

¹ *Philippine Duchesne—Frontier Missionary 1769-1852- Louise Callen, RSCJ*

Speaking of this life at Easter, we tried to connect boys and girls in high school with a reality they live in their own flesh. We thought we could announce the Resurrection and propose a New Life in which the life of a person is worth more than any cell phone.

Just that Easter weekend, in fact, a group of sixth year students at the school where we work were violently robbed. When we told the story of Cristian, we were trying to generate empathy with the situation. Contrary to our hope, though, they felt more aligned with “the other side” of the story.

When describing whatever educational practice, it is necessary to realize the context in which it has developed. Freire, in his book *Pedagogy of Hope*, recounts an experience of a talk he gave about authority, freedom, and punishment in the education of children in a poor region of Brazil. Beginning with Piaget, he expounded at length about how to treat children. When drawing to an end, a man who had been among those listening gave him a lesson that, according to Freire himself, he'd never in his life forget.

This man asked Freire if he knew where they lived and he described the limitations of space and possibilities that there would be in their living quarters, which were poor. Not only this, though...He also described nearly perfectly the house in which Paulo Freire lived with his family. And with this, Freire understood the differences that exist between the two contexts and how this puts us in a different place which we speak of limitations, authority, and the education of children. Upon returning to the car, Freire's wife said something that more or less summed up the situation: *Maybe it was you, Paulo, who didn't understand them.*

When Philippine arrived in America, she encountered a situation that was totally different than what she had hoped for or dreamed. She herself, like Freire, felt that they did not understand her. Bit by bit, she came to understand those times that the very context highlighted. The language differences, differences of culture and custom, in the ways of living their faith...without a doubt, these were things that affected her mission, including having her feel like she had failed in her desires or that she was not capable of doing that which was asked of her. Nonetheless, she overcame these difficulties and made living in a different context part of her mission and dream.

Present in one's context are the different political, social, cultural, and economic elements upon which are built inequality, exclusion, segregation, and injustice within our society. Those who practice popular education try to establish conditions and practices to transform this situation via an education understood in multiple dimensions: formal, non-formal, and informal. We educate under the assumption that educational change alone will not transform society, but without educational change, the society will not be transformed.

The context leads to the practice

Context is a fundamental part of what we in Popular Education consider to be our practice; that is, what we call Social Practice—precisely because it always starts from a reality that seeks to be transformed into a better one.

The context leads to the practice...This doesn't not mean to only take into account the “where” in which the educational practice is developed. Nor does it mean to only analyze from ‘the exterior’ as though it was a science experiment.

The context is part of what we do...and it has its correlations in how we do what we do and of course in why we do what we do as well.

That practice arises from context implies the assumption and discovery that there exist unique vital understandings...Ways of understanding oneself, understanding what is happening, of organizing, of appreciating, and acting. These ways that are not mine, but are those with which I am in dialogue.

Working in the context of poverty from an educational perspective, implies dismantling one's own ideas, making room for what someone else understands about the world, about life. It also implies questioning one's own understanding. It is in this way that we encounter another element that makes up Social Practice: Our ideas, conceptions.

Of course, analyzing these goes hand in hand with the way we look at context. It is what the man said to Freire when he explained to him that what Freire had said had nothing to do with what they were living, nothing to do with their reality. And, that this harsh reality that they were living led them to understanding and doing things differently.

Obviously, this is not something that happens instantly. All educational practice presupposes a process, as Francis says in the encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium: Time is greater than space* (222). Francis invites us to *accept the tension between fullness and limitation. Being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces.*(223) *Generating processes of people-building, as opposed to obtaining immediate results which yield easy, quick, short term political gains* (224). To generate and accompany processes is even more difficult within a school educational system and supposes a difficulty likely to be even greater: That there is no time to wait for the building of knowledge or the process of maturation.

Our way of acting, our way of thinking

In the *Pedagogy of Autonomy*, Freire reflects on the demands of teaching...Among them, he suggests that teaching demands love and humility. We can see this in the way that Philippine understood her encounter with the Potowatomie. She touched into her own limitation, loving that which was different, coming to know the Other, believing deeply that this otherness has something to which I could succumb and which also nourishes us.

She never learned the language of this people, but they had observed her during prayer and they could perceive her good will and her concern for them. Through Philippine, the Great Spirit invites the Potowatomie to seek a new meaning for their lives.

Freire speaks of methodological rigor and flexibility at the same time. Philippine, strong as an oak, yet at the same time, flexible, able to deal with whatever change or challenge. These elements are characteristics of a Popular Education educator and of thought and action that need not be in contradiction with each other.

We see these same intentions in the choices and experiences of Philippine. She worried deeply about what the students learn in order to live and bear witness in the society of the time...and she lamented that they and their families didn't sense that in the education that they received from the Religious. *We thought we would find children, ignorant but docile and innocent. In reality, as their fathers gave themselves to laziness and drink and their mothers to the desire for luxury, they appeared indifferent to the idea of their daughters learning.*²

Education is a political act

² Philippine Duchesne- Frontier Missionary. 1769-1852 Louise Callen, RSCJ

We consider that all education is a political act. When we speak of 'the political' we do not refer only to party politics, but also to politics understood as the art of knowing how to live together; this is in contrast to the sterile banking concept of education, that only takes into consideration fact and information apart from that based on the experience of the students. Education, from the perspective of Popular Education, calls for an ethical-political option that arises from and favors the interests of the dominated, excluded groups for the survival of Mother Earth.

We educate with the intention of empowering those who are excluded and unequal and of fostering their organizing in order to transform current society into one that is more egalitarian, and one that acknowledges differences.

We educate to create educational interventions based on pedagogical processes of cultural negotiation, confrontation, and dialogue of wisdoms.

Popular Education is not the banking model of education

Fundamentally, the process of education has been and in many cases continues to be what Freire called "the banking system" of education. It is a model of transmission that is direct and based on instruction. The one who knows "transmits" to the one who does not. Popular Education breaks with this idea since it starts from the assumption that all humans have knowledge derived from the world they inhabit and the proactive setting developed in their daily lives. Popular Education also parts with the banking model in recognizing that all humans have both intellectual and hands-on abilities and that the separation of those two kinds of skills is part of the make-up of the duality upon which the modern Western world, and especially its modern capitalist version, has built its power. This recognition of knowledge understood as another complementary dimension of "knowing" gives evidence that every educative relationship is a mediation in which these different skills dialogue, share, and negotiate as part of their culture, which will demand the clarity that the one who teaches, learns, and by that same token, the one who learns, teaches. *She learned to weave by watching our hands. We learned to pray by watching her face.*³

Popular Education considers that the culture of participants is the scenery which gives dynamism to intra-culturality, inter-culturality, and trans-culturality of different groups of humans. It is here that we return to looking at Philippine. She recognized this other culture with which she had to be in dialogue and the difficulties that this dialogue of cultures asked of her when she did not know the language and couldn't learn it. *God has not given us the gift of languages. Without a doubt, God wishes us more failures than success. I think that when I see some priests who can preach in English after several months in the country. I despair of being able to do that.*⁴

As educators, we begin at the here and now of the other and our aim is to have knowledge arise from that here and now, whatever the situation might be. Our educational work is realized WITH the oppressed, not for them or over them. I am not the one who "gives the recipe" of how to be a subject of the story, but I am to walk with them in the search of their own ways of organizing.

³ Sharon Karan, RSCJ Province of the United States-Canada

⁴ Philippine Duchesne: Frontier Missionary 1769-1852. Louise Callen, RSCJ

Organization is central in Popular Education. It is dialogue and praxis... praxis is a word used by Freire to designate the kind of practice that transforms the unjust conditions of inequality in which we live; conditions he calls oppression. It is not only to carry out didactic practices like simulations in a laboratory. Praxis is a type of practice which connects into the social relationships we have where we live. It is a type of practice that seeks to transform that which has become natural—those things which have become second nature to such a degree that I believe them to be natural. So long as I believe them to be natural, I do nothing to help transform them. Popular Education tries to dismantle these sorts of relationships that have been presented as natural, the way things are, but in actuality, they are relationships that have been created socially, with veiled intention.

It is because of this that Popular Education educators are always on the journey, searching for coherence between what we do, the context in which we develop our practices, and our ways of understanding ourselves and that which is around us. We always begin there, understanding that our practice is in dialogue with these three components—and seeking coherence unceasingly. However, with a critical eye that allows us to analyze those contradictions that arise, the tensions of the different forces that “pull,” we are able to learn. We try to live out our practices under the premise of knowing that we are always learning from it. We can grow in learning and that allows us to return renewed to our practice in order to continue this spiral that tries to reflect our educational practice.

A rereading of the four calls of the General Chapter from this view of education

Today, as the Society of the Sacred Heart, we invite you to reread the bold daring of Philippine and the calls of the Chapter from this perspective.

—*To Reach New Frontiers*—

From this educational perspective, what are those new frontiers that we are invited to reach today?

In the style of Jesus and of Philippine, we invite you to think of education from the existential and geographic peripheries of our world today. And, as they did, in keeping with the philosophy of Popular Education, the invitation is to situate ourselves existentially on this periphery. We are to deconstruct our knowing, our way of seeing things, understanding reality, in order to be able to dialogue with the new people and scenarios that present themselves. For this, it is important to understand that education is a political practice, filled with intentionality. As such, we invite you to leave to one side the aseptic, neutral, way that education and understanding are usually viewed. As we said before, education alone does not transform the world, but it is essential so that the world can be transformed into a better reality, one of greater dignity for those who are poor and excluded.

—*To Live More Humanly*—

As the Society of the Sacred Heart we dialectically connect “the radical style of Jesus of Nazareth with the call to live more humanly.

Since our beginning, since the bold courage of setting sail for new frontiers with Philippine, this challenge has been present and the search to live congruent with the style of Jesus is a part of every day. *She was a pioneer missionary educator whose only goal was to spread the Word of God in a new land. Now we know that she was not only holy but also human, sometimes perplexed by the ways of the people on the frontier, sometimes overwhelmed by a feeling of failure, sometimes reluctantly following the norms of the day rather than standing up to power. Always she was a woman who centered her life on God, who lived the mission to the*

*end*⁶...transforming, changing, making more human, those relationships, those realities in which we are living, even in the midst of issue that seem impossible to us.

—*To Create Silence*—

In Popular Education, a term that has life to it, a term that helps us to live our desired future in the present moment is the Utopia of transforming the reality that we are living. “Utopia is on the horizon. I move two steps closer; it moves two steps further away. I walk another ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps further away. So what's the point of utopia? The point is this: to keep walking.”⁶

In order to enter into the lives of others, it is necessary to know them. And to come to know them, silence is necessary, not speaking for them. The attitude of silence makes it possible for the most vulnerable sectors to not be read by others. It keeps us from making “natural” what we say about them. The challenge is to see that they know how to read and write the world in which they live.

At this time in which we recognize that the paradigm of rampant consumerism crosses through our societies, we are invited to create silence in the face of the cries of the Earth and to listen to them. The invitation is also to create silence and listen to First Nations peoples. Their cosmology can contribute a distinct way to relate to nature as Sister/Mother—a way that also has a sacred dimension which can distance us from exploitation and merchandising.

The Sacred Heart also speaks to us of a utopian project: The Kingdom, with dreams and a mysticism that is anchored in our Spirituality. We are called to silently gaze upon our wounded world, contemplate it, listen to the heartbeats in this world, and silently welcome the life that it brings.

—*To Be and Act as One Body*—

This call invites us to be united in diversity and act as one dynamic, interconnected body... A body that forms a style of net that draws together the distinct educational practices that have transformation as their intention. We believe, according to our concept of education, that this is the best way to act—and that acting this way brings with it questioning our own ideas, being patient and waiting for processes, while also living them, sure and certain that it is the path to lasting transformation. The realities of injustice rise up against us and demand that we seek an immediate way to change them. But changes will be real and lasting when everyone owns this, when we nourish one another with the diversity of those in search of a more just world.

QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of this Latin American concept are concrete contributions to the call to reach new frontiers?
2. Does the context of our educational practice challenge us? In what way?

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