

Editorial

Thinking/doing as the practice of freedom: occupational therapy and Paulo Freire's centenary

Magno Nunes Farias^a , Roseli Esquerdo Lopes^a 

^aUniversidade Federal de São Carlos – UFSCar, São Carlos, SP, Brasil.

How to cite: Farias, M. N., & Lopes, R. E. (2021). Thinking/doing as the practice of freedom: occupational therapy and Paulo Freire's centenary. *Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional*, 29, e3027. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2526-8910.ctoED292021>

Paulo Reglus Neves Freire was born in Brazil, in Recife, Pernambuco, on September 19th, 1921. Since his childhood, respect, dialogue, democracy, the search for coherence, the dialectic between freedom and authority have crossed his life (Freire, 1994) as basic elements for his apprehension of the world, in his *praxis* overflowing in his work.

In 2021, we celebrate the centenary of the birth of this intellectual person who crossed the most diverse borders until he died in 1997. These 100 years show his rich path of theoretical and methodological elaborations on the relationships of oppression and the possibilities of social transformation, which have been historically used by different fields of knowledge, including occupational therapy, in different places around the world.

Some works have mentioned the use of this author by Brazilian occupational therapists since the 1970s. *Maria Heloísa da Rocha Medeiros* (Reis, 2017) an occupational therapist who began her teaching career at the Occupational Therapy Course from the Methodist University of Piracicaba (São Paulo - Brazil) in 1977 and organized the academic discipline *Occupational Therapy Applied to Social Conditions*, says: "And then we invented a course, invented an Social OT course! We used Paulo Freire, other authors who discussed social marginality and what was marginality [...] in the second half of 1977" (Reis, 2017, p. 300).

Medeiros says that she participated in the 1st *Brazilian Education Seminar* at the University of Campinas (SP - Brazil) in 1978. Paulo Freire did the opening lecture by phone from abroad because he was prohibited from entering the country. She also reports the meetings with the author's works during her master's degree in Philosophy of Education at the Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas started in 1979, where professors Moacir Gadotti and Carlos Brandão worked directly with Freire in their academic disciplines. "At that time, the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* came to replace the 'Gospel' [...] and inspired everyone who struggled against the military dictatorship in which we lived" (M. H. R. Medeiros, personal communication, April 2nd, 2021). Her work called *Reflections on expressive activities for a liberating occupational therapeutic practice*, at the 5th São Paulo Scientific Meeting of Occupational Therapists (Medeiros, 1979) was inspired by Paulo Freire and other authors such as Carl Rogers, to propose



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

the use of mediated activity from a historical, cultural and subjective perspective, as opposed to a prescriptive practice and centered only on technical knowledge.

As remembered by the second author of this editorial, in 1978 Paulo Freire was cited in the lecture of the occupational therapist Léa Soares, in an event at the University of São Paulo Medical School. She spoke about her professional experience in the education of young people and adults.

Therefore, we can say that Paulo Freire was sought as a reference in a period highlighted by the struggle for the end of the military dictatorship, seeking for the re-democratization of Brazilian society, tensioning the expansion of civil, political, and social rights, demarcating new demands for occupational therapists, which implied processes of transformation of the occupational therapy of that time (Lopes, 2016). Groups of professionals interested in producing critical elaborations in/for the area, questioning the professional technical-political role within the unequal society, had Freire's contribution as an important background, which became more intense with Freire's return to Brazil with the political amnesty in 1980.

Thus, professionals have been trying to design a therapeutic-occupational praxis using Freirean references timidly in the accessed literature. We can see this in the brief elaborations of Toldrá (1986), describing an experience in territories called *Favela da Vila Nogueira* and *São Quirino* in Campinas (SP), focused on popular education, in which, even, Paulo Freire also worked there. The author affirms the importance of Freire's principles to understand the individuals' everyday life, based on respect and proximity, essential to the transformation-oriented practice (Toldrá, 1986).

We highlight the elaborations of Barros (2004) and Barros et al. (2007) at the beginning of the 21st century in which configuring social occupational therapy they affirm the adoption of Freirean assumptions for thinking/doing occupational therapy based on the notion of process, highlighting two elements from the author: conscientization and dialogue.

Conscientization goes beyond the level of conscience by unveiling the reasons for a given situation followed by a transforming action of this projected reality. Paulo Freire [...] does not dissociate technical action from political action (Barros et al., 2007, p. 352).

Outside Brazil, we have publications by foreign authors such as that by Townsend (1996) who brings Freire to debate about empowerment and a practice that involves the possibility and the philosophy of hope. In this direction, Townsend (1997a, 1997b) briefly references this author to discuss *domesticating and/or truly liberating* occupational therapy within the processes of exclusion, interrogating the power and the transformative potential of the occupation, if guided by democracy and horizontal and collaborative relationships. VanLeit (1998) present a work of social action with adolescents punctuating the concepts of empowerment and dialogue. The author stating that: "Freire's ideas share commonalties with occupational therapy's philosophy in that he emphasizes active learning methods and engagement of individuals in determining their own needs and priorities" (VanLeit, 1998, p. 34).

In this way, Farias & Lopes (2020) stated that Paulo Freire is an author who has been used historically in occupational therapy, whose theoretical and methodological

contributions can help to consolidate, strengthen and instrumentalize the *praxis* of the occupational therapists committed to the *practice of freedom with dialogic*, based on ethical-political commitment, criticality-problematization, democratization, and technical-scientific rigor.

Although there are different ways of apprehending Paulo Freire in terms of informing the praxis of occupational therapy, a common point is that this praxis need to be configured critically in the face of the reality sparked by social, economic, and cultural vulnerability, which permeates the different individuals of the action, people involved in everyday oppressions.

Paulo Freire brings elements to occupational therapy not only given through critical analyzes that *denounce* the woes of the world, but also through resources, methodologies, and strategies to *announce* ways and possibilities for overcoming them, considering that it is necessary to overcome an only verbalist position about the problems, which stops on “blah”, so it is urgent to aim the concrete action for the change in dialogue with the reflection, enabling the transposition of *limit-situations* (Freire, 1987).

Under Freire's (1987) perspective, occupational-therapeutic actions become spaces for mediating a critical reading of the world, in search of emancipation possibilities to problematize the socioeconomic and cultural contradictions that cross people's lives, denaturalizing unfair realities, linking them to movements of (re) inventions and (re) creations of everyday life, in which the *reason for things is questioned* (Farias & Lopes, 2020).

In this way, the therapeutic-occupational process is consolidated in the perspective of the possibility of liberation, bearing in mind that “[...] liberation is a *possibility*; it doesn't end, nor destiny, nor doom” (Freire, 2013, p. 50, author's emphasis). It is a technical and political task for *anti-oppression*, involving the issues of class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, territory and any other dehumanization process, as stated by Freire (2001).

We emphasize the importance of Freire's work not being placed as a static, a-historical and unquestionable set, on the contrary, he is an author who always affirmed the need to critically dialogue with his ideas and propositions: “[...] if you follow me you destroy me. The best way to understand myself is to reinvent myself and not try to adapt to me” (Freire, 2014, p. 27). Thus, this reinvention is also a task for us, occupational therapists based on a dense and historically situated apprehension, avoiding being like others, “Freirean tourists” (Freire, 2001, p. 61).

The processes of oppression in which Freire's elaborations meet are historical. Freire (1980), in *Education as the Practice of Freedom*, whose first edition is from 1967, emphasizes this issue taking on a Brazilian context crossed by elements such as colonialism, slavery, and authoritarianism that, continuously, are shaped and also conserved, as it jumps to our eyes on the current situation we face.

Furthermore, this context is strongly marked by the neoliberal and neoconservative order, added to the inequalities sparked by the CoVID-19 pandemic, has tragically affected the vulnerable population, exposing them to a *necrophilic policy* - guided by the pulse of a symbolic and material death (Malfitano et al., 2020; Farias & Leite Junior, 2021).

Based on Gramsci (2007, p. 184) reading, we live the *morbid symptoms*, resulting from the “[...] fact that the old dies and the new cannot be born”, bearing the marks of

what Freire calls a *closed society*. However, given its historicity, Freire continually reminds us that the future is questionable and that transformation is possible - *History never is, but it is being* (Freire, 2013). For this reason, this society that insists on closing off to the construction of individuals with free and creative conscience, also has its cracks, resulting from ruptures that can enable ways for “[...] highly permeable, interrogating, restless and dialogical forms of life, in opposition to the 'silent', quiet and discursive forms of life, of the rigid and militarily authoritarian phases” (Freire, 1980, p. 60).

For us, remembering and celebrating Paulo Freire's centenary is important to reaffirm his relevance for thinking/doing *occupational therapy as the practice of freedom*, based on solidarity as a collective and political action, so that we manage *untested feasibility*.

Autumn of 2021, in the second year of the pandemic.

References

- Barros, D. D., Lopes, R. E., & Galheigo, S. M. (2007). Terapia ocupacional social: concepções e perspectivas. In A. Cavalcanti & C. R. C. Galvão (Eds.), *Terapia ocupacional: fundamentação & prática* (pp. 347-353). Rio de Janeiro: Guanabara Koogan.
- Barros, D. D. (2004). Terapia ocupacional social: o caminho se faz ao caminhar. *Revista de Terapia Ocupacional da Universidade de São Paulo*, 15(3), 90-97. <http://dx.doi.org/10.11606/issn.2238-6149.v15i3p90-97>.
- Farias, M. N., & Leite Junior, J. D. (2021). Social vulnerability and Covid-19: considerations based on social occupational therapy. *Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional*, 29, e2099. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2526-8910.ctoen2099>.
- Farias, M. N., & Lopes, R. E. (2020). Social occupational therapy: formulations by freirian references. *Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional*, 28(4), 1346-1356. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4322/2526-8910.ctoEN1970>.
- Freire, P. (1980). *Educação como prática da liberdade*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra.
- Freire, P. (1987). *Pedagogia do oprimido*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.
- Freire, P. (1994). *Cartas a Cristina: reflexões sobre minha vida e minha práxis*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.
- Freire, P. (2001). *Pedagogia dos sonhos possíveis*. São Paulo: Editora UNESP.
- Freire, P. (2013). *À sombra desta mangueira*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.
- Freire, P. (2014). *Pedagogia da solidariedade*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra.
- Gramsci, A. (2007). *Cadernos do cárcere*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira.
- Lopes, R. (2016). Cidadania, direitos e terapia ocupacional. In R. E. Lopes & A. P. S. Malfitano (Eds.), *Terapia ocupacional social: desenhos teóricos e contornos práticos* (pp. 29-48). São Carlos: EdUFSCar.
- Malfitano, A. P. S., Cruz, D. M. C., & Lopes, R. E. (2020). Occupational therapy in times of pandemic: social security and guaranties of possible everyday life for all. *Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional*, 28(2), 401-404. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4322/2526-8910.ctoED22802>.
- Medeiros, H. R. M. (1979). Reflexões sobre as atividades expressivas para uma prática terapêutica ocupacional libertadora. In *Anais do 5º Encontro Científico Paulista de Terapeutas Ocupacionais* (pp. 35-48). São Paulo: Associação Paulista de Terapeutas Ocupacionais.
- Reis, S. C. C. A. G. (2017). *Histórias e memórias da institucionalização acadêmica da terapia ocupacional no Brasil: de meados da década de 1950 a 1983* (Dissertação de mestrado). Universidade Federal de São Carlos, São Paulo.

- Toldrá, R. C. (1986). Terapia ocupacional e educação popular. In P. Freire, A. Nogueira & D. Mazza (Eds.), *Fazer escola conhecendo à vida* (pp.83-88). São Paulo: Editora Papirus.
- Townsend, E. (1996). Institutional ethnography: a method for showing how the context shapes practice. *The Occupational Therapy Journal of Research*, 16(3), 179-199. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/153944929601600303>.
- Townsend, E. (1997a). Occupation: potential for personal and social transformation. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 4(1), 18-26. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14427591.1997.9686417>.
- Townsend, E. (1997b). Inclusiveness: a community dimension of spirituality. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 64(3), 146-155. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/000841749706400311>.
- VanLeit, B. (1998). Adolescent social action program: involvement of occupational therapy students in an innovative health promotion program. *Occupational Therapy in Health Care*, 11(3), 29-37. PMID:23948044. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/J003v11n03_03.