Transforming Banking Model of Education in Malaysia with Paulo Freire's Problem-Posing Pedagogy and Socratic Dialogue

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Abstract

Despite progress toward independence and economic development, Malaysia continues to grapple with a multifaceted landscape of oppression, influenced by historical patterns of ethnic dominance, intersectional inequalities, and a pervasive culture that suppresses dissent. This paper employs Paulo Freire's "banking" model of education to elucidate its function as a political instrument within Malaysia's educational framework, perpetuating systems of oppression. The paper then explores how an alternative model of education, problem-posing pedagogy proposed by Freire, can be transformative to the Malaysian classrooms, making reference to Socratic dialogue. Finally, the paper concludes by outlining some recommendations for fostering transformative change within Malaysian classrooms.

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Malaysia is a mixing pot of ethnicity, gender, religion and other social markers. While this diversity has been a source of national pride, it has also engendered conflicts, tensions, and a complex web of oppression since gaining independence from British colonial rule. Although the time of overt subjugation characteristic of colonization has passed, this does not mean that injustice has come to an end. Contemporary manifestations include blatant transgressions of human rights, such as the excessive use of force by authorities against marginalized communities—particularly non-Malay minorities and LGBTQI individuals—through criminalization and custodial violence (Chen, 2021).

The aspiration for education to address cultural tensions and promote social justice has been a long-standing objective, as articulated in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 and its previous iterations, which identify "access," "equity," and "unity" as three of five ambitious goals (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, 2013). However, genuine efforts to critically interrogate the Malaysian education system and propose effective critical pedagogy solutions to systemic issues remain inadequate.[1] Existing research tends to be small-scale and experimental, often focused on non-social justice objectives with limited impact on the broader educational landscape. Examples include initiatives that apply critical thinking pedagogy to enhance student performance and competitiveness (Hashim et. al., 2020, pp. 227-237), implement critical pedagogy in specific subjects (such as English Language Teaching) (Jeyaraj and Harland, 2019), explore intersectional pedagogy to raise multicultural awareness among educators on a one-off basis (Maasum et. al., 2014), or adapt philosophical inquiry to promote interreligious understanding, which has a limited scope of inquiry (Zulkifli et. al., 2020).[2]

This paper critically examines the Malaysian education system, exposing the underlying political dynamics through the lens of Paulo Freire's "banking" model of education, elucidating its function as a political instrument within Malaysia's educational framework, perpetuating systems of oppression. While Freire's work has been adapted in North America, Latin America, and various parts of Europe (Aronowitz, 2004, p. 8), no research has applied his model to Malaysia, despite the Malaysian educational landscape sharing numerous characteristics that align with his critique and the increasing recognition of the need for educational reform in the country.

[1] Critical pedagogy is a form of teaching that integrates the broader social contexts of learners into learning, with the goal of fostering critical consciousness and driving social change. See Jeyaraj and Harland (2019).
[2] The programme is called "Hikmah (wisdom) programme" started by Rosnani Hashim. It encouraged inquiries only up to the extent that they do not weaken the participants' religious faith. See Zulkifli et. al (2020), pp. 3497-8.
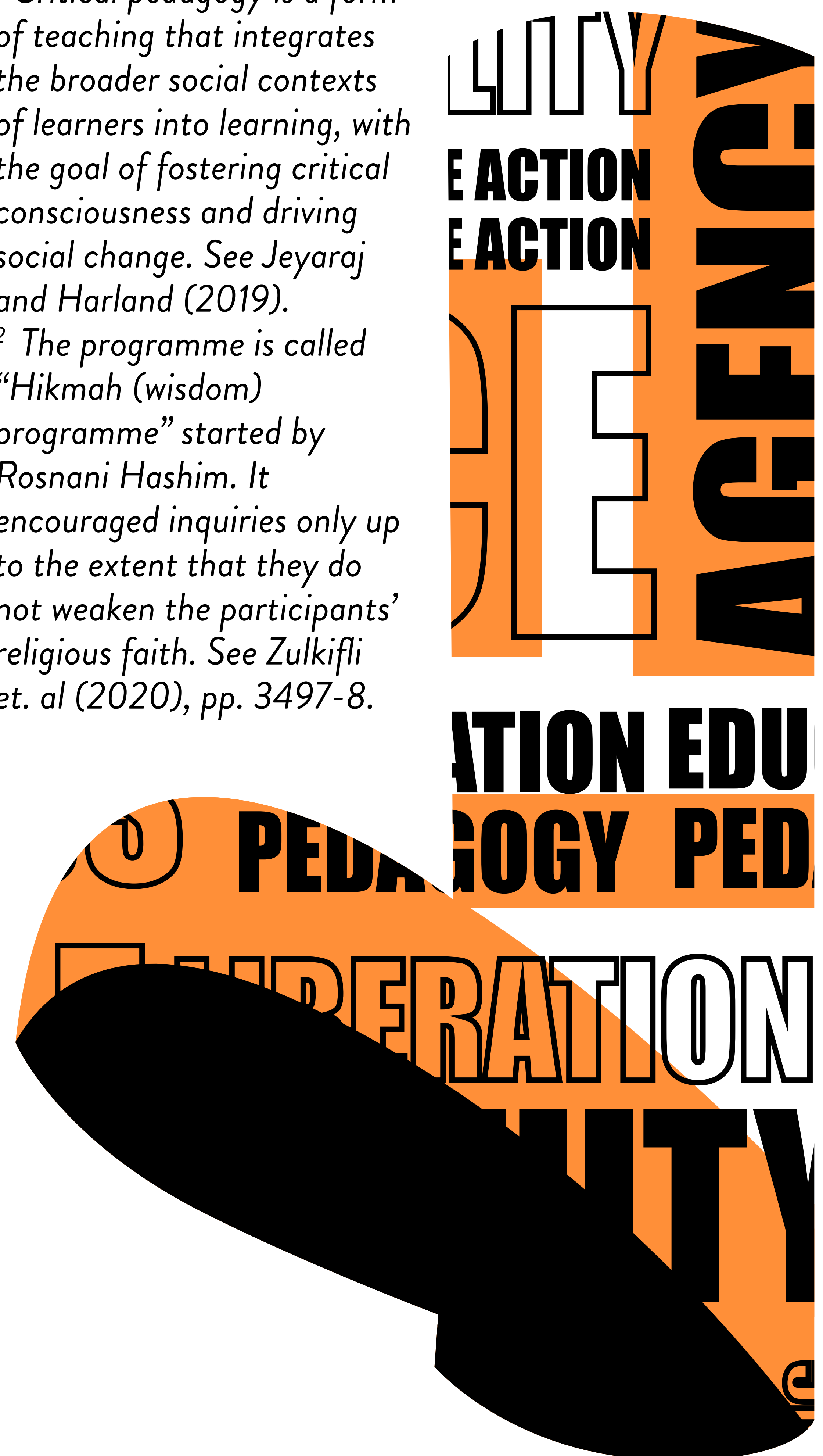
1. Paulo Freire and Oppression

Paulo Freire, a renowned Brazilian educator recognized for his literacy work with oppressed peasants in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Brazil, Chile, and other Latin American and African countries, defined oppression as the deprivation of freedom and autonomy of an individual or social group as a result of violence and exploitation from another individual or social group. As Freire remarked, oppression happens when

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> **Oppression happens when "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders his pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person.**
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> *Paulo Freire, 2005, p. 55*

For Freire, oppression can extend beyond overt displays of violent forces or criminalization, expressing itself as subtler forms through manipulative and ideological aspects. As described in his book as "antidialogical actions" (strategies employed by oppressors to inhibit genuine dialogue and maintain control), oppression can manifest in visible, direct forms of control, such as conquest and divide and rule. It can also emerge through more insidious and subtle means that shape consciousness and culture, such as through manipulation and 'cultural invasion'. Manipulation or manipulative oppression is "accomplished by means of pacts between the dominant and the dominated classes—pacts which, if considered superficially, might give the impression of a dialogue between the classes." These pacts, however, manifest unequal power relations and the "unequivocal interest of the dominant elites"; they serve to "conform the masses to their objectives" (Freire, 2005, pp. 147-152). Ideological oppression, or "cultural invasion," on the other hand, is accomplished through 'the internalisation of the oppressor by the dominated consciousness of the peasants' and "the values, the standards" and the "way of life" of the oppressors (Freire, 2005, pp. 153, 167). It can be sustained through social practices and norms, as well as institutions such as the education system.

One of the most obvious forms of manipulative oppression is perhaps ethnic dominance through race-based affirmative action policies. Malaysia stands out as the only country in the world that continues to practice race-based affirmative action benefiting the majority population (Nair, 2020). The National Economic Policy (NEP), despite purported noble goals of achieving "national unity" by "eradicating poverty irrespective of race,", grants privileged positions to the Bumiputera (sons of the soil or the Malays and indigenous groups) through ethnic quotas for scholarships, higher education entry, corporate ownership and housing opportunities (Gomez and Sundaram, 1998, pp. 117-18; Husain, 2021; Joseph, 2015; Lee, 2008; Lee, 2021; Watson, 1980).[3] Next, draconian laws and policies persist and are ostensibly framed as tools for social security and national harmony (Draconian Laws in Malaysia 2022), concealing the ruling class' interest to maintain political control and silence dissent. Examples include the Sedition Act 1948 (Sedition Act 1948, 1948), which suppresses criticism against the government; Internal Security Act (ISA) of 1960, which allows detention without trial (later replaced by the Security Offences Act (SOSMA) with similar provisions) (Resolution Adopted at the 78th Annual General Meeting 2024); and the National Security Council (NSC) Act of 2016 (Laws of Malaysia Act 776, 2016), which grants the Prime Minister authority to suspend civil liberties of a 'security area'. These laws justify national security and stability by permitting manipulative tactics aimed at maintaining political control and silencing dissent.

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[3] *The NEP has undergone changes through the years to amend the policy for greater equality, but the large gist of the framework which disproportionately benefit the majority, remains unaltered. See Lee (2021).*
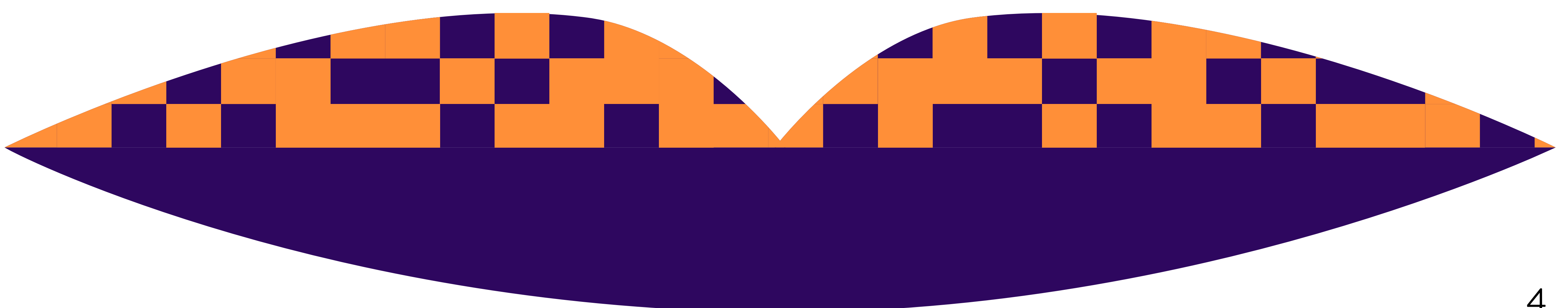
2. Banking Model of Education in Malaysia

2.1 Banking Model of Education

Beyond manipulative oppression, it can be said that ideological oppression persists through a banking model of education. Freire criticized traditional pedagogy—what he termed the banking model of education—for perpetuating oppression (Freire and Macedo, 1995; Kirkendall, 2004). In this model of education, teachers, like sovereign rulers, wield complete authority over the students, and education is reduced to a one-directional act of "depositing" knowledge, filling "the students with the content of his narration-content which is detached from reality" (Freire, 2005, p. 71). The result of this is a generation of students who internalize a fixed reality of knowledge shaped by the oppressors, fostering inauthenticity and perpetuating subjugation (Freire, 2005, pp. 63, 71-73, 95, 144, 161).

The key characteristics of Freire's banking model of education are as follows:

Freire recognises education, more specifically, a banking model of education, as an exercise of domination or tool for ideological oppression, indoctrinating students with the dominant values, beliefs, and ideologies of those in power. As Freire put it: Education is "the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression" (Freire, 2005, p. 78). The result of this is the students' internalisation of power imbalance (Freire, 2005, p. 153), fixed reality of knowledge (Freire, 2005, p. 71), the opinions of oppressors (Freire, 2005, pp. 63, 144) and their own inauthenticity (Freire, 2005, p. 161), perpetuating their subjugation.

(1) One-directional approach to knowledge or information depositing.

(2) The "teacher" or "subject" is an authoritative figure with control of the narrative of the knowledge.

(3) The "student" is equated as an "object, " regarded as powerless, ignorant and without reasoning capacity.

(4) Materials being taught are "static" and "detached from reality. "

(5) The materials being taught contain "contradiction" with the external reality (Freire, 2005, pp. 71-75).

2.2 Malaysian Education System as A Banking Model

As a remnant of its colonial past, Malaysia's education system has not fully transitioned away from an examination-oriented approach, despite the abolishment of PT3 (Form 3 assessment) and UPSR (Primary 6 assessment) exams and ongoing reform efforts aimed at promoting student-centered learning (Radzi, 2022). These initiatives have failed to instigate genuine change, as evidenced by the persistence of rote learning pedagogies (Loo, 2000; Wong, 2001); for instance, the Moral Education curriculum continues to emphasize the memorization of 12 moral values in primary education and 16 in secondary education, rather than fostering critical engagement or deeper understanding (Lau, 2022). Furthermore, the Malaysian classrooms mirror Freire's depiction where teachers wield absolute control over the narrative of knowledge while relegating students to the passive role of mere recipients. A stark power imbalance prevails, granting teachers authority over narrative and teaching methods and occasionally resorting to coercive measures (The Problems with Our Local Education System, 2020). For example, guidelines still permit corporal punishment for student misconduct (Guidelines to Follow on Caning, 2019), leading to potential abuse of this power by teachers.[4]

A banking model of education can also be said to further entrench the interest of the dominant ethnic and religious group through curriculum bias in the textbooks, where the narrative and information being "deposited" to the students often reflect dominant ideologies and historical interpretations of the dominant group. The national curriculum often emphasizes and glorifies certain values and histories of the ruling class or dominant social group, at the expense of the contributions of other minorities and fostering national unity (Joseph, 2005, p. 33; Santhiram, 1997).

For instance, in Chapter 4 of the Form Four history textbook, students are taught that the Malays hold a special position on the ethnic "ladder" in Malaysia and that their special privilege should be recognised and legitimised (Hasan et. al., 2019, pp. 176-177). The Malaysian history textbooks have also been criticized for being filled with errors and exaggerated facts, serving political interests. According to Ranjit Singh Malhi, the history textbooks are silent about the pioneering role of the Chinese in developing commercial agriculture in the Straits Settlements and the Malay states during the 19th century. The vital role of the Chinese in the nation's tin mining industry is dismissed with only two to three sentences in the Form Three history textbook. Similarly, the contributions of Indians to the nation's rubber industry and in building roads, railways, and bridges, as well as constructing ports, airports, and government buildings, are scarcely mentioned (Malhi, 2021)

Cartoon by David Horsey on Hearst Newspaper in 2010.

[4] *See Leong (2023) for a recent caning incident that had resulted in injury of the student.*

Compounding these issues is the troubling encroachment on free speech within the realm of academics. Views that cannot be circulated encompass open criticisms of the government, sentiments that might incite racial or religious disharmony, and expressions "unsuitable to the interests and well-being of the students or the University" (Universities and University Colleges Act 1971, 1971). As of November 2020, the Ministry of Home Affairs maintained a list of more than 1,700 banned publications (2022 Country Reports, 2022). As we have seen thus far, the Malaysian education system is not apolitical. It exhibits many characteristics aligned with Freire's banking model. As Freire observed, the banking model of education "serves the interests of the oppressors" to keep the people ignorant and submissive (Freire, 2005, p. 73). The result of such an education system may be the creation of a generation of students who are more likely to conform, ready to obey instructions, and resistant to change—a perfect example of oppression.
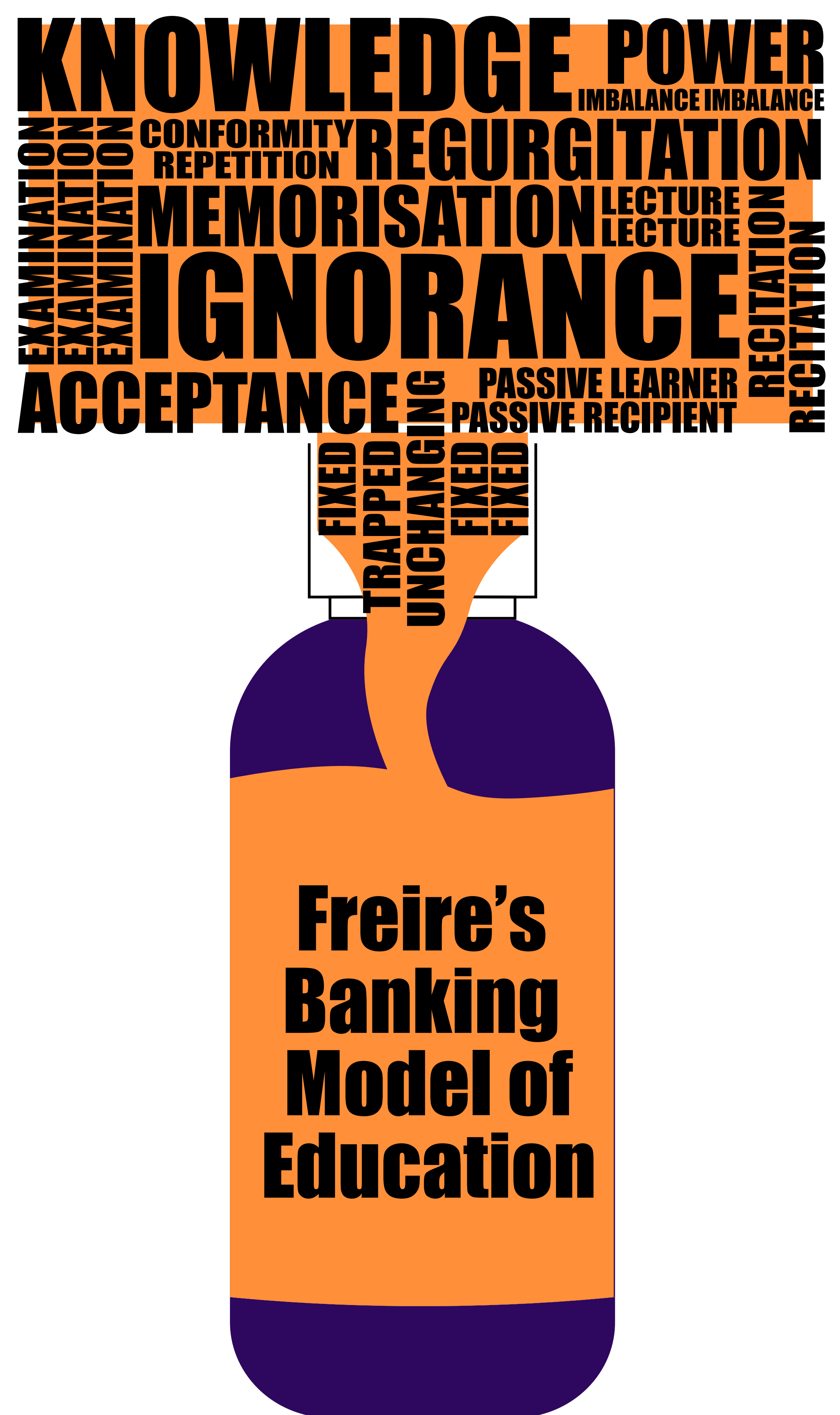
3. The Pedagogical Approach to Change

3.1 Problem-Posing Pedagogy

As an alternative to the banking model of education, Freire advocated for a critical pedagogy that prioritizes the development of critical consciousness (conscientização) as its central objective, a method he termed "problem-posing pedagogy" (Freire, 2005, pp. 79, 111-114, 116-124). Conscientização is the awareness of one's oppressive reality and a revolutionary commitment to end oppression, which Freire describes as praxis—where knowledge and awareness lead to action (Freire, 2004, pp. 65-66, 109, 174; Weiler, 1991, p. 454). Problem-posing pedagogy promotes empowerment and praxis through collaborative problem-solving dialogues and co-creation of knowledge between teachers and students (Freire, 2005, p. 80).[5] In this model, the student–teacher relationships are reconfigured. As Freire put it, 'The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.' (Freire, 2005, p. 80) The teachers and students now constitute what Freire described as 'student-teachers' and 'teacher-students' relationship; it is no longer one characterised by power imbalance, but rather a collaborative partnership where both parties are equal 'co-investigators' of the reality (Freire, 1873, p. 40; Freire, 2005, p. 80). For Freire, this pedagogical approach transcends mere methodology; it serves as a cultural, political, and revolutionary tool aimed at liberation and the overcoming of dehumanization and oppression (Freire, 2005, pp. 43-44, 79, 81).

The problem-posing model of education can be illustrated in five main phases:

(i) Investigation: Teachers or investigators observe the histories, habits, behaviours, languages and local conditions of the students, and identify "generative words" or "generative themes," or subjects or topics that define the lived experiences or realities of the participants (Freire, 2005, pp. 103, 110).

(ii) Thematisation or Codification: The identified themes are codified into representations in preparation for discussions. Codification usually involves sketches, photographs or oral representations that are relevant to the problems, situations and felt needs of the students (Freire, 2005, pp. 114-117).

(iii) Problematization and Dialogue: Students participate in "decoding dialogue" called "thematic investigation circles," which involve continuous communication and critical discussions between the educator and learners about the themes and problems. Here, educators play an important role in presenting the codified themes as problems to be solved or decoded and actively challenge the learners' opinions. Students externalise the themes, realise that they "exist in dialectical relationship to the oppressor" and try to overcome the contradiction by changing their "limit-situations" (Freire, 2005, pp. 49, 82, 85, 98, 115, 117-118).[6]

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[5] A nice overview of Freire's problem-posing pedagogy can be found in Freire's Education for Critical Consciousness (1973).

[6] "Limit-situations" are the barriers and oppressive structures that restrict individuals from fully realising their potential and agency. See Freire (2005), p. 99. Problematization of one's themes and lived experiences allow students to distance themselves from their realities and understand their own 'limit-situations' as the first step to change and participation in "limit-acts" (actions taken to overcome situations that limit their freedom and potential). See Freire (2005), pp. 98, 102.

(iv) Action: The culmination of the problem-posing process is action. Learners are encouraged to take informed and reflective action to address the problems they have discussed. Freire repeatedly emphasised the importance of praxis, the combination of reflection and action in his work, in transforming reality (Freire, 2005, pp. 83-84, 100-101).

(v) Reflection: Reflection occurs through the finalisation of important themes and the translation of insights into further didactic materials by educators or investigators (Freire, 1973, viii; Freire, 2005, pp. 120-124).

For example, in a moral class, instead of focusing on rote memorization of moral values, teachers can identify the problematic realities revolving around the student dynamics, whether it is discrimination, injustice, inequalities, or bigotry against other races, genders or religions. A problem-posing pedagogy focuses on collaboratively explore the problems through collaborative dialogues, unpacking previously held judgements and beliefs, and explore solutions to these moral problems.

PROBLEM

POSING

MODEL

3.2 Considerations Regarding Applying Problem-Posing Pedagogy in Malaysia

While Freire's pedagogical method signals a step in the right direction for the Malaysian education system, his view is rooted in an essentialist and universalist humanisation. For Freire, the essentially defining ontological feature and vocation of being human is the pursuit of freedom and humanization (Freire, 2005, pp. 55, 66, 74-75, 84). Epistemically, this view is paired with the belief that there exists a form of "methodological rigour" and "right thinking" that yields knowledge in the "higher stage" than "common sense" (Freire, 1998, pp. 33-36, 40-45, 51, 125, 129; Glass, 2001, p. 21). Accordingly, this assumed universal and common knowledge about human nature enables the demystification and illumination of the workings of power, thereby empowering individuals to combat oppression and justify emancipatory efforts (Biesta, 2004, p. 35; Biesta, 2005, pp. 146, 153; Freire, 2005, pp. 75, 83).

However, his universalist and essentialist humanization stance has invited criticisms. For example, Glass (2001, pp. 20-21) criticized the inconsistency of universalist and essentialist humanisation with Freire's historicized view of humans as "unfinished," "uncompleted," "historical" beings (Freire, 2005, p. 84) which suggests plurality in ways of being and conceptions of good "circumscribed by "their embodiment in specific situations and backgrounds of culture, history, and meaning." Ellsworth (1989) criticizes critical pedagogy as over-looking how the principles of "rational discourse" or "truths" can marginalize cultural practices and epistemologies that do not align with this framework. Some also criticized Freire's view as glossing over the multiplicity and intersectionality of oppressive experiences that characterized the lived histories across race, gender, ethnicity, and religion (Ellsworth, 1989; Khandekar, 2021; Mclaren and Leonard, 1994; Weiler, 1991), viewing power and the relationship between the oppressor and oppressed as naively dualistic and binary (Abraham, 2013, p. 13; Clemitshaw, 2013, p. 274; Ellsworth, 1989; Freire and Macedo, 2004; Martin and Mohanty, 1986, pp. 208-9).

INTERSECTIONALITY

DIVERSITY

In Malaysia, the complex interplay of race, religion, gender, and socio-economic status highlights the concept of intersectionality in Malaysia, which suggests that individuals can simultaneously experience both oppression and dominance, as well as multiple layers of disadvantage that can occur both within and between social groups (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, a Muslim Malay cisgender woman may occupy a top rung on the race and religion ladders while simultaneously occupy a lower rung on the gender and class ladders. This is because traditional gender roles are still deeply ingrained in the Malaysian society, with cultural and religious expectations often subordinating women to men (Sheriff et. al., 2019). Furthermore, the economic disparity can be traced back to the "divide and rule" policies of British colonization, which positioned Malays in administrative roles and traditional agrarian activities in rural areas, while the Chinese were typically engaged in tin mining, construction, and commerce in urban centers, and Indians predominantly worked in the plantation sector (e.g., rubber and palm oil). As a result of this historical division, the Chinese communities gained greater access to education, economic opportunities, capital ownership, and upward economic mobility compared to other ethnic groups (Lee, 2019, pp. 3, 7). Conversely, a Buddhist Chinese cisgender woman may occupy a top rung of the class ladder (T20—top 20% of income earners) while facing oppression based on her race, gender, and religion, as a result of race-based affirmative action policies. On the other hand, a Muslim Indian transgender man individual may find themselves occupying an even lower rung on the overall ladder of oppression as they grapple with criminalization under Sharia law and face marginalization due to their gender identity, race, and class, along with exclusion from their religious community.[7]

Extrapolating from the criticisms, Freire's humanization view may not fully capture the nuances of the lived experiences of individuals who are shaped by multiple, intersecting forms of oppression in contexts like Malaysia.

Nonetheless, it is worth looking at Freire's thoughts beyond the Pedagogy of the Oppressed to offer a more comprehensive representation of Freire's perspectives. In his various works including "A Dialogue with Paulo Freire" and "Paulo Freire, "A response"," he noted that the omission of the plural forms of oppression in his earlier works, including Pedagogy of the Oppressed, was due to his concentration on class-based oppression along Marxist class lines (Freire, 1997a; Freire and Macedo, 2004, pp. 169-170; Roberts, 2015, p. 379). In his later works such as Pedagogy Of The Heart and Letters to Cristina, Freire appealed to a position of 'unity within diversity', attempting to create a more inclusive framework that synthesizes various forms of oppression within the broader fight for liberation (Freire, 1996; Freire, 1997b). He emphasized that the "'different' must have objectives beyond those specific ones of each group" (Freire, 1997b, p. 85), and the "objectives the different groups fight for coincide" (Freire and Macedo, 2004, p. 173). In other words, the fight for liberation must consider the diversity and interplay of various forms of oppression, while acknowledging that there is something that unites us all as human beings – our fundamental right to humanization. However, while Freire's view sought to integrate multiple forms of oppression into a broader framework for liberation, his problem-posing pedagogy did not provide explicit mechanism or methodology for how to engage in dialogue in complex, intersectional and pluralistic classroom settings.

[7] *Sharia Law (Islamic Law) in Malaysia criminalizes transgenders, same-sex relationships and sodomy. See Haniff et. al. (2021).*

4. Socratic Dialogue Meets Problem-Posing Pedagogy

4.1 Maeutic Questioning

In this section, I argue that the numerous questioning methods and tools in Socratic dialogue can complement and enhance Freire's problem-posing pedagogy, some of which are already inherent in Freire's model but not explicitly outlined. The purpose of this section is to make explicit the tools and framework inherent in Freire's problem-posing pedagogy, and add on to Freire's model by specifying the dialogic methods that can help promote constructive dialogue in intersectional and pluralistic classroom settings.

Originating with Socrates, the Socratic method, as recorded in Plato's dialogues, was initially a form of cross-examination (elenchus).[8] It involves asking a series of probing questions to uncover contradictions or inconsistencies, thereby freeing learners from their false preconceptions in the process of exploration of truths (Abenoza and Lozano, 2024, p. 54; Knezic et. al., 2010, pp. 1105). This process, known as maieutic questioning (midwifery), leads to aporia (a state of perplexity or ignorance), which Socrates likened to labor or childbirth (Leigh, 2007, p. 317; Plato, 1987, 148e–151d). The Socratic method was later reinterpreted by German Neo-Kantian philosopher Leonard Nelson and his student Gustav Heckmann into what is now known as modern Socratic Dialogue, retaining the key aspect of Socratic questioning – maieutic questioning, which goal is to "cut through the roots of their dogmatism," achieve "unprejudiced judgment," and come to "the realisation of not-knowing" through maieutic questioning (Heckmann and Neiser, 2004; Nelson, 1949, pp. 15, 30, 32).

Modern applications of the Socratic dialogue questioning can take various forms: it might involve a sequence of specific types of questions, the practice of elenchus, or seminar styles like "fishbowl," "triad," or "simultaneous seminars" (Furman, n.d.; Morrell, 2013; Osborne et. al., 2016; Paul and Elder, 2007).

Maieutic questioning can be understood as a series of systematic questioning that involves drawing out the implicit beliefs and assumptions of students through various means, including probing participants to clarify or further about their responses, presenting them with unusual or surprising assumptions, encouraging them to seek out counter-evidences or "disconfirmatory" evidence (conditions under which a claim would be false), as well as pointing out contradictions or inconsistencies (Leigh, 2007, pp. 313-6). While not explicitly stated, the critical questioning emphasized in Freire's problem-posing pedagogy shares similarities with maieutic questioning. Both approaches focus on asking "Why?" and challenging participants' views to engage learners in reflecting on their reality and the social structures that shape their lives, rather than passively accepting information (Freire, 2005, pp. 86, 93, 117-118).

[8] *Socratic dialogues have a strong focus on ethical inquiry which aligns with the ethical orientation of critical pedagogy. See for example, Plato's Meno (1980); and Plato's The Republic (2004) for the original Socratic dialogues on virtue and justice.*

However, maieutic questioning in Socratic dialogue extends beyond merely asking "Why?" or challenging assumptions, incorporating a more systematic and structured exploration of ideas to uncover deeper truths and inconsistencies. It can sometimes be seen as a form of "regressive inference," where facilitators encourages students to systematically analyze beliefs by tracing them back to the underlying and deep seated presuppositions and assumptions through specific question types including clarifying questions, counterexample questions, assumption probing questions, and consequence-testing questions (Abenoza and Lozano, 2024, pp. 67-8; Nelson, 1949, p. 10; Osborne et. al., 2016; Paul and Elder, 2007).[9] This approach can challenge deep-seated internalized biases about others and promote an understanding of how the the different layers of identity contribute to unique experiences of privilege and oppression. For example, when a student is asked why they believe a certain social norm is fair or just, they may initially respond with a surface-level, socially approved answer. Through maieutic and systematic questioning of clarifying assumptions, considering counter-evidences, and analyzing consequences, the facilitator would then guide the student to trace that belief back, leading to a realization that their belief is based on inherited norms or stereotypes, and how social structures, cultural narratives and their life experiences have shaped those stereotypes or beliefs. Through this kind of questioning and dialogue, the facilitator can help the student develop a more nuanced understanding of how different identities intersect and contribute to complex experiences of privilege or oppression.

[9] Refer to Table 1 for a representation of Socratic dialogue questioning method in different stages.

Socratic Dialogue

1 Concept/Problem Definition

2 Clarification

3 Assumption Probing

4 Evidence Probing

5 Viewpoints and Perspectives

6 Implications and Consequences

7 Action

Table 1

Question Type/Stage	Description	Sample Questions

Codification: Preparation of teaching materials that are relevant to the problems, situations and felt needs of the students.

| Question Type/Stage	Description	Sample Questions
Stage 1: Concept/Problem Definition	Probing participants on their understanding of a concept or issue based on personal experiences.	• What is the problem? • How do you define X using your personal experience?
Stage 2: Clarification	Asking for clearer explanations or understanding.	• Can you clarify what you mean by X?
Stage 3: Assumption Probing	Challenging existing assumptions.	• What influenced you to hold this view? Have you considered X?
Stage 4: Evidence Probing	Probing evidence and reasons, as well as counter-evidence.	• What led you to hold such a view towards X? • Can you think of any examples that can potentially challenge your cur-
Stage 5: Viewpoints and Perspectives	Assessing validity or reliability of arguments, anticipating objections, and discussing alternatives.	• What would someone who disagreed with your viewpoint say/argue?
Stage 6: Implications and Consequences	Exploring consequences and implications of arguments or proposals?	• What are the consequences of this approach to others who do not share your social identity/view?
Stage 7: Action	Consider actionable steps to the problem discussed.	• How do you propose we deal with X?

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4.2 Communicative Ethics and Enlarged Mentality

Next, Socratic dialogues emphasize basic shared norms of moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity, whereby different voices are included in a discussion (Abenoza and Lozano, 2024, p. 99; Benhabib, 1992). These norms, or what Seyla Benhabib called "communicative ethics" are: (i) Rule of universal moral respect: we must respect one another as beings whose point of view is worthy of equal consideration. (ii) Rule of egalitarian reciprocity: we should treat one another as concrete human beings and strengthen our ability to express our point of view by creating, whenever possible, social practices that materialize the discursive ideal (Benhabib, 1992, pp. 29-32). The moral principles proposed by Benhabib above are compatible with a pluralist stance by allowing the "coexistence of all ways of life compatible with the acceptance of a framework of universal rights and justice" (Benhabib, 1992, p. 46). In Freire's problem-posing pedagogy, while an egalitarian relationship and co-creation of knowledge between teachers and students is emphasized, the model does not offer sufficient guidance on how to navigate power dynamics between students themselves. In a diverse and pluralistic classroom, students come with different lived experiences, social positions, and perspectives, and Freire's pedagogy does not provide enough guidance on how to ensure that all voices are heard equally in group discussions. By actively accommodating these shared moral principles in dialogue, teachers can ensure equal opportunities of voices are given to students, while being mindful of power imbalances that may hinder some voices from being heard.

Apart from reinforcing basic shared norms of moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity in the classroom, it is also crucial to practice a form of perspective-taking known as "enlarged mentality" to promote equal respect and inclusivity of intersectional and plural voices.

Originating with Immanuel Kant and later embraced by Hannah Arendt, this concept fosters a form of perspective-taking and imaginative engagement that enables individuals to consider diverse perspectives (Benhabib, 1992, p. 53). Enlarged mentality transcends mere passive empathy or agreement; it necessitates a critical form of perspective-taking that encourages individuals to abstract "from the limitations which contingently attach to our own judgment," "see everything that is too far from us as though it were our own affair, and to represent "the particular conditions" in others' viewpoints in order to arrive at a more impartial and objective judgment of the issue

(Arendt, 1961, p. 221; Arendy, 1978, p. 258; Arendt, 2005, p. 323). In Socratic dialogue, it is common for facilitators to require individuals to suspend their judgments, engage empathetically and critically with others' perspectives, and envision oneself in similar circumstances (Abenoza and Lozano, 2024, pp. 94-99; Altorf, 2016, pp. 9-12). Participants are encouraged to practice a sense of "impartiality" where they not only listen to and understand the perspectives of others but also critically evaluate them from a broader, more inclusive standpoint. This allows for a deeper engagement with differing viewpoints, as individuals are encouraged to look beyond their own biases and personal interests, and arrive at more nuanced and well-rounded understandings of the issues at hand.[10]
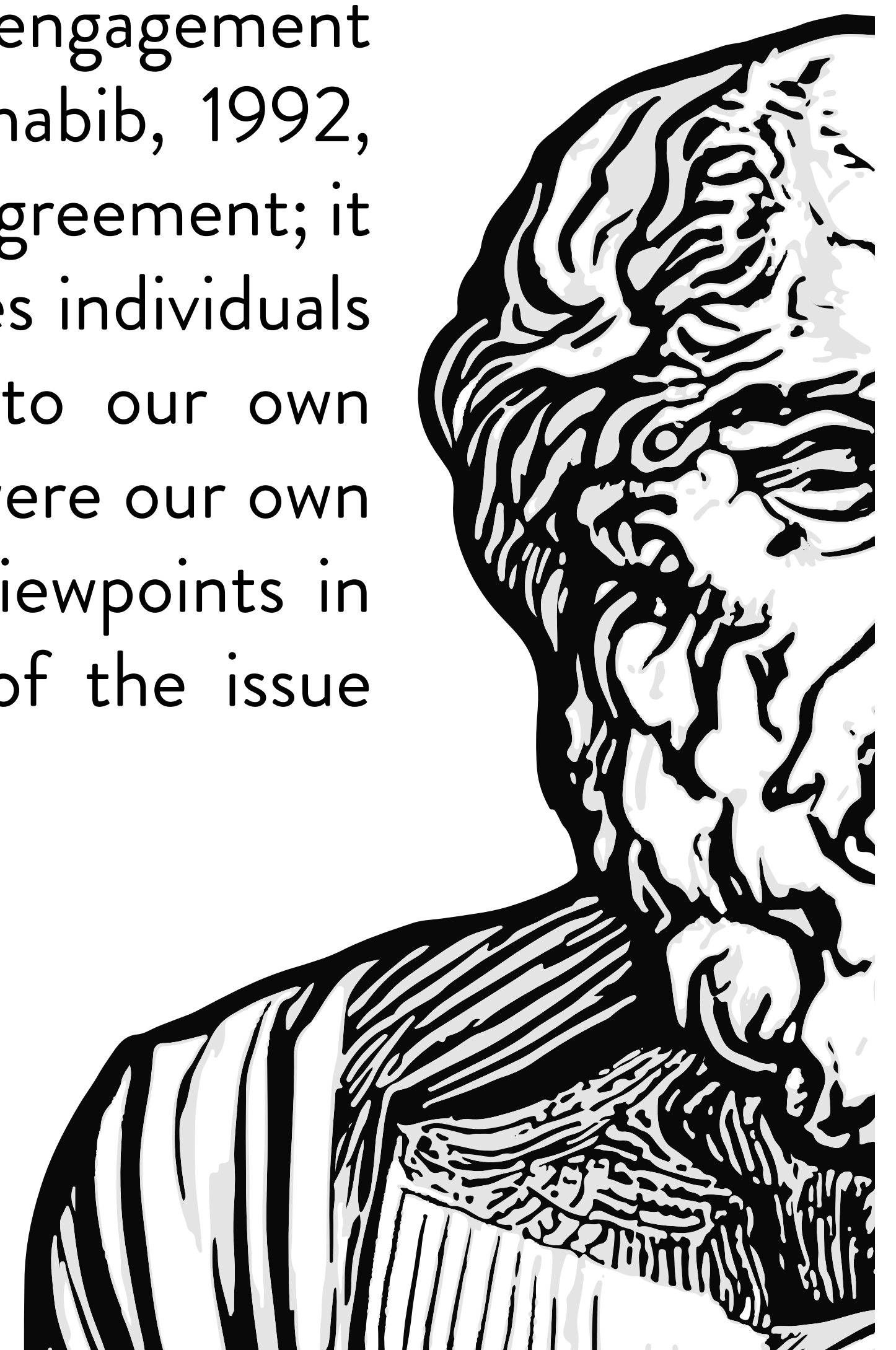
[10] The "impartiality" here does not imply an absolute impartiality or universal truth; rather, it represents a relative impartiality and a fluid, pluralist construct that evolves through the dialogue.

4.3 The Unconscious and Aporia

Finally, Freire's pedagogy primarily relies on a more rational, dialogue-driven approach to knowledge creation, which may not fully account for the diverse ways people process and understand their experiences, including emotional responses and unconscious ideas or beliefs, and the validity of these responses. Freire's model could benefit from incorporating these dimensions beyond the public dialogic space more explicitly by referring to the Socratic method of questioning. The Socratic method of questioning which is aimed at critically examining beliefs and uncovering contradictions or "aporia," can prompt reflection on why one is holding conflicting views, potentially uncovering hidden motivations or values that have not been acknowledged.

Often, this conflict stems from deeper, unconscious beliefs or feelings—like implicit biases or unresolved emotional reactions—that they have not consciously examined or integrated into their reasoning. Jonathan Lear's interpretation of the original Socratic method (elenchus) suggests a reading of Socrates as using a form of irony in drawing out deeper unconscious beliefs or aspirations. He suggests that elenchus does not just involve revealing contradictory beliefs or propositional attitudes, but also the contradiction between what he called "pretense" (the ego), and "aspirations" (the id or superego).[11] In a paradigmatic case of elenchus, Socrates probes his interlocutors to see the limitation in their perspectives and hint upon an alternative understanding that transcends the interlocutors' views through encountering inconsistencies between their surface and more deeply seated, sometimes unconsciously held beliefs (Lear, 2006, pp. 457-9).

For instance, when students are asked to engage in discussions about the problem of racial inequalities or discrimination, they can face inconsistencies in their responses, shaped by social norms and a mix of deeply ingrained historical narratives, personal experiences, and repressed emotions from unpleasant events in the past. Especially in an environment that restricts free speech, one may practice self-censorship and provide normatively agreeable or socially approved responses even if their deeper feelings or experiences might tell a different story. This dissonance between surface-level responses and underlying beliefs can highlight the complexities of human attitudes towards sensitive issues, revealing internalized beliefs or emotional reactions that may not be fully acknowledged or expressed. These unconsciously held beliefs should not be automatically dismissed as irrational or invalid, as they often represent deeply rooted elements of an individual's identity, shaped by historical, cultural, and social influences. By guiding students through questions that reveal the contradictions between their beliefs and emotions, and reflecting on these contradictions, the educator could help students confront and examine unconscious biases, assumptions and memories they may hold about other ethnic groups and historical factors influencing their views. This process could foster greater self-awareness, friendships, and a more empathetic, open, and reflective dialogue that goes beyond surface-level discussions and facilitates the healing of historical wounds.

[11] *Following Sigmund Freud's categorization, the "id" consists of primal fantasies and erotic desires, the "ego" consists of the conscious, socially acceptable beliefs, and the "superego" that consists of internalized societal standards and moral ideals. See Freud (1981), XIX: 1-66 and Civilization and its Discontents, XXI: 57-145.*
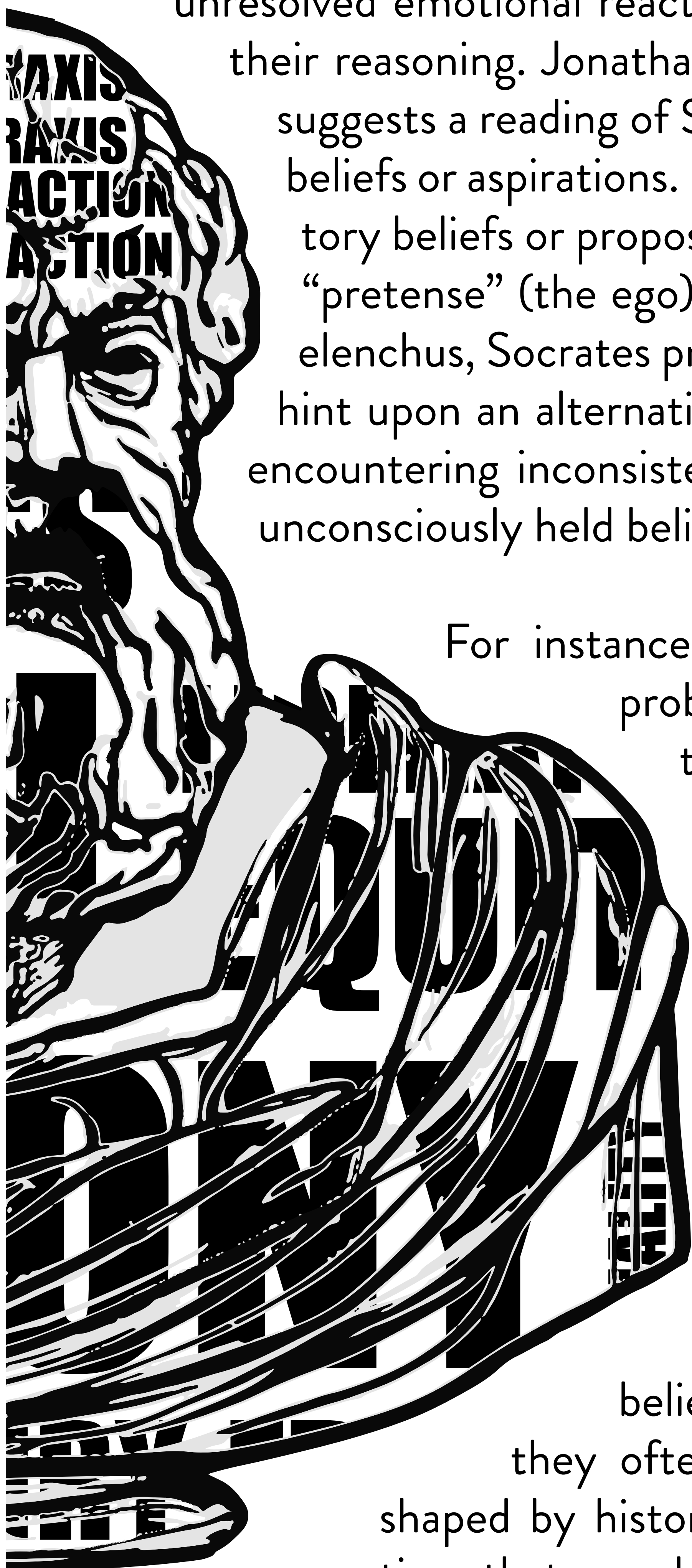
5. Recommendations and Next Steps

To facilitate the transition to a more liberal, critical and inclusive Malaysia, the Malaysia education landscape and policies require a comprehensive transformation that moves beyond a banking model.

(1) Curriculum Reform

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 emphasizes holistic student development and cognitive performance, alongside the goal of achieving equitable outcomes by addressing urban-rural, socio-economic, and gender disparities. While higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking, reasoning, creative thinking and innovation are recognised, the task to improve them is not emphasized and embedded within the curriculum and pedagogy. There is no mention of shift in curriculum to reduce rote learning and a rejection of the banking model (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, 2013). To truly transform the education system into one that fosters critical and creative capacities, a deliberate move toward problem-posing and dialogic pedagogy at all education levels and subjects is necessary.

For instance, in History classes, teachers can pick historical events that have led to conflicts and tensions in the society, and invite students to critically analyze and reinterpret these incidents, explore the perspectives of different cultural groups, address mistaken assumptions, and discuss what could have been done differently. With some creativity, these dialogues can also be applied to subjects that seem to have no direct relations with social issues. For instance, in Mathematics classes, teachers can introduce concepts or tools like Venn Diagram, bar graphs or pie charts by having students visually represent the global distribution of LGBTQI criminalization. Afterwards, teachers can lead to critical discussions and dialogues about local occurrences, challenge the fixed nature of the data and trends, and encourage diverse perspectives on the issue.

(2) Teacher Training & Professional Development

To facilitate the transition away from a banking model of education, teachers should be trained to facilitate collaborative and Socratic dialogues that encourage students to question assumptions, analyze social realities, and co-create knowledge. The current Continuous Professional Development (CPD) training programmes for teachers tend to revolve around topics such as incorporation of technology in teaching and learning, or subject-specific knowledge, skills and instructional strategies (Kerangka dan Strategi Perlaksanaan Latihan Pembangunan Profesionalisme Berterusan, 2021). While pedagogical methods such as flipped classroom and inquiry-based learning are taught and shared in the CPD workshops, they are often delivered on a one-off basis or accompanied by theoretical guides with limited practical application.

CPD workshops need to shift its focus to explore problem-posing and dialogic pedagogical methods and transition from isolated sessions to a more holistic, continuous professional development approach, which include follow-up support, hands-on training and classroom simulations, and a community for regular feedback, at the very least. Teachers exposed or trained in problem-posing pedagogy and Socratic dialogues can also take the lead to facilitate CPD workshops and model how to create classroom environments where questioning, reflection, and open dialogue are central to the learning process, and collaboration with local NGOs and grassroot communities experienced in these dialogic methods, such as the Malaysian Philosophy Society and Socrates Café, can further enrich these workshops.

12 The Vision Schools initiative was conceived by Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in 2000 during his tenure as the Prime Minister of Malaysia. See Mahathir Moots Reviving Vision School Model (2018). The history of the vernacular education system can be traced back to the history of British colonization, when the "divide and rule" tactic was employed across various sectors (including education), exploiting existing ethnic, cultural and religious differences among the population to strengthen British control. See Shanmugavelu et. al. (2000), p. 11.

(3) Removal of Curriculum Bias

It is crucial to also conduct a comprehensive review of the education curriculum to remove bias and untrue information that support the interests of the ruling elites. Policymakers and educators should consider involving diverse stakeholders—including marginalized communities, historians, and independent experts—in curriculum review processes. Educators should ensure that textbooks and educational materials present a balanced and accurate portrayal of history, culture, and social issues. Even if a complete overhaul of the curriculum is not possible, incremental steps can still be taken to introduce supplementary materials, encourage critical engagement with existing content, and foster classroom discussions that challenge dominant narratives. Teachers can play a pivotal role in this process by guiding students to critically question and evaluate the information presented in textbooks, and incorporating multiple perspectives into their lessons. Collaborative projects, debates, and Socratic dialogue methods can also be employed to encourage students to critically evaluate the material and form their own informed opinions.

(4) Transformation of Vernacular Education

The vernacular schooling system in Malaysia can be seen as a vestige of the British colonial era's "divide and rule" strategy aimed at serving the interests of the colonizers and preventing unified dissent.[12] Vernacular education system divides schools along ethnic or cultural lines, which includes Chinese Vernacular Schools (Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina, SJKC) which uses Chinese as the language of instruction, Tamil Vernacular Schools (Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil, SJKT) which uses Tamil as the language of instruction, and Religious or Islamic Schools (Sekolah Agama Rakyat, SAR). While some may argue that vernacular schools help preserve a sense of unity due to their respect and preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity, others contend that such schools can inadvertently perpetuate segregation and hinder cross-cultural dialogue and solidarity, thereby intensifying misunderstanding, discrimination, bigotry and intolerance among different ethnicities (Vernacular Schools Reflect Divided Society, 2024).

(5) Draconian and Censorship Laws

Laws such as the Sedition Act of 1948 (Sedition Act 1948, 1948), the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (Laws of Malaysia Act 588, 1998), the Printing Press and Publications Act 1984 (Printing Press and Publications Act 1984, 1984), the Security Offences Act (Resolution Adopted at the 78th Annual General Meeting, 2024), as well as the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 have been weaponized to restrict the free speech and rights of the people, including the rights to academic freedom.[13] Furthermore, the Penal Code, Sedition Act, Peaceful Assembly Act, and Communications and Multimedia Act in Malaysia incorporate excessively broad and ambiguously formulated clauses, granting authorities extensive leeway to investigate or detain individuals for a range of activities or expressions deemed unfavorable by the government For instance, content that is "indecent," "obscene," "menacing," "offensive," or has "seditious tendency" is prohibited.[14] These laws not only led to censorship and self-censorship, but also the indoctrination of specific ideological narratives, shaping public discourse and limiting critical thought.

As a result, individuals were often exposed to a narrow view of history, politics, and culture, reinforcing the status quo while suppressing alternative perspectives. To truly foster a future generation that is critical, open-minded and democratic, these laws must be reevaluated and where necessary, repealed, through grassroot and collective movements and collaboration with international bodies including United Nations, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Instead of suppressing speech through vague and oppressive laws, the focus should be on promoting education that encourages critical engagement with ideas, history, and societal issues and promotes empathy and understanding, allowing respectful speech that does not incite harm, violence, or discrimination.

[13] As per the government's official statistics, there were 692 investigations conducted by the police between January 2020 and June 2022 under the Communications and Multimedia Act. These investigations led to 87 prosecutions, encompassing artists, performers, and political activists. See Malaysia 2023 (2023).

[14] See clause 211 in Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (Laws of Malaysia Act 588, 1998), and section 3 in Sedition Act 1948 (1948).

(6) Re-evaluation of Unequal Policies

Finally, it is crucial to transform policies that dis-proportionately benefit certain groups at the expense of others. For example, policymakers should consider revising the quota system in higher education to provide equal opportunities for all Malaysians, regardless of their race or religion. This is because the persistence of unequal policies can negatively impact reforms aimed at transitioning away from the banking model of education. When policies continue to disproportionately benefit certain groups, they reinforce existing power structures and social divisions, and perpetuate a cycle that makes it harder to create an inclusive, critical pedagogy that values diverse perspectives. While racial and religious equality and social justice is a sensitive and taboo-ed topic in Malaysia, we should not shy away from discussing it. It is only through inter-race and inter-religious collaborative dialogue that we can frame it as a collective problem to be addressed, appreciate the viewpoints from the other side, as well as identify any irrational demands or inconsistent beliefs that we have, thereby working together towards positive-sum and shared solutions.

The journey towards liberation in Malaysia will be lengthy, arduous and uncertain. Nonetheless, this path is not insurmountable. It begins with individuals taking small steps in their daily lives—questioning, unlearning and deconstructing what has been taught, indoctrinated, and normalized, while being open to embracing alternative viewpoints. Educational transformation does not lie merely in having grand educational blueprints or declaring universal aspirations; rather, it is rooted in the groundwork of unlearning and relearning, which also includes questioning the assumptions underlying these very blueprints and liberatory frameworks. Finally, this paper is not a prescription written to "deposit" knowledge in the minds of the readers, nor an assertion of truth. It is one interpretation of the future, and we invite others to engage with, challenge, and refine it.

CRITICAL INTERSECTIONALITY
CONSCIOUSNESS PRAXIS COLLECTIVE ACTION
PRAXIS COLLECTIVE ACTION
AGENCY
REASONING OPPRESSED JUDGEMENT JUSTICE
FAIRNESS EDUCATION PEDAGOGY
CRITICAL LIBERATION EQUITY
THINKING EQUALITY DEPOSITING
DIALOGUE INQUIRY FREEDOM

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