

Is There a Nordic Freire? The Reception History of Freirian Ideas in Finland

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Abstract

World-renowned educational theorist Paulo Freire has a decades-long legacy reaching all corners of the world. In this reception study, we ask, is there a Nordic Freire, that is, have the Nordic educators and scholars recognized Paulo Freire's works in the past decades? Our reception study's purpose is not to go into depth to Freire's thinking but ponder if there is a tradition of "Freirian" research and pedagogy in our Nordic country? Thus, we contribute to the understanding of Freire's legacy from the Nordic perspective. As an answer, we outline the trajectory of Freire's reception over the decades. Our historical and empirical analysis is grounded on our prior knowledge of the field and based on a systematic literature review and contemporary informants as our retrospective sources. We systematically searched and reviewed Finnish educational literature from the early 1970s to 2000s using literature databases. Secondly, we applied snowball sampling to find and contact Finnish veteran educational researchers and practitioners of adult education and gathered their autobiographical first-hand reminiscences of Freire's reception. Even if the direct impact has not been widespread and the proper academic research on Freire emerged belatedly, there have been many significant connections and echoes. Furthermore, we

highlight that the Finnish educational system's renewal since the late 1960s was parallel to the Freirian spirit of educational, social justice. In conclusion, we suggest that by applying the Freirian approach, it is possible to develop critical literacy and a sense of initiative for the oppressed.

Keywords: *Paulo Freire, Finland, educational theory and history, education for social justice*

Introduction

World-renowned educational theorist Paulo Freire (1921–1997) was widely known around the world already in the late 1960s. His literacy campaigns had attracted attention, as did his exile and his radical educational work in Chile and his lectures in the United States. As is well known, Freire's literacy campaigns and educational theory were taken up and put into practice from an early stage in many countries, particularly in South America and Africa. At the turn of the decade and in the early 1970s, numerous texts featuring Freire's ideas were published in Portuguese, Spanish, and English. However, more extensive research on Freire's work did not begin until the 1980s, particularly in Brazil, to where he had returned at the time, and in the United States, where many Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking researchers had established close academic ties.¹

Global interest in Freire's work has continued to this day. There is an abundance of scholarly work on Freire in the Anglo-American research literature alone (see, e.g., Au 2018; Gadotti 1994; Darder 2002; Darder 2018; Kirylo 2020; Lake & Kress 2013; Mayo 2008; McLaren 2000; McLaren 2015; Torres 2014, 2019) not to mention other research traditions in different language areas (see Peters & Besley 2015). It is crucial to study Freire's

reception in various locations to grasp different aspects of his influence gradually. In 2021 educators and scholars worldwide have celebrated Freire's Centennial (primarily online due to the Covid-19 pandemic).

In what follows, we do not analyze Freire's thought but focus instead on his *reception* in the Nordic context, namely in Finland. The Nordic countries have a rich and relatively long tradition of folk culture and education (*bildning*), dating from the 19th century. Therefore, it is not clear or self-evident how a "man from Recife" (Kirylo 2013) has been received in Finland over the decades. Thus, we were interested in finding out how Paulo Freire's thoughts were received and used in this context, if at all.

Freire's *magnum opus*, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was published in 1968, and his early writings were translated into several languages since the late 1960s. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* gained its most sweeping significance within the debate that began in the human and social sciences and social criticism in the second half of the 1960s. The discussion focused on social and educational sciences' role, social impact, and knowledge interests.² The critical debate on the social sciences was closely linked to the new political movements of the 1960s and perhaps most strongly to the radical student movement.

As a broad characterization, progressive educators and scholars knew Paulo Freire's name in Finland during 1970–1990. Still, his works were rarely read, and Freire's thinking was often known only superficially. The situation in the neighboring country Sweden was different since there were major translations of Freire's books in the 1970s. In Finland, the original interest in Freire was grounded in the new movements of social activism of the 1960s and early 1970s following familiar Western patterns. This interest was strengthened by rapidly growing concerns with Latin American issues in Finland. In the 1970s and

1980s, Freire's ideas lived mainly in the field of liberal adult education. Proper academic research on Freire did not begin until the late 1990s and early 2000s.

In this article, we examine whether there are recognizable traditions of "Freirian" research and pedagogy in our Nordic country and what have been the main features of Freire's reception.

Methods

We have used two sets and types of empirical data in our analysis: a systematic review of reception in literary sources and data collection using informants who worked contemporarily in the relevant fields of education and research.

First, we searched several Finnish databases (principally the Finnish national bibliography Fennica and the article database Arto) to form our corpus of research on Freire and Freire-related research and literature published in Finland from the 1970s on. We started by using "Freire" as the keyword in our searches. Then we expanded the scope of the search by widely checking possibly related books and publications dealing with critical educational issues, adult education, and Latin American topics, even when there was no mention of Freire as a keyword in the database entries. Thus, our systematic literature review consisted of Finnish authors' articles, pamphlets and books, book translations from the Latin American authors and various Finnish study materials in liberal adult education from the late 1960s to 1970s, and educational research literature from the 1970s on, referring directly or indirectly to Freire, his philosophy or his literacy method.

We categorized the findings according to their form and content, especially to see whether the contribution was originally Finnish or a translation, whether it was an article or a monograph, whether it was research-oriented or practice-

oriented, whether it contained mainly *original research* using and elaborating Freire's ideas or a *general introduction* to Freire's thinking, and also registering what were the fields of application and particular pedagogical or theoretical perspectives of the texts. These distinctions are rarely clear-cut, and we did not try to quantify the categories. Instead, we used them to robustly ground our interpretation of the *tendencies* we found in the general nature of related literature (Tight 2019).

In addition, we used the method of snowball sampling to gather information from Freire's contemporaries. This method is defined by identifying an initial subject who can then provide other actors' names (Atkinson & Flint 2004). As a purposive sampling technique, snowball sampling can be applied "in situations where there are no lists or other obvious sources for locating members of the population of interest," and it is especially "useful for locating hidden populations" (Morgan, 2008, p. 816).

For us, this method's principal value was obtaining people who had 'hidden' memories and unwritten history on Freire's (possible) presence in Finnish liberal adult education and universities' practices. We contacted veteran educational researchers and actors in liberal adult education, introduced our research project, and asked them the following questions: When did you first encounter Freire's name, texts, and ideas? How and where Freire's ideas were used in Finland? Have Freire's ideas been utilized in research and teaching or otherwise in universities and society? Also, we asked them if they knew other persons we should contact. We began with people we already could identify under our prior knowledge of the field and people whose names we had encountered through the review of literary reception. In total, we contacted over 30 people and received 19 responses with informative content concerning the actual subject matter of our queries. We sent all of the informants at some point

an email message containing the basic information of our inquiry and the questions mentioned above. We knew some of them in advance, and some we also contacted by phone afterward to elaborate on some details in their answers. Four out of five of our informants represent the older generation who were active or at least students in the 1970s and have retired by now. Around three out of four were academics in different university positions during the period under inquiry. The rest were active in liberal adult education in practice (as were some of the academics also).

We aimed to *reconstruct a comprehensive historical view of the tendencies and the main fields and perspectives within the reception of Freire in Finland*. The literature review result and the query data have been analyzed, combined, condensed, and summarized. We report them mainly in a chronological manner to offer a narrative view of the reception history. We do not minutely specify individual findings from the data in the text, apart from direct quotes and literature references, as both sources inform our reconstruction of data, and all the information we gathered is incorporated in the exposition. We begin with an overview and follow up with the most significant examples of impulses acquired from Freire.

Freire's Reception in Finland: Overview

Original reception and contemporary context (1970–)

In Finland, too, the early interest that Freire aroused was based on and linked to the social movements of the 1960s: radical leftist movements, labor movements, student insurgency, women's liberation movement and feminism, youth movements, civil rights movement, children's rights movement, the peace movement, "Third Worldism." Also, the general concern in Latin American issues began to grow in Finland since the late 1960s. It culminated following the

military coup in Chile. In Finland and other Nordic countries, it created an unusual movement of solidarity and support for the country's opposition.³

Interest in Latin American issues focused on music, literature, and politics – often combining the three, as in the “New Song” (*la Nueva canción*) movement. In a short period, there was a considerable amount of commentaries and translated books on Latin America. For the new (and mainly youthful) political left, the anti-imperialist movement in Latin American debates became one of the central reference points and shared experiences.

To mention a few examples to give an idea of the liveliness of this cultural-political activity at the time: Independent (and openly leftist) record company Love Records, which specialized in alternative and radical music (and which published most of the *Nueva canción* -recordings in Finland), was founded in 1966. Their record *Lautanen Guatemalan verta* (“A Plate of Guatemala's blood,” a reference to a poem by Pablo Neruda) was the first “new song” - publication in Finland (followed by many others).⁴ In addition to Neruda, there were several other Latin American prose and poetry translations in the late 1960s (Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Miguel Ángel Asturias, etc.). At the turn of the decade, the political discussions and movements had grown vibrant and visible in society. Several moderately or radically leftist books and pamphlet series (even by mainstream publishers) published original or translated contributions to political debate.⁵

As political action, these cultural activities were both political and pedagogical, for they taught people about the ongoing political struggles in Latin America. As such, they testified the Freirian maxim. In Freire's words: “There is a ‘politicity’ in education, in the same way that there is an ‘educatability’ in that which is political; in other words, there is a political nature in education, just as

there is a pedagogic nature in political action” (Escobar, Fernandez & Guevara-Niebla with Freire 1994, p. 35).

The first Finnish language publication introducing Paulo Freire and his pedagogical and political ideas to the Finnish audience was the translation of the Brazilian journalist Marcio Moreira Alves’s *Un Grano de Mostaza* (1972; the translation, *Kapinoitsijan päiväkirja*). It was based on the English version of *A Grain of Mustard Seed* (1974) and published in the best-known leftist radical publishing series of the time, the “Exclamation mark” -books (‘Huutomerkki-kirjat’). In the book, Alves describes his meeting with Freire, released recently from the arrest, and Freire’s pedagogy and literacy method in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (Alves 1974.)

Although there were more discussions on Latin American topics at that time, and more books on these issues were written and published than ever before or after, Freire’s works were not translated into Finnish. On the other hand, in neighboring Sweden, Freire’s teachings gained more attention in both school and adult education, and his ideas were discussed in the university and the press (Suortti 1999). Swedish translations of Freire’s books were published quite early as well.⁶ Freire even became introduced and immortalized in Nye Engström’s sculpture *Efter badet* (“After the Bath,” 1976) alongside Angela Davis, Pablo Neruda, and Mao Zedong, in the Västertorp district of suburban Stockholm.⁷

Freire’s thinking was an inspiration in Nordic liberal adult education in the 1970s. Swedish translations and discussions of Freire’s works had an apparent influence in Finland due to the historical, cultural, and academic ties with Sweden. Finnish scholars and adult educators read Freire’s works and commentaries in Swedish and Swedish–Finnish academic collaborations

introduced his thinking to some Finnish educators. The Swedish progressive adult educators were especially interested in Freire. They arranged Freirian spirited seminars for their Nordic colleagues in Nordens Folkliga Akademi ('Nordic Folk Academy') in Kungälv near Gothenburg (Sweden). A group of Finnish adult educators – some of them our informants – also participated in these meetings during the 1970s. Several of the informants mentioned that the contemporary Swedish sources of critical educational developments were known in Finland⁸.

In addition to Swedish, our informants read Freire in English and German translations, which were available in university libraries. However, Spanish translations were rare, which gives the impression that the notably increased interest in the Ibero-American culture was not generally reflected in the educational field. In the 1960s and 70s, scientific connections to the Ibero-American world were established mainly through social and political sciences. During the 1970s and 80s, the Finnish tradition of Latin American studies emerged (see Pärssinen 2002). Particularly important was the research group TRICONT (abbreviation referring to “three continents”), which started in the 1960s. TRICONT published a pamphlet book series *Kolmas maailma* (“Third World”) during the years 1968–1972 and brought many third world issues and especially Latin American social, political, and development research into the focus of scholarly attention (von Bonsdorff 1986). Characteristically, academic research, informal associations, non-governmental organizations, and unorganized grassroots civic activities were not sharply separated. Instead, they supported each other under the same umbrella of political-cultural activism, in a way reminiscent of parallel local movements in other parts of the world, including Freire’s contexts in Latin America. (Kastari 2001; von Bonsdorff 1986.) Typical of the contemporary scene of autonomous activism in the margins and border-crossings of the academic context, Freire’s ideas gained

attention mainly on the non-academic islands of non-formal adult education and informal groups of self-motivated free learning. Paradigmatic forms of such an educational practice were study circles, which peaked in popularity in the Nordic countries during the 1970s (see e. g. Larsson & Nordvall 2010). According to some of the informants, Freire's ideas were studied in the independent reading groups in Finland, too.

However, educational sciences were not at the core of university radicalism. Besides, and probably contributing to the issue, the Finnish left-wing disintegrated into competing and disputing fractions in the early 1970s (Kastari 2001). In the process, they formed several clashing political views of transforming or overthrowing capitalist society. Freire's syncretism did not easily fit into this atmosphere of ideological-political purity and varieties of dogmatisms. At the time, the budding interest in Freire's work was not directly linked to any particular party-political faction but was instead a product of a more general atmosphere of leftist resistance and revolutionary spirit and dispersed among many different radical or moderate critics of imperialism and capitalism.

Thus, there are several reasons for which no actual Finnish tradition of Freirian educational research within universities was born at the time. One of the informants studied at Stockholm University and noticed the Freirian influences there and also the contrast in Finland: "When I continued my studies in Finland in the early 1980s, I was somewhat surprised that Freire was not very well known in Finland at that time." Overall, as another of the respondents puts it:

Freire's influence in Finland could have been indirect: Freire brought together reform-minded and 'radical' educators, educators who questioned ossified teaching methods (lecture / introduction + group work!) and emphasized the importance of continuous

dialogue and student-centered approach. To my recollection, in the 1970s, some loose groups were formed to execute such objectives. Eventually, Freire disappeared quite quickly, as early as the 1980s, from the field of adult education. His methods were considered too inconvenient and challenging to apply. It was perhaps due to mental laziness and unwillingness to try new pedagogy.

This recollection of the initial curiosity towards Freire (and radical or critical pedagogy more broadly) of the latter part of the 1970s fading away during the 1980s seemed to be shared by all informants. Some of them offered explanations based on the change within the university discipline. On the one hand, academic adult education's scope narrowed down, and scholars began to emphasize empirical approaches considered more scientific. On the other hand, they concentrated on studying more sound professional practices. Moreover, the political radicalism of the 1970s that created the initial interest in Freire went out of fashion in the early 1980s, and more fragmentary, elitist, and “postmodern” cultural topics and trends replaced his ideas.

Yet, many who studied education in the 1970s were acquainted with Freire's theories. Students discussed them intensively in and outside the university classrooms. In the 1970s, Freire became known in Finland through discussions, lectures, seminars, and teaching in universities and liberal adult education and autonomous grassroots study groups. Over the decades, many adult education scholars referred to Freire in their texts. Still, surprisingly few studies focused primarily on his works. In addition to some short general overviews, these include a few articles, applied studies, and a set of graduate theses.⁹

Later developments (2000–)

It took until the 2000s for Freirian-inspired critical pedagogy to gain more profound academic attention in Finland. The first research monograph on Freire appeared in the year 2000, and the Finnish translation *Sorrettujen pedagogiikka* (Pedagogia do oprimido/Pedagogy of the Oppressed) was published in 2005. The interest in Freire and different traditions of critical pedagogy has gained some momentum during the 2000s and 2010s in Finland.

There does not seem to be any single explaining factor for this development. Perhaps it should be mainly attributed to pure coincidences: certain individuals and their interests that resulted in publications which, in turn, directed attention and brought new recognition of Freire's input for educational issues. However, it is apt to acknowledge a certain analogy with the 1970s in the general political atmosphere. Critical social and political discourses returned to the educational and social sciences in the 1990s after the relatively apolitical and individualistic attitudes in the late 1980s. In Finland, they were partly induced by the severe economic depression during the first half of the 1990s, by post-socialist discussions in Europe, and the worldwide rise of the anti-globalization and ecological movements in the latter part of the 1990s.

The most important of the publications signaling this new phase were Aino Hannula's licentiate (post-graduate) thesis (1998) and dissertation (2000b). The latter was the first in-depth study of Freire in Finland and the starting point for successive research¹⁰. Then came the translation (Freire 2005a) with Finnish introduction and afterword (Tomperi 2005; Tomperi & Suoranta 2005), and the recent biographically driven research monograph by Juha Suoranta (Suoranta 2019). These publications have been accompanied and followed by several other works and translations of critical pedagogy.¹¹

The Finnish translation of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is perhaps a case in point of how classic and modern translations can impact educational, philosophical, and social theory, even in the current academic settings. It drew a lot of attention and stimulated renewed interest, discussion, and research within the Finnish reception of Freire. It is also an example of how translations and introductions sometimes attain wider influence in crossing over from the academic world to the general audience and educational practitioners. Although translations are nowadays not valued in the university context as forms of academic work and as a special kind of research contribution, Freire's reception is an example of their impact: in the 1970s, the Swedish translations were significant in introducing Freire to Finnish educators for the first time, and in the 2000s, the Finnish translation created interest in and momentum for Freire's deepening import in academic research and pedagogical applications.

The Paulo Freire Center–Finland was established in 2007 to “promote research, organize events, and collaborate with teachers, educators, cultural workers in developing Freirian oriented activities,” with Professor Peter McLaren visiting to give the inaugural lecture of the center. The center was, and to our knowledge still is, the only one in the Nordic countries dedicated to Freirian thinking.¹² In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the Freirian spirited Special Interest Group met at several Annual Conferences of Finnish Educational Research. In 2008 and 2009, The Paulo Freire Center–Finland organized Critical Pedagogy Summer Schools at Tampere University. They drew participants from Ph.D. students at different Finnish universities interested in learning about Freirian ideas.

Before we move on to more substantial examples of Freire's reception, it should be noted that there is no prior systematic research into the dissemination of Freire's educational influence in Finland yet.¹³ However, as in the rest of the world, Freire's ideas have inspired practical action and experimentation in

various community education projects, trade union training, welfare development projects, outreach youth work, health education, and many other educational projects aiming to raise people's critical awareness (see Peters & Besley 2015; Torres 2019). In the following, we take a closer look at the best-known Finnish applications of Freire.

Primary Examples of Freire's Influence

One cannot talk about the Finnish reception of Freire's pedagogy without briefly describing the long and impressive educational career of Helena Kekkonen (1926–2014). She is the first person to apply Freire's emancipatory education in Finland. In Kekkonen's work, the discovery of Freire's ideas took place in the early 1970s, when she had left her job as headmaster of the Vocational School of Laboratory Work of the City of Helsinki and had set herself up for entirely new projects in adult education.¹⁴ The aim was to encounter people's educational needs in their everyday life. Adult educators and teachers of liberal adult education started to reach out to people in their actual living environments without waiting for them to enter the classroom. This radical idea and method led Kekkonen to work in prisons, teach natural sciences to the inmates, and organize cultural and social study circles.

Experiments and emerging experiences demonstrated to Kekkonen that Freire's principles fit perfectly into penal institutions' realities. The prison setting was characterized by the social discrimination against prisoners, which many prisoners had internalized as a sign of their incapability and alienation. Kekkonen discovered that the exercise of power in a total institution was structured as a confrontation between prisoners and guards. The guards also sometimes resorted to seemingly almost arbitrary subjugation. The social dynamic of the prisons was thus a clear case of the oppressors–oppressed - relationship.

The prison study circles became successful in a way that surprised even Kekkonen herself. The prisoners' self-esteem increased, they were inspired by literature and the arts, and many found their voice even in creative self-expression. They started to look at their life histories and the society around them with new awareness and criticality. Simultaneously, the defensive self-pity of being a victim of the circumstances gave way to a renewed sense of responsibility and control of one's own life. Study circles were a decisive turning point in the lives of some participants. (Kekkonen 1993.) This kind of Freirian principle of pedagogical hope was characteristic of Kekkonen's activities and thinking.

After her prison education experiments, Helena Kekkonen promoted Freire's ethos in different roles in Finnish adult education. For instance, she worked as the Secretary-General of the Finnish Adult Education Association (1974–1986), an internationally appreciated peace educator, and Secretary-General of the Peace Education Institute. Her example always conveyed a very typically Freirian educational love, where words, deeds, and human reality were united. For her work, she received the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education in 1981, the same award given to Freire in 1986.

Within peace education, Leena Kakko followed the path Kekkonen opened and linked her work to Freire's pedagogical thought (Kakko 1988). In her study, she introduces Freire's basic ideas and ponders why scholars are not familiar with Freire in Finland. She concludes that Freire's writing style differs from the usual; Freire "spins the same thoughts over and over again." Also, "since his learning conception is the opposite of the behaviouristic-technological model of education emphasizing efficiency, it is no wonder that we have so few Freire experts in Finland" (ibid. p. 91). Significantly, from the viewpoint of peace education, Kakko believed that Freire's thinking is crucial.

If people learn to see themselves as beings that shape and change their local circumstances, it is not a long way to go in their efforts to change the whole world's conditions. Suppose they perceive peace as a necessity for human life and rely on their possibilities for action individually and collectively. In that case, they can also act in their ways to realize that necessity in their living environments. (Kakko 1988, p. 91.)

Another pioneer of Freire in Finland in the 1970s was Ritva Jakku-Sihvonen. Her first encounter with Freire took place in her educational studies in the early 1970s at the University of Jyväskylä. After her graduation, she held an assistantship in adult education at the University of Tampere from 1974 to 1978. In that capacity, she taught about Freire and arranged several Freirian-spirited courses, among them a project in which her students planned a study course for single parents. As part of the academic work, she published a study on Freire's pedagogy, under the name Hiivala-Jakku 1976, and talked about Freire in her didactics courses in summer universities during the 1970s. She was active within the Adult Education Association at the same time as Helena Kekkonen. Jakku-Sihvonen's teaching and educational contribution was probably the most significant individual factor in spreading the knowledge of Freire in the academic world in the early phase. Almost all of those informants who had their initiation to Freire's ideas in the 1970s, especially at the universities or through the adult education association, mention Ritva Jakku-Sihvonen.

The third example of a more visible influence of Freire in Finland has been the research and teaching that Leena Kurki has done in social pedagogy. Her research has focused on Latin American educational traditions, Jesuit education, socio-cultural animation and activation (*animación sociocultural*), Mounier's personalism, and the theology and pedagogy of liberation (Kurki 1991a, 1991b, 2000, 2002, 2005). The similarities between *animación sociocultural* (both the French and the Ibero-American traditions) and Freire's critical pedagogy are

evident (Kurki 2000). According to Kurki, “Freirian pedagogy of liberation, as well as the wider Latin American field of social pedagogy, the ‘methodology of social action,’ is essentially *animación sociocultural*” (Kurki 2000, p. 12). Both have their roots in the movements of folk culture and folk education (Kurki 2005).

In addition to these, Freire’s thinking has influenced Finnish projects of developmental cooperation and its research, where it has supported especially those approaches which have been called “participatory action” and “participatory action research.” Marja-Liisa Swantz is a well-known Finnish developer of these approaches in the world. In her memoirs, she writes how getting to know Freire’s anthropology and participatory action research, “the critical intervention of the people in reality through the praxis” (Freire 2005b, p. 53), and the idea of “the culture of silence” helped her situate her work in developmental co-operation and dialogical teaching in Tanzania within the country’s political context. She understood that education connects to complex political issues. Swantz was particularly intrigued by people’s cultural wisdom and local knowledge in enriching teaching and development (Swantz 2004). Freire’s ideas confirmed her that it was possible to bring together insight, reflection, and analysis, and practical and personal experience: “My life and work were re-structured in a new way [by Freire’s thought], and I experienced that period as a fruitful one in all aspects of my life” (Swantz 2004, p. 263). Swantz also took note of how Freire’s ideas differed significantly from the general socialist propaganda of that time, which spoke only to the masses: “I began to realize that these [Freire’s] ideas created a real foundation for development. It is possible to challenge people both as individuals and as communities at the same time, as individuals within communities, and to raise awareness. Communication between people is key to a new kind of social awareness” (Swantz 2004, p. 264).

Freire's work has also been recognized in Finnish literacy education. Freire's position as a literacy theorist has by no means been wholly established in Finland. Still, more attention was directed to his writings when the notion emphasizing the connections of literacy and social awareness became more popular alongside traditional and functional conceptions of literacy (Raassina 1990). In Freire's view, literacy education cannot be politically neutral because it is tied to questions of critical social awareness: "Critical awareness promotes a desire to learn to read and write, and literacy, in turn, strengthens critical awareness and creates favorable conditions for freedom from oppression, apathy, and fatalism, and for people to actively change their situation" (Raassina 1990, p. 58). In Finnish developmental geographic research, focusing on regional issues of global and local development problems, a few texts have been written on Freire's literacy projects' role, particularly in African and Latin American countries (Jauhiainen et al. 1984).

References to Freire can also be found in Finnish studies on contextual theology. The focus of contextual theology is usually directed at the Third World realities, whose socio-cultural and religious traditions have challenged European academic universalism (Ahonen 2004). Latin American revolutionary and liberation theologies are well known in Finland.¹⁵ Their contents, practices, and religious interpretations have emerged from the experience of oppression, and they aim to "prioritize the defense of the poor and the removal of ideological masks of religion, instead of defending Christianity as an institution (apologetically)" (Raunu 2004, p. 193). Many of the original ideas of liberation theology, from the poor's seminal role to the concept of liberatory religious praxis, as put forward by Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, were developed alongside with and influenced by Freire's educational philosophy (Raunu 2004). Freire is also used in studying the relationship between liberation theology and feminism (Vuola 1997; 2001).

It is perhaps noteworthy that Freire's thinking is rooted as one of the theoretical traditions in Finnish art education research and teaching. A case in point is Lissu Lehtimaja's artistic research on Freire. It is undoubtedly the most original and innovative form of introducing Freire's thinking in Finnish: a comic book entitled *Freiren kyydissä* ('Riding with Freire', Lehtimaja 2006).¹⁶ Another example is Liisa Söderlund's dissertation thesis in visual arts, in which she applies Freire's theory of oppression and liberation in her action research with homeless people. As part of the study, the homeless photographed their own lives and living environments and interpreted the pictures with the researcher. Söderlund also organized a photo exhibition to raise awareness among the public and municipal politicians. (Söderlund, forthcoming.)

Finally, we must mention the "theater of the oppressed" developed by Augusto Boal. It is also well known in its various forms in Finland, where theater has historically been an important cultural institution (Riekkö 1999; Paasonen 2000). Boal was an influential Brazilian teacher inspired by Freire. Since the 1960s, he developed community theater approaches to guide participants or viewers to reflect on their community's circumstances, situations, and problems. Boal's "forum theater" refers to a performance in which viewers can analyze and resolve dramatized conflict situations through discussion and acting. Freire himself mentions this kind of dramatization in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as one of the possibilities of "coding" educational topics (Freire 2005b). Boal's "invisible theater," on the other hand, is a street theater where people are provoked in their everyday life, sparking awareness and reflection by creating scenes that differ from ordinary social expectations. Theater groups have used Boal's ideas in theater education and youth and social workers and NGO activists in youth work.

General Tendencies of Freire's Reception and Influence in Finland

In Finnish texts on Freire, the emphasis has often been more on his didactical and methodical views than his social and educational philosophy. Freire's basic ideas of dialogue, pedagogical ethics, and "problem-based learning" have been easily identified and linked to other trends in contemporary pedagogy and psychology of learning.¹⁷ On the other hand, Freire's more visibly political and philosophical aspects have been sometimes perceived as obscure and contradictory (Tuominen 1975). Professor of education Juhani Suortti, however, points to an important reminder:

When someone claims that he [Freire] is writing about his principles in a vague way, it is more a matter of not being able to speak more objectively about all the different social conditions, because we lack a proper language for it. The problem with Freire's philosophy is that people who interpret his ideas do not understand the circumstances under which he created his theories, and thus they give too much weight to an expectation of finding some hidden theory. (Suortti 1999, p. 181.)

Freire's thought has been taking place and made real not only in his texts but above all in the myriad practices in which literacy teaching and basic education have raised people's awareness of their social position.

Freire's teachings have been used in educational work in Finland both in the tradition of the more progressive informal adult education and the formal teaching of different subjects in schools, such as literacy and art education. Freire's ideas have been brought to Finnish adult education in various practical applications of emancipatory learning. They have been applied, for example, in adult education aiming at innovative and transformative learning, based on critical reflection and conscious analysis of oppressive structures of society and their thoughts on subjective experiences (Ahteenmäki-Pelkonen 1997). Finnish leftist liberal adult education organizations, such as adult education centres and study centres, have maintained and applied Freire's ideas. Among them are the

Socialist Democratic Party of Finland's adult education organization Työväen sivistysliitto ("Workers' Education Association"), and Kansan sivistysliitto ("People's Education Association"), a study centre related to Left Alliance, heir to the Finnish People's Democratic Party.

Interestingly, Demokraattinen sivistysliitto ("Democratic Civic Association"), the Communist Party of Finland's study centre, has kept Freire in its study programs and published a 43-page booklet *Toimintaan Freiren kanssa* ("Action with Freire" 2012). As a Marxist non-governmental organization, Demokraattinen sivistysliitto has focused on revolutionary educational objectives. It has read Freire as a revolutionary and emphasized the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed's* final chapter: the leaders' and peoples' collaboration in the political revolution. The study centre's main principles are global solidarity, social and economic justice, and the ideas of peace, humanism, and socialism (Suoranta 2021).

Freire's ideas have been applied in inquiry-based learning, interactive teaching, and dialogical pedagogy in school teaching. However, this is problematic if Freire's ideas are used only as teaching "methods" – dialogue without society – without his pedagogy's content and purpose: the political nature of education and the objectives of political emancipation and liberation. This tendency has been called the "taming" of Freire (Suortti 1999). An example of the tamed interpretation is the following statement by the Finnish professor of dance pedagogy Eeva Anttila: "The problem is that his ideas have been used for political ends – which, in my view, was never his initial purpose" (Veiga 2019, para. 3). However, in critical educational theory, especially in Freire's thinking, education is always political (Freire 1985; McLaren 2000; Darder 2018). As Freire stated:

There was a time in my life as an educator when I did not speak about politics and education. It was my most naive moment. There was another time when I began to speak about the political aspects of education. That was a *less* naive moment, when I wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). In the second moment, nevertheless, I was still thinking that education was *not* politics but only had an *aspect* of politics. In the *third* moment, today, for me there is *not* a political aspect. For me, now I say that education *is* politics. Today, I say education has the quality of being politics, which shapes the learning process. Education is politics and politics has *educability*. (Freire & Shor 1987, p. 61, italics original.)

Freire's pedagogical principles can be applied in many different settings in addition to literacy teaching, basic education, and radical adult education. Thus, there are more texts which Freire as an inspiration, e.g., in media education, dance pedagogy, and art education, than actual studies, presentations, and commentaries on Freire (Anttila 2003; Kotilainen 2004; Lehtimaja 2006; Suoranta 2003).

In terms of the praised Finnish teacher education, it is worth noting that the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has been one of the few classics of educational theory used in some teacher education programs (at least as optional literature). Thus, the students have had a chance to get to know Freire's key ideas as part of often unpolitical Finnish teacher education. Alongside John Dewey and Jean Piaget, Freire is one of the theorists of the 20th century whose name the teachers and teacher students in Finland most often recognize – even though only a very few of them have read Freire.

To summarize, based on our reconstruction, we can point out several general tendencies of Freire's reception in Finland through the decades since *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

- Freire’s ideas have been disseminated more through teaching, studying, and discussions than in research and publications;
- They have gotten more attention within (liberal and radical) adult education than in educational sciences more generally, and they have also been used more in free civic adult educational organizations than in universities (and formal teacher education, for instance);
- Publications that discuss Freire’s ideas have been, for the most part, general and introductory (and often short) instead of critical and original scholarly research;
- Freire has been present predominantly (but also aptly for his views, one might say) as educational-pedagogical inspiration and application derived from his thinking, rather than as specific research into his writings – as “Freirian spirit” more than specialized “Freire-scholarship”;
- There seems to have been more Freire-related discussions, publications, and applications in some specialized sub-areas (art education, for instance) than in the “core” or main disciplines of education;
- Certain perspectives and spheres of educational work stand out in retrospect: in particular, peace education, social pedagogy, education in the social margins, third world issues and co-operative development, and the aforementioned arts education;
- International influences have been central. In the 1970s, the interest in Latin American politics and culture created the soil on which the proximity to Swedish discussions brought initial contents. During the recent decades, the more focused attention to Freire’s thinking within educational and pedagogical research has coincided with and partly resulted from the increased interest in critical pedagogy at large in its Anglo-American forms. In this sense, one could say that Freire, too, like so many other influences in the modern-day academy, finally arrived in Finland via the U.S.

Concluding Remarks: Education for Social Justice

What, then, have been the implication and effects of the translation of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Finnish research on Freire, and other Freirian initiatives on academics and the public? How have these activities mobilized Freire's theory or concepts? As we have demonstrated in this article, Freire's work has not gone unnoticed in Finland. It is not an exaggeration to say that if not a tradition, Freire has formed an undercurrent of critical educational thinking in Finland, separate from the mainstream. Although we cannot say that there is a particular Finnish "Freirian tradition," Freire has a firm place in today's Finnish critical pedagogy tradition in the margins of national educational debate.

The same holds in terms of Finnish educational policy. Freire's thinking as such has hardly had any discernible direct effect on Finnish educational policies. However, the progressive ideas of the 1960s and 1970s, when the Finnish educational system's reform took place, were part of the general leftist atmosphere of cultural and political renewal we referred to in the beginning. As one of our informants pointed out, the Swedish radical educators of the late 1960s were interested in the new progressive ideas originating in the South and North America at the time and inspired by Freire's early works.¹⁸ These ideas of a more socially just education were carried over in many discussions in Finland as well.

It should be noted that parliamentary processes related to social and educational reforms in Finland (and other Nordic countries) in the 1960s differed dramatically from those of Brazil during Freire's time in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In Brazil, the progressive government of Goulart was ousted in a coup in 1964 after the power elite (economic elite, right-wing politicians, and high-ranking officers) had decided that there was a limit for the popular classes'

literacy and political activism. As Freire (2002 p. 14) put it, the power elite thought that the popular classes and the poor are not part of democracy and cannot “participate actively in the historical process.” In Finland, as in other Nordic countries, the political context was quite different: educational and other reforms were initiated and implemented through democratic debate and decision-making. They were based on the rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*) established after the civil war in 1918. It guaranteed the relatively stable development of society along with comprehensive tripartite income policy agreements—“consensus politics”—between trade unions, employer organizations, and the state through the latter part of the 20th century.

It is vital to see the Finnish comprehensive school reform's birth and its success in the broad structural context: it was decisively much more than just a pedagogical reform (Renfors & Suoranta 2018). It was not just a reform of curricula and teaching methods but, in essence, a comprehensive reform of social justice and equality for the students and their families. These advances seem almost amazingly progressive in retrospect. They were possible because, at the time, Finland was governed by the so-called “people’s front” or “popular front” governments that consisted of Social Democrats, Finnish People’s Democratic League (socialists and communists), and the agrarian Centre Party. Many grassroots organizations and the 1960s and 1970s progressive movements mentioned above also supported the school reform. The leftist parties strove for equality in the vertical or social sense – among socioeconomic strata – and the agrarian Centre Party in the horizontal or geographical sense – representing people in rural areas and defending their chances for equally good quality of life and education as was available in the cities. Similar fundamentally progressive alliances and transformations seem much more difficult to attain in the present world.

Freire and other Latin American revolutionaries' struggles were different from what was going on in the Nordic countries, where social democratic and leftist politics transformed welfare systems. Even so, both had a vision of social justice and an equal society for all. We can even think that there are certain family resemblances between the Freirian revolutionary pedagogy of the south and the progressive educational reform in the north 50 years ago. It was not a coincidence that transformative educational and social thinking gathered momentum at that same time in different places in the world. Political initiatives shared the same ideals and an understanding that educational justice is always tied to deeper and more general social justice concerns and building an equal society. These politics emphasized global class struggle and workers' possibilities to win control in capitalist states (see Malott & Ford 2015; Ford 2017).

Finland and its public sector, including the public educational system, have been under a neoliberal assault since the 1990s. Neoliberal hegemony has increased individuality and market mentality in people and society and, in general, emphasized individualistic interpretations of reality against collective understanding. Also, neoliberalism has directly affected the public sector reducing welfare benefits and education funding through several budget cuts in the 2010s.

The emphasis on individual competencies in a competitive knowledge economy has replaced the idea of general education and self-cultivation (*Bildung*) for personal growth, and the ideology of “continuous learning” for “upskilling” individuals has replaced the understanding of school and education as a social organization for political progress. The business sector has ruthlessly used the opportunity and advanced managerial forms of leadership and entrepreneurship education to comprehensive and higher education. At best, Freire helps people

understand these developments and other intersectional factors of social reality such as class, gender, and ethnicity and overcome distorted impressions and ideologies of various kinds. As Villacañas de Castro (2016) has pointed out, Freire's

critical pedagogy consists of the educational effort to overcome the phenomenal forms which lie suspended as a superficial plane of effects which block the people's access both to an adequate understanding of the causal factors of reality and to the radical transformation that this understanding might afford them. This definition involves the implicit expectation that conscientização should lead to an epistemological and a political moment. (p. 80–81, italics original.)

Thus, there seems less space for Freirian thoughts in the educational sector in Finland in the present. *Zeitgeist* is not on Freire's side, and he will probably live on the fringes of the Finnish educational scheme in the future, too. Actors in the non-formal educational sector who still apply Freire's ideas are rare exceptions to the rule. They feel that Freirian praxis benefits them and other progressive-minded people in their separate struggles for a better world. They learn joint responsibility and participatory and critical approaches to read the word and the world in their democratic organizing and realize that with Freire, they are never alone but surrounded by the global Freirian community. In non-formal adult education and various progressive social movements and pockets of resistance, e.g., in climate change, social and economic justice, gender and peace movements, they continue to reinvent Freire just like he hoped.

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Notes

¹ Anglo-American critical pedagogy was developed in close proximity to Freire and his thought. Many pedagogical theorists of Latin American origin, as well as several European and North American researchers, introduced Freire's ideas to wide academic and educational audiences in Northern hemisphere – for instance, Carlos Alberto Torres, Donaldo Macedo, Rosa Maria Torres, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, Paula Allman, Peter Mayo, Ira Shor, bell hooks, Antonia Darder, Glenn Rikowski, Dave Hill, and Mike Cole. On the translations and commentaries of Freire's work, see, e.g., (Gadotti, 1994, pp. 71–82).

² The seminal work by Jürgen Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse (Knowledge and Human Interests)*, with its distinction of *technical*, *practical*, and *emancipatory* interests of knowledge, was published in 1968. Alongside many other evolving perspectives and rising theorists of the time, Freire's work is aptly placed within the then novel movement of emancipatory social, educational and philosophical criticism, which Habermas (1971, 310) describes as striving for *self-reflection* in order to free subjects from contingent social and ideological relations of dependency and domination.

³In the spirit of this solidarity, within a few months, more than 20,000 Finnish people joined the Finland–Chile Friendship Society, which was founded in 1973 (Pirttijärvi 1998). Finnish diplomats helped victims of political persecution to escape from Chile to Europe. Finland welcomed around 200 Chilean refugees, and they were the first-ever political refugees received by an official Finnish governmental decision (Hiilamo 2010). Contemporary documentary materials from Finland, including news reels and interviews, have been collected by the Finnish broadcasting company (YLE) in the net, for instance: <https://yle.fi/aihe/artikkeli/2019/04/30/yhtenaista-kansaa-ei-voi-koskaan-voittaa-chilen-kansainvalinen>

⁴ The record got its name from a song that was based on adapted translation of the poem Almería by Pablo Neruda, see: <https://www.antiwarsonsongs.org/canzone.php?id=56759&lang=en>.

⁵Notable book publications of the time include *Kolmas maailma. Uutta proosaa espanjankielisestä Amerikasta* (1966, “Third world. A collection of new Hispanoamerican prose”), *Kello 0. Latinalaisen Amerikan runoja ja runoelmia* (1969; “0 o'clock. Poetry from Latin America”), Olli Alho, *Latinalaisen Amerikan haaste* (1969, “The Challenge of Latin America”), Johan von Bonsdorff, *Latinalainen Amerikka* (1969, “Latin America”), Jyrki Lappi-Seppälä, *Toinen Amerikka – kolmasosa kolmatta maailmaa* (1969, “The Other America—A Third of the Third World”), Matti Rossi, *Väkivallan vuosi: Matka Latinalaiseen Amerikkaan* (1970, “The Year of Violence: A Journey in Latin America”), Sven Lindqvist, *Heittovarjo. Latinalainen Amerikka 1970-luvun kynnyksellä* (1970, translation of *The Shadow: Latin America Faces the Seventies*), André Gunder Frank, *Kapitalismi ja alikehitys Latinalaisessa Amerikassa* (1971, translation of the *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*), Osmo Apunen, *Vaihtoehtona vallankumous* (1971, “Revolution as an Alternative”), Terttu Oroza, *Bolivian päiväkirja* (1971, “A Diary from Bolivia”)—in addition to many other new Finnish books and timely translations.

⁶*Pedagogik för förtryckta* (1972, *Pedagogia do oprimido/Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), *Kulturell kamp för frihet* (1974, *Ação cultural para a liberdade/Cultural Action for Freedom*), *Utbildning för befrielse* (1975, *Educação como prática da liberdade/Education for Critical Consciousness*), and *Pedagogik i utveckling* (1978, *Cartas à Guiné-Bissau/Pedagogy in Process*). The first Swedish dissertation (and thus the first research monograph) on Freire, Jan-Erik Perneman's *Medvetenhet genom utbildning* (*Consciousness through education*), was also finished early on, in 1977.

⁷ See the wikipedia-article and a picture of the sculpture: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Efter_badet

⁸ One of the connections mentioned was the book *Den dolda läroplanen* (The hidden curriculum) by Swedish educational sociologist Donald Broady. The book was read in university courses and then translated co-operatively by some of the participants, among them one of our informants (it was published in Finnish in 1986).

⁹ Among the Finnish research and academic literature discussing Freire before the 2000s, at least the following merit a mention: Fried (1975); Tuominen (1975, 1979a, 1979b); Hiivala-Jakku (1976); Engeström (1984); Matikainen (1986); Tamminen-Piippo (1988); Pikkarainen (1989, 1992); Komulainen (1990); Karjalainen (1993); Kempainen (1996, 1997; 1999); Pekama (1998); Suortti (1999).

¹⁰ See also Hannula 2000a; 2001.

¹¹ E.g. see Finnish translation of Peter McLaren's book *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire and the Pedagogy of the Revolution* (Che Guevara, Paulo Freire ja vallankumouksen pedagogiikka, 2009), Juha Suoranta's introduction to critical educational theory *Radikaali kasvatus* ("Radical Education", 2005), a book on critical research methods (Suoranta & Rynänen, 2014) and edited books consisting of mainly young Finnish scholars' articles on specific themes of critical pedagogy (Kiilakoski, Tomperi & Vuorikoski, 2005; Aittola, Eskola & Suoranta, 2007, Lanas, Niinistö & Suoranta, 2008, Moisio & Suoranta, 2009).

¹² See <https://paulofreirefinland.wordpress.com/>

¹³ There are some reviews on different areas, however (for instance in minor thesis and diploma studies), see, e.g., Matikainen (1986); Laakso (1989); Corander (1993); Karjalainen (1993); Ståhle (1993); Riekkö (1999); Hintikka (2000); Paasonen (2000); Karppinen & Räisälä (2002).

¹⁴ See, e.g., Kekkonen's autobiography (Kekkonen, 1993, pp. 112–220).

¹⁵ See, e.g., Saraneva (1991); Vuola (1991, 2008, 2019).

¹⁶ See the publisher's page for the book (in Finnish): <https://like.fi/kirjat/freiren-kyydissa/>

¹⁷ It might be worth note that the Finnish translation deliberately did not use the term "problem-based education/learning" which used to be a common interpretation of Freire's idea in Finland (and misleading as such, because it frequently got mixed up with the "problem-based" teaching and learning method, PBL). Instead, it uses literal translation of "educação problematizadora"/"problematizing education" (*problematisoiva kasvatus* in Finnish). This refers to teaching and learning that encounters the world as problematical, as something that can and *must* be questioned and thus transformed, instead of accepting knowledge and the world as something ready-made, stable and unproblematic.

¹⁸ We already mentioned Broady's *Den dolda läroplanen* (translated into Finnish in the 1980s) which consists of essays written for the educational journal *KRUT Kritisk Utbildningstidskrift* (founded by Broady himself with others). In the essays he also discusses Freire's early influence in Sweden (see for instance, Broady, 1986, pp. 89–91).

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