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Traces of Critical Pedagogy in Jose Rizal's Philosophy of Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the traces of critical pedagogy in Jose Rizal's philosophy of education, situating his thought in dialogue with Paulo Freire's theory of conscientization. Rizal's writings, particularly Noli Me Tangere and El Filibusterismo, reveal both a language of critique—a moral and intellectual denunciation of colonial oppression—and a language of possibility that envisions education as a path to social emancipation. His depiction of the schoolmaster's struggles against clerical control, and of Placido Penitente's disillusionment in the colonial classroom, demonstrates how education under Spain functioned as an apparatus of domination. Yet in Dapitan, Rizal embodied a practical alternative: a community-based model of education grounded in scientific inquiry, civic virtue, and social responsibility. These initiatives reveal a dialectical understanding of oppression and liberation, anticipating Freire's call for education that cultivates critical consciousness and human dignity. By articulating critique while embodying possibility, Rizal developed a prototype of critical pedagogy that predates Freire, offering a vision of education as both a site of resistance and a foundation for national regeneration.

Keywords: Jose Rizal, critical pedagogy, philosophy of education, Paulo Freire, liberation

Introduction

The question of Jose Protacio Rizal's (1861–1896) relationship to the Philippine Revolution remains one of the most enduring and contested debates in Philippine intellectual history. Scholars have long argued over whether Rizal stood as the antithesis of the revolution, or whether the revolution itself was the antithesis of Rizal. This tension has often been framed as an irreconcilable dichotomy between Rizal and the revolutionary struggle of Andres Bonifacio, leader of the revolutionary movement known as the *Katipunan*, which sought national

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independence through armed struggle, in their fight for an independent Filipino nation. Central to this debate is the recurring appeal to Rizal's view of education as a primary explanation for his opposition to violent revolution.

Rizal's writings and actions reflect a deep conviction that the moral, intellectual, and civic formation of the Filipino people must precede political liberation. In his letter to the young women of Malolos (1889), Rizal championed women's right to education, emphasizing that the formation of virtuous citizens begins with the education of families and communities. Such text underscore his view of education not merely as skill acquisition, but as a process of moral cultivation, civic responsibility, and social empowerment.

The invocation of Rizal's educational view in historical and scholarly discourse has often been ambiguous and, at times, misleading. While many historians and biographers point to his educational ideals as evidence for his preference for reform over revolution, such readings risk reinforcing an assimilationist narrative. This narrative portrays Rizal as aligned with Spain's *'civilizing mission'* and later with America's ideology of '*benevolent assimilation,'* reducing him to a passive reformist or a bourgeois intellectual whose interests coincided with colonial authority.

Despite this long-standing debate, there exists a significant gap in scholarly literature. While Rizal's educational thought is frequently taught and cited, it has rarely been reconstructed as a coherent theoretical and practical framework. Existing studies tend to fragmentarily reference his schooling, letters, and activities during exile in Dapitan, often selectively, to explain his reluctance to the revolution that was initiated by Andres Bonifacio. This selective approach has inadvertently obscured the deeper emancipatory dimension of his educational philosophy, leaving the impression that his pedagogy was secondary to political action or aligned with colonial accommodation. Few works engage critically with the question of how Rizal's educational vision itself constituted a form of revolutionary praxis—one capable of fostering critical consciousness and social transformation without recourse to violence.

This paper seeks to address that gap. It argues that Rizal's philosophy of education should not be interpreted merely as a justification for rejecting violent revolution, but rather as an alternative and anticipatory form of revolutionary praxis. Through his writings, pedagogical practices, and civic engagement in Dapitan, Rizal actively cultivated critical awareness, practical skills, and civic responsibility among his students and the wider community. His educational initiatives in Dapitan—teaching literacy, science, agriculture, handicrafts, and civic values—demonstrate his commitment to collective empowerment and self-reliance. Far from passive retreat, these practices exemplify a form of critical pedagogy, emphasizing the awakening of critical consciousness as a precondition for genuine liberation.

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In this sense, Rizal anticipates key principles later articulated by Paulo Freire in his framework of education for liberation: the formation of critical awareness, the integration of theory and practice, and the empowerment of individuals to transform their social reality. By situating Rizal's educational philosophy in this framework, the paper reclaims his vision as profoundly revolutionary, challenging readings that reduce him to colonial compliance or gradualist reformism.

To pursue this argument, the paper is organized into three interrelated parts: (1) an examination of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, (2) a detailed study of Rizal's philosophy of education and pedagogical practices, and (3) an articulation of critical pedagogy within Rizal's thought. Through this structure, the paper seeks not only to clarify Rizal's position in relation to the revolution but also to demonstrate the enduring relevance of his educational ideas for contemporary discussions on civic formation, critical pedagogy, and nation-building.

This study contends that Rizal's philosophy of education constitutes a deliberate and systematic engagement with the conditions for national and social emancipation. By emphasizing moral, intellectual, and civic formation, Rizal sought to cultivate a Filipino populace capable of exercising freedom responsibly, sustaining democratic governance, and resisting colonial domination. In doing so, his educational vision transcends the dichotomy of reform versus revolution, presenting a holistic framework of liberation through education that remains profoundly relevant for understanding both his thought and its contemporary implications.

Review of Related Literature

Scholarship on Jose Rizal's philosophy of education reveals an evolving trajectory of interpretations that highlight both the breadth and depth of his thought. One of the earliest systematic accounts is Camilo Osias's *Rizal and Education* (1921), which frames Rizal's advocacy of education as foundational to nation-building. For Osias, Rizal envisioned education not simply as intellectual instruction but as a transformative process fostering moral development, civic responsibility, and critical reasoning. Education was, therefore, the indispensable means for the Filipino people to attain self-determination and collective empowerment. Osias emphasizes that Rizal consistently championed popular and public education as the pathway toward enlightenment and eventual liberation, thus situating his pedagogy within a broader nationalist project.

Building on this, Floro Quibuyen (2011), in *Rizal's Legacy for the 21st Century: Progressive Education, Social Entrepreneurship and Community Development in Dapitan*, shifts attention to Rizal's concrete praxis during his exile. Quibuyen demonstrates how Rizal's pedagogy in Dapitan combined literacy, science, agriculture, and vocational training with civic engagement and community cooperation. Education, in this context, was inseparable from social

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responsibility, as Rizal transformed Dapitan into a model of sustainable and participatory development. Quibuyen argues that this period illustrates Rizal's anticipation of progressive education and experiential learning, situating him as both a nationalist thinker and a practitioner of emancipatory pedagogy. By reinterpreting Dapitan not as passive exile but as deliberate community-building, Quibuyen underscores Rizal's vision of education as a lived practice of liberation.

In *"Citizenship and Civic Education: A Critical Elaboration on the Pedagogy of Rizal's La Liga Filipina"* (2019), Clement Camposano unsettles dominant readings of Rizal by relocating his intellectual journey between Voltairean liberalism and Rousseau's social contract tradition. Rather than portraying Rizal as a unified thinker, Camposano argues that his conception of La Liga embodied a form of civic pedagogy—one that sought to cultivate habits, dispositions, and a sense of the "general will" beyond the framework of individual rights. In this light, La Liga Filipina becomes an extension of Rizal's educational philosophy beyond the classroom, integrating political and ethical formation into the practice of civic life. For Rizal, education was inseparable from the cultivation of civic virtues, social cooperation, and responsible citizenship—traits indispensable for sustaining collective freedom and solidarity. Civic education, therefore, is understood not only in terms of abstract ideals but also through the everyday practices by which citizenship is embodied, even as these remain shaped by structures of power, inequality, and habitus.

Roman, Reyes, Valencia, and Tantengco (2014), in their article entitled *Pilosopiyang Pang-edukasyon ni Rizal: Isang Pilosopiyang Pilipino sa Edukasyon,* provide a contemporary analysis that positions Rizal's philosophy of education as a distinctly Filipino contribution to global educational thought. Using content analysis of Rizal's writings and practices, particularly in Dapitan, they argue that Rizal's philosophy emphasized critical inquiry, moral formation, scientific and humanistic knowledge, and respect for human dignity. Crucially, they interpret Rizal's pedagogy through the pragmatist concept of sociality, highlighting that for Rizal the school was an *organon*—an instrument—for transforming individuals into socially responsible citizens. Rizal's vision, therefore, was not limited to abstract intellectual cultivation but was directed toward shaping individuals capable of active participation in community life.

These works reveal a consistent theme: Rizal's view of education foregrounded the formation of moral character, civic responsibility, and critical consciousness as the basis of true nationhood. Early accounts, such as that of Osias, focused on intellectual and moral foundations, while later analyses, like those of Quibuyen and Roman et al., examined the practical, progressive, and civic applications of his pedagogy. But, despite Rizal's prominence in Philippine history, relatively few studies systematically analyze his philosophy of education as a coherent and critical framework. Much of the literature either fragments his thought across historical

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episodes or emphasizes his political stance on revolution, often neglecting the emancipatory and transformative dimensions of his pedagogy.

What remains underexplored, however, is the very philosophical foundation of Rizal's philosophy of education. While existing studies highlight its moral, civic, and practical applications, they often stop short of examining its deeper conceptual underpinnings—such as its epistemological, ethical, and political dimensions. This gap underscores the need for scholarship that situates Rizal's philosophy of education not merely as a set of practices or reformist ideals but as a systematic and critical philosophical framework. Doing so would allow us to appreciate more fully its historical rootedness, theoretical innovation, and continuing relevance for nurturing critical consciousness, civic responsibility, and nation-building in the modern Philippine context.

While Rizal's view on philosophy offers profound insights into moral, intellectual, and civic formation, invoking it as the primary explanation for his rejection of armed revolution presents significant interpretive risks. This narrative often portrays Rizal as aligned with Spain's so-called 'civilizing mission' and, later, with America's ideology of 'benevolent assimilation.' By framing his advocacy for education as a rationale for rejecting revolutionary action, some interpretations reduce Rizal to a passive reformist, whose reforms were merely aimed at improving conditions under colonial rule, rather than genuinely challenging structures of oppression. Others depict him as a bourgeois intellectual whose interests coincided with colonial authority, implying that his stance was motivated less by principle than by the preservation of class privilege. Such readings risk distorting the complexity of Rizal's thought, flattening the multidimensionality of his intellectual and moral project, and portraying him as complicit in colonial agendas rather than as a visionary who sought genuine emancipation through alternative, nonviolent forms of social transformation.

Renato Constantino (1991) offers a sharp critique of this narrative. In his Marxist nationalist historiography, Constantino problematizes the canonization of Rizal under American colonial rule, arguing that such framing served to legitimize colonial authority and suppress more radical revolutionary traditions represented by figures like Andres Bonifacio and the Katipuneros. He contends that the emphasis on Rizal's reformist stance—especially when interpreted through the lens of education—was co-opted to present him as an "Americanized, canonized hero," thereby neutralizing his potential as a revolutionary symbol. For Constantino, this selective reading not only misrepresents Rizal's intellectual and moral intentions but also undermines the historical memory of Filipino resistance by elevating reformist strategies above more radical, revolutionary forms of struggle. In this sense, Constantino implicitly warns against simplistic appropriations of Rizal's educational advocacy to justify a conservative or passive political stance, urging scholars to recognize the subtler ways in which his pedagogy and civic engagement contributed to Filipino consciousness and empowerment.

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Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education that develops a critical theory of teaching and learning. The term was first popularized by Henry Giroux (1983) in *Theory and Resistance in Education: Pedagogy for the Opposition*. Etymologically, "critical pedagogy" combines two elements: *critical* and *pedagogy*. The term *critical* was borrowed from the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, especially from theorists such as Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse. It emphasizes the development of critique and discourse that can inspire social action and transformation. The term *pedagogy*, meanwhile, refers not only to teaching methods but also to a social theory that highlights the dialectics of subjectivity, agency, freedom, and structure in everyday classroom life.

As such, critical pedagogy challenges the legitimacy of prevailing social structures and promotes counter-hegemonic discourses within the classroom. Since its emergence in the 1980s, it has evolved into a diverse field encompassing multiple theories, practices, and strands. Today, critical pedagogy is no longer a monolithic discourse but a collection of approaches concerned with both the political and liberating potential of education. This diversity is reflected in postmodern, postcolonial, and queer theories, which draw not only from Marxist thought but also from the works of Gramsci, Said, Deleuze, and Foucault (Dale, J., & Hyslop-Margison, 2010).

Despite its diversity of approaches and emphases, critical pedagogy retains two core and enduring elements: the *language of critique* and the *language of possibility* (Giroux, 1983). The first refers to a moral, intellectual, and political stance that interrogates the structures of domination, oppression, and dehumanization. It seeks to unmask the hidden mechanisms by which inequality is reproduced and normalized—whether through the hierarchies embedded in social life, the cultural practices that reinforce exclusion, or the educational institutions that function as ideological state apparatuses. In this sense, the language of critique exposes the ways in which schools often mirror the injustices of society, transforming classrooms into sites where obedience, conformity, and passivity are cultivated instead of genuine inquiry and agency.

The *language of possibility*, on the other hand, directs attention beyond the exposure of injustice to the envisioning of alternative futures. It emphasizes that education, while implicated in the reproduction of oppressive social structures, also carries the potential to reimagine and reconfigure social relations. Through this lens, the classroom is not simply a space of transmission but a terrain of struggle where democratic participation, critical questioning, and solidarity can be cultivated. The language of possibility demands that pedagogy be oriented toward emancipation, enabling learners to imagine new ways of being together and to exercise their agency in the transformation of the world.

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Closely related to this is what Paulo Freire describes as *ontological hope*. If the language of possibility emphasizes education's capacity to envision alternatives, the language of hope stresses the existential necessity of believing that such alternatives are achievable. Hope is not mere optimism or wishful thinking; rather, it is a critical disposition rooted in praxis—the unity of reflection and action. It is what prevents critique from degenerating into despair and what sustains the pursuit of social transformation even amid setbacks. For Freire, hope is constitutive of human existence: it affirms the unfinishedness of the human being and the openness of history to change. Thus, the language of hope animates the language of possibility, ensuring that the struggle for liberation remains both grounded and enduring (Freire, 2014).

While this study does not attempt an exhaustive discussion of critical pedagogy's theoretical heritage, its primary focus is on the contributions of Paulo Freire, recognized as a seminal pioneer of the field. This focus is especially relevant in the Philippine context, where research on critical pedagogy is still in its early stages.

Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) is widely recognized as a foundational text in critical pedagogy and contemporary philosophy of education. Its influence has been global, with millions of readers engaging with its ideas, and it has positioned Freire as one of the most influential educators of the 20th century. Unlike many educational theorists who develop abstract frameworks, Freire's philosophy is deeply grounded in lived experience, particularly his experiences as a member of subaltern groups in Brazil. As he reflects:

> *"Thought and study alone did not produce Pedagogy of the Oppressed; it is rooted in the concrete situation and describes the reactions of laborers (peasant or urban) of middle-class persons whom I have observed directly or indirectly during the course of my educative work"* (Freire, 2005, p. 37).

This grounding in lived experience allowed Freire to articulate a pedagogy that is both practical and theoretical, responding directly to the conditions of oppression and marginalization that he observed. His work emerged as a response to political repression in Brazil, including the systematic silencing of educators and the poor, which catalyzed his development of a pedagogy aimed at liberation. In this context, Freire became an exemplary organic intellectual, combining a deep understanding of social structures with a moral commitment to social justice. As Shaull (2005) observes, his thought represents "the response of a creative mind and sensitive conscience to the extraordinary misery and suffering of the oppressed."

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Freire's writing is characterized by its dialogical form, blending social theory, political critique, and educational practice in a way that actively engages the reader. Rather than presenting knowledge as a fixed and transmissible commodity, Freire invites readers into a process of reflection, questioning, and co-construction of understanding. His text demonstrates clear affinities with Marxism, particularly in its critique of social and economic oppression; with Existentialism, especially Sartre's emphasis on human freedom and agency; and with Psychoanalysis, in its attention to consciousness, internalized oppression, and subjectivity (Dale & Margison, 2010).

Understanding Freire's work requires more than a single reading. The text's depth and complexity emerge over repeated engagement, as the reader begins to apprehend its emancipatory potential. His philosophy challenges conventional notions of education as the passive transmission of knowledge, instead proposing a model in which education is a tool for liberation and social transformation. In this sense, Freire not only critiques existing social and educational structures but also provides a practical framework for fostering critical consciousness, agency, and solidarity among learners.

Freire's ideas have inspired generations of educators, activists, and theorists across diverse contexts, influencing approaches to adult literacy, community education, social justice pedagogy, and postcolonial education. His work remains profoundly relevant today, particularly in societies marked by inequality, oppression, and the persistence of systemic injustices. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is both a theoretical and practical guide, offering a vision of education as a transformative and humanizing force capable of empowering the marginalized and reshaping social realities.

Marxist Foundations of Freire's Pedagogy

Freire's work is deeply rooted in Marxist assumptions about class struggle and social transformation. He draws extensively on Marx's analysis of society, particularly the distinction between the economic base and the superstructure. In Marxist terms, the economic base consists of the means of production—the material tools, technologies, and resources used in productive activity—and the relations of production, which are the social relationships that structure labor, ownership, and control over production. The superstructure, by contrast, comprises ideology, culture, politics, education, law, and other institutional forms that both reflect and reinforce the economic base. Through this lens, education is not a neutral process but a social institution that can either maintain or challenge the prevailing structure of power and inequality. Engels (1939) notes that social change may occur incrementally through reformation, which modifies elements of society without altering its fundamental structures, or through revolutionary transformation, which entails a complete restructuring of the social, economic, and ideological order. Freire's

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critical pedagogy aligns with the latter, recognizing that genuine liberation requires a radical rethinking of the social order and the relationships between oppressors and the oppressed.

For Freire, history is inseparable from the struggle between oppressors and the oppressed. In this historical framework, dehumanization is a central concept. Unlike ontological perspectives that view human beings as inherently fixed in their essence, Freire understands dehumanization as a historical and social phenomenon. It is produced through oppression, exploitation, and systemic injustice, and it affects both the oppressed and the oppressors. As he explains:

> *"Within history, in concrete, objective contexts, both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompletion."* (Freire, 2005, p. 43).

This assertion highlights the dual potential inherent in human existence: the capacity for both oppression and liberation. Humanization, according to Freire, is the vocation of the oppressed. It is the process by which they reclaim their dignity, agency, and full humanity in the face of persistent structural barriers. This process, however, is not automatic; it is constantly challenged by injustice, exploitation, and domination. At the same time, humanization is affirmed in the resistance and struggle of the oppressed to restore justice, assert freedom, and overcome alienation (Freire, 2005, pp. 43–44).

Dehumanization, conversely, distorts the humanity of both oppressors and oppressed. For the oppressed, it produces internalized oppression: they may accept their subjugation as natural, internalize the values of the dominant class, and reproduce systems of inequality even as they seek liberation. For the oppressors, dehumanization manifests as an inability to recognize others as fully human, which in turn diminishes their own humanity. Freire observes that the oppressor's worldview is conditioned by their possession and domination; they see themselves as "having" rather than "being," valuing accumulation and control over genuine human relationships. In this sense, oppression becomes a structural mechanism that perpetuates itself across generations unless challenged through critical consciousness and transformative education.

Freire's analysis of dehumanization also illuminates the paradoxical nature of liberation. The struggle for humanization is not merely about the emancipation of the oppressed; it also involves the potential transformation of the oppressor. Through the creation of conditions for dialogue, reflection, and critical action, both parties can move beyond the limiting dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed. Freire argues that the oppressed must become active agents in their own liberation while avoiding the trap of becoming sub-oppressors themselves—a risk that arises when the oppressed adopt the same patterns of domination internalized from their oppressors

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(Freire, 2005, p. 30). This insight underscores the need for a pedagogy that is attentive not only to structural inequality but also to the development of critical consciousness, ethical reflection, and social responsibility.

In Freire's framework, education plays a pivotal role in either perpetuating dehumanization or promoting liberation. Traditional forms of education, which he describes as the "banking model," treat students as passive repositories of knowledge. In this model, the teacher deposits information into the minds of students, who merely memorize and reproduce it without critical engagement. This approach mirrors and reinforces oppressive social structures by normalizing conformity, suppressing creativity, and discouraging critical reflection. By contrast, Freire advocates for "problem-posing education," a dialogical and participatory approach in which teachers and students engage as co-learners. Problem-posing education encourages learners to critically examine the world, recognize systemic injustice, and envision possibilities for transformation. It fosters humanization by promoting agency, dialogue, and conscious action, enabling both the oppressed and society at large to move toward more just and equitable conditions.

Through this lens, Freire situated education as a historical and political practice. It is not a neutral or purely technical activity; it is a medium through which oppression can be challenged and liberation pursued. Education becomes a site for critical reflection, ethical engagement, and collective action, where learners develop the capacity to transform both themselves and the social conditions in which they live. In this sense, Freire's pedagogy is simultaneously a theoretical framework, a moral project, and a practical guide for emancipatory education, demonstrating the enduring relevance of his ideas in contexts of social inequality, oppression, and the pursuit of humanization.

The Oppressor and the Oppressed

In Freire's framework, the oppressor is identified as the primary initiator of violence within society, though often acting unconsciously. The oppressor maintains power by transforming the world and other people into objects to control, thereby perpetuating a system of domination. This objectification is not merely a political or social act; it is also a moral and existential distortion, as the oppressor fails to recognize that their privileges—accumulated through control, exploitation, and systemic advantage—dehumanize both the oppressed and themselves. As Freire notes, the oppressor's sense of "being" is reduced to "having," creating a false identity grounded in possession rather than authentic human relationships (Freire, 2005, p. 44). The oppressor, in their egoistic pursuit of power and wealth, becomes trapped within the very system of domination they uphold, unable to perceive the ethical and social consequences of their actions.

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The oppressed, on the other hand, live within the reality of dehumanization, which shapes their consciousness and social existence. Their struggle for liberation is both a moral and historical imperative, aimed at recovering the humanity that has been denied to them. However, this struggle is fraught with complexity and paradox. In striving for freedom, the oppressed often internalize the values, norms, and attitudes of the oppressor, a process that may unintentionally reproduce forms of domination. In this sense, the oppressed risk becoming "sub-oppressors," perpetuating cycles of inequality and control even as they seek liberation (Freire, 2005, 30).

Freire emphasizes that education is the key site for interrupting this cycle of oppression and preventing the internalization of domination. A pedagogy committed to humanization develops the critical consciousness of learners, enabling them to perceive social injustices, understand their historical and structural roots, and engage in transformative action. Such education moves beyond mere knowledge transmission; it is dialogical, participatory, and reflective, encouraging learners to question oppressive structures and imagine alternative possibilities for social life. By fostering ethical awareness, self-reflection, and collective agency, education becomes a tool for cultivating liberation rather than reproducing domination.

Freire's analysis underscores that the liberation of the oppressed is inseparable from the moral transformation of the oppressor. True humanization involves a mutual recognition of humanity: the oppressed achieve freedom not by destroying the oppressor but by transforming society in ways that restore dignity and equality for all. In this way, Freire's pedagogy challenges both educators and learners to confront the ethical dimensions of knowledge, power, and social relations, making education a central practice in the pursuit of justice and human flourishing.

Education as Paradox: Domination or Liberation

For Paulo Freire, education is inherently paradoxical: it can either function as a tool of domination that reinforces existing power structures or serve as a vehicle for liberation and humanization. This dual potential is central to his critique of traditional schooling and his vision of transformative pedagogy. In its repressive form, education operates through what Freire famously terms the *banking model*. In this model, students are treated as passive containers into which teachers deposit information. The teacher assumes the position of absolute authority, while the learner is relegated to memorization and repetition, absorbing knowledge without critical engagement or reflection (Freire, 2005).

This process is, in fact, profoundly political. By discouraging questioning, reflection, and dialogue, the banking model mirrors and perpetuates hierarchical social relations, conditioning learners to accept authority and domination as natural. The classroom becomes a microcosm of the broader society, reproducing inequality and social control. Learners are not encouraged to interrogate the causes of oppression or imagine alternatives; rather, they internalize passivity and

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compliance. Freire argues that this model generates what he calls *narration sickness*, in which information is transmitted as a series of static truths, detached from the lived experiences and critical realities of the learners. As a result, students fail to develop critical consciousness and the capacity to transform both themselves and society.

In contrast, Freire advocates *problem-posing education*, a model designed to disrupt hierarchical structures and foster liberation. In problem-posing pedagogy, teachers and students engage as co-investigators of knowledge. Knowledge is not transmitted unidirectionally; it is jointly constructed through dialogue and inquiry. Students critically reflect on their experiences, identify contradictions in social reality, and question the underlying causes of oppression. Through this process, learners cultivate *conscientização*, or critical consciousness, the awareness of social, political, and economic structures that shape human experience. This awareness is not merely theoretical—it carries an ethical and practical imperative, motivating individuals to act toward social transformation.

The problem-posing model also reconceptualizes the relationship between teacher and student. Freire rejects the hierarchical binaries of traditional education, replacing them with the reciprocal roles of "teacher-student" and "student-teacher." In this framework, the teacher learns in the process of teaching, while the student teaches in the process of learning. Dialogue becomes the medium through which knowledge is both created and applied. The classroom thus emerges as a space of praxis, where theory and action are intertwined and learning is inseparable from the struggle for humanization and social justice.

Freire's conception of education as paradoxical also underscores its ethical dimension. While the banking model enforces domination, problem-posing education cultivates autonomy, agency, and responsibility. It prepares learners not merely to adapt to existing social conditions but to challenge and transform them. Education becomes a moral and political act, demanding critical engagement with reality and the courage to envision alternatives to oppressive structures. In this sense, Freire situates education at the heart of historical struggle: it is both a reflection of the social order and a potential catalyst for its radical transformation.

Rizal's Philosophy of Education

The philosophy of education of José Rizal occupies a unique and underexplored place in Philippine intellectual history. While he is widely venerated as the foremost nationalist, his sustained reflections on education—embedded in his novels, essays, letters, and lived praxis—reveal a deeper pedagogical vision that extends beyond mere reformism. Rizal consistently recognized education as both a site of oppression and a potential vehicle for emancipation. Colonial schools, dominated by clerical and authoritarian control, functioned less to cultivate civic consciousness than to reproduce ignorance, passivity, and subservience. Yet for Rizal, the

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same institution, once liberated from such constraints, could become the foundation of national regeneration and self-determination.

Despite its significance, scholarship on Rizal's philosophy of education remains relatively sparse and fragmented. Early works such as Osias (1921) highlighted his advocacy for public and popular education, while later studies, notably Quibuyen (2011), underscored his practical pedagogy and community-building in Dapitan. More recent scholarship, including Roman, Reyes, Valencia, and Tantengco (2014), has interpreted Rizal's thought through the pragmatist concept of sociality, emphasizing the school as an organon for forming socially responsible citizens. These studies, however, often privilege the pragmatic and civic dimensions of his pedagogy while leaving underexamined its philosophical foundations—its epistemological, ethical, and political premises. Addressing this gap requires situating Rizal's educational thought within the broader discourse of liberation, morality, and nation-building.

As a point of departure, this paper turns to a pivotal passage from Chapter 33 of *Noli Me Tangere*: "The school is the base of the society; the school is the book wherein is written the future of the people! Show us the school and we will show you the kind of people there are" (Rizal, 1996). In this statement, Rizal encapsulates his conviction that education is both theoretical principle and practical program: the school is not simply a venue for instruction but the very ground upon which society's future is inscribed. It is this conviction that animates Rizal's dual role as critic and reformer. On the one hand, through episodes like the "Adventures of the Schoolmaster" in *Noli Me Tangere* and the "Class in Physics" in *El Filibusterismo*, he dramatized the oppressive character of colonial pedagogy. On the other hand, through his reforms in Dapitan, he modeled the possibility of a liberating and socially engaged education rooted in science, civic virtue, and moral responsibility.

Rizal's critique of late nineteenth-century Philippine education is incisively rendered in Chapter 19 of *Noli Me Tangere*, "The Adventures of the Schoolmaster." The colonial curriculum, reduced to the so-called "Four R's"—Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, and Religion—was overwhelmingly dominated by the latter. As the schoolmaster laments, *"In the majority of schools the books are Spanish, except the Catechism in Tagalog, which varies according to the religious orders… these books are usually novenas, triduums"* (Rizal, 1996, 111). Education, thus subordinated to clerical control, functioned less as a means of civic and intellectual development than as an instrument of religious conformity. Far from cultivating critical inquiry, the system entrenched passivity, ignorance, and subservience, molding the young not into citizens but into docile subjects.

Rizal does not portray the teacher as wholly passive within this oppressive order. With scarce resources but determined resolve, the schoolmaster attempts a series of reforms in both method and content. He introduces a communicative approach to Spanish, emphasizing practical

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phrases and names rather than rigid grammatical drills, producing tangible progress among the pupils. Such progress, however, provokes immediate resistance. The parish priest ridicules him: *"Don't use borrowed clothing with me. Be content to speak in your own language and don't spoil Spanish. It is not for the likes of you"* (Rizal, 1996, 107). Behind this rebuke lay not only linguistic prejudice but the deliberate use of Spanish as a tool of exclusion, reinforcing colonial hierarchy and cultural domination.

Undeterred, the teacher undertakes self-study, borrowing books from Pilosopo Tasyo and refining his pedagogy. He boldly abolishes corporal punishment, convinced that flogging instills only fear, resentment, and indifference rather than true discipline and compassion. In its place, he cultivates an environment animated by curiosity and joy. Attendance improves, and pupils participate eagerly. Yet this success again invites hostility. The curate, invoking the dictum that "learning enters with blood," pressures parents to demand the restoration of corporal punishment. Under clerical duress, the teacher relents, and the outcome is devastating: attendance collapses, motivation wanes, and his most promising pupils abandon their studies. The episode demonstrates the fragility of reform under ecclesiastical power and the efficiency with which fear extinguishes the will to learn.

The schoolmaster continues to experiment—teaching in Tagalog, translating Spanish texts, integrating practical manuals such as *Urbanidad de Hortensio y Feliza* and Father Barranera's *Historia de Filipinas*, and even innovatively turning the tiled floor into maps for geography lessons. Yet each initiative is thwarted by clerical interference. The school thus emerges as a battleground where genuine reform is systematically stifled in the name of orthodoxy. Finally, in despair, the teacher confesses to Ibarra:

> *"In the meantime, then, I was working for the children to become like parrots who could recite from memory so many things of which they understood not a single word... Thus we will die and, thus, will proceed those still to be born! And in Europe, they speak of Progress!"* (Rizal, 1996, 111).

Through this testimony, Rizal underscores the tragic predicament of colonial teachers: their sincere efforts at reform—abolishing corporal punishment, fostering joy in learning, introducing vernacular instruction, and cultivating civic knowledge—were repeatedly thwarted by clerical authority and by a pedagogy of rote memorization. For Rizal, the "adventures" of the schoolmaster were not heroic exploits but tragic struggles, symbolizing the impossibility of authentic reform within a system designed to perpetuate ignorance.

This critique is deepened in *El Filibusterismo* (Rizal, 2009), particularly in Chapter 12, "The Class in Physics." Here Rizal shifts the lens from the rural school to the university classroom,

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illustrating how colonial pedagogy stifled higher learning. The professor's disdainful remark—*"Since you come here to waste time and not to learn, let us lose it completely, and it is I who will waste it. We shall not have class today"* (Rizal, 1996)—captures the paradox of colonial education: what was meant to foster knowledge is reduced to an arbitrary performance of authority and humiliation.

Instruction in physics, ostensibly a science of inquiry and experiment, is transformed into rote recitation where correctness depends not on reasoning but on obedience. Placido Penitente's hesitation to answer is construed as insubordination, collapsing intellectual uncertainty into moral fault. The pedagogy of fear cultivates docility, not curiosity, silencing initiative and suppressing thought. The professor's absolute authority, unmediated by scientific rigor, exposes how colonial instruction functioned less to transmit knowledge than to reproduce hierarchy—between teacher and student, Spaniard and Filipino. By stripping science of its critical character, the system ensured dependence and alienation rather than empowerment.

Placido's eventual disillusionment and decision to abandon his studies signify not merely personal despair but the futility of pursuing authentic education under a system designed to sustain ignorance. In Rizal's view, the colonial classroom was a microcosm of the wider social order: hierarchical, authoritarian, and antithetical to critical agency.

Taken together, the "Adventures of the Schoolmaster" in *Noli* and the "Class in Physics" in *Fili* provide a coherent and complementary critique of colonial education. Both episodes dramatize how clerical and colonial authority systematically undermined reform and weaponized pedagogy as an instrument of domination. Both also reveal Rizal's educational philosophy: a vision of schools emancipated from ecclesiastical control, grounded in rational inquiry, scientific method, civic formation, and above all, respect for the learner's dignity.

For Rizal, true national progress depended upon such an emancipatory education. Without it, the youth could only be molded into compliant subjects; with it, they could be transformed into citizens capable of freedom, critical thought, and collective self-determination.

The 19th Century Philippines

After depicting the Philippine educational landscape of the 19th century through the metaphors in *Noli Me Tangere*, we can now turn to Rizal's broader portrayal of Philippine society. For Rizal, the realities of the colonial classroom reflected the larger social structure of the Philippines under Spanish rule: a hierarchy marked by oppression, inequality, and the dominance of colonial and clerical powers. His more mature depiction of this social order emerges vividly in *El Filibusterismo* (Rizal, 2009), particularly through the metaphor of the *Bapor Tabo*.

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In Chapter 1, Rizal presents the *Bapor Tabo* as an allegory for Philippine society itself—bulky, defective, and stagnant, yet undeniably real. The ship's captain symbolizes the governor-general, bound by the conflicting demands of the friars and powerful elites. The passengers are divided into two groups, representing the rigid stratification of colonial society. The upper deck, with its comfort and luxury, is occupied by friars, Spaniards, and peninsulares—those who enjoyed privilege and authority. By contrast, the lower deck houses the indios, Chinese, and Filipino students, cramped and enduring the hardships of servitude. Through this imagery, Rizal dramatizes how Philippine society was run not by the official state, but by friars and "illustrious personages," whose control forced the captain—and thus governance itself—"to stop, go astern, or half-speed ahead."

This social allegory highlights the dual realities of colonial life: the leisurely affluence of the elite, shaded by awnings and puffing cigars, and the silent suffering of the majority. The indios, in particular, are portrayed as docile and resigned, lowering their brows in quiet submission rather than resisting abuses. Rizal's critique was not only descriptive but diagnostic: such passivity, compounded by systemic oppression, prevented genuine progress.

From this analysis of social structure, two pathways for change emerged in the late 19th century: reform and revolution. Reformists, largely associated with the Propaganda Movement, sought Hispanization and assimilation, calling for (1) equality between indios and Spaniards, (2) recognition of the Philippines as a province of Spain, (3) representation in the Cortes, (4) the adoption of Spanish as the medium of instruction, and (5) the secularization of the clergy. When hopes for assimilation proved futile, revolutionaries—most notably the Katipunan under Andres Bonifacio—embraced armed struggle to overthrow Spanish rule and establish an independent Filipino nation (Agoncillo, 1974; Constantino, 1991).

Traditionally, Rizal has been labelled as an assimilationist. Yet scholars such as Schumacher, Quibuyen (1999), and San Juan (2011) have challenged this reading, arguing that Rizal's nationalism must be understood in two developmental phases. The young Rizal, visible in his pre-1887 writings and *Noli Me Tangere*, still placed his hopes in reform. The matured Rizal, however, especially through his conflicts with Marcelo H. del Pilar, his founding of *La Liga Filipina*, and the pages of *El Filibusterismo*, articulated a more radical vision.

This ideological shift is most vividly dramatized in Chapter 7 of *El Filibusterismo* through the dialogue between Basilio and Simoun. Basilio embodies the reformist aspirations of the Propaganda Movement, seeking gradual change through education, Hispanization, and assimilation. Simoun, by contrast, personifies the revolutionary path, advocating the overthrow of colonial rule through armed struggle. In their exchange, Simoun denounces the reformists' demand for assimilation as a betrayal of national identity:

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> "What will you be in the future? A people without character, a nation without liberty—everything you have will be borrowed, even your very defects… you wish to add one more language to the forty-odd that are spoken in the islands, so that you may understand one another less and less." (Rizal, 2009, p. 52)

For Simoun, the call for assimilation is tantamount to cultural suicide, a consecration of tyranny disguised as progress. To him, the reformists' dream of Hispanization was nothing more than the internalization of colonial domination—an attempt to erase Filipino identity and replace it with a borrowed culture that could never truly belong to the people. Such an aspiration, he argues, strips the nation of its character, leaving it perpetually dependent and incapable of authentic self-determination. By pleading for acceptance as a province of Spain, Filipinos were, in his view, surrendering the possibility of genuine nationhood and resigning themselves to permanent subordination. Instead of aspiring to be absorbed into the colonial body, Filipinos, Simoun insists, must cultivate the ambition to become an independent nation, capable of charting its own destiny and developing its own character free from foreign tutelage.

This revolutionary fervor reaches its dramatic climax in Chapter 33 of *El Filibusterismo*, where Simoun contends that centuries of accumulated injustice, oppression, and repressed resentment cannot remain silent forever. Eventually, the weight of suffering, carried across generations, must find its outlet in an eruption of violence. To Simoun, this violent upheaval is not simply an impulsive act of rage but the inevitable consequence of structural injustice that has left the masses with no alternative. He proclaims:

> "It's the last resort of the weak, force against force, violence against violence." (Rizal, 2009, p. 279)

In this moment, revolution is reframed not as an act of barbarism but as a radical purification—a "holiness" that seeks to sweep away the corrupt structures of tyranny. Violence, for Simoun, is envisioned as a regenerative force, a necessary rupture that would cleanse the nation of its chains and allow a new generation to reconstruct society on foundations of freedom and dignity. It is, in his radical imagination, the only language the oppressors can understand, a desperate but righteous response to centuries of exploitation. Revolution becomes not merely a political option but a moral imperative, the decisive act through which a broken people could reclaim their agency and reconstitute themselves as a nation.

Rizal complicates this radical position in the novel's conclusion. In Simoun's final dialogue with Padre Florentino, he issues a caution against revolutions fueled merely by vengeance and hatred. He warns that violence, if not guided by virtue, produces only "monsters and criminals" (Rizal, 2009, p. 320). True national redemption, Rizal argues, requires not only the attainment of political independence but also the cultivation of civic virtue, sacrifice, and moral

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integrity. Without such moral regeneration, independence risks degenerating into another cycle of tyranny:

> "What is the use of independence, if the slaves of today will be the tyrants of tomorrow?" (Rizal, 2009, p. 322)

This dialectical movement—from reform to revolution, and finally to the insistence on moral transformation—captures the essence of Rizal's mature philosophy. For him, liberation was inseparable from ethical responsibility, and the struggle for national independence could not be sustained without the inner emancipation of the people through education and the formation of character.

Here lies the heart of Rizal's mature philosophy: the conviction that the transformation of the Filipino people must begin not with violence or the mere transfer of power, but with education and moral formation. As Gripaldo (2000) observes, Rizal understood education as a redemptive and liberating force, one that aimed to produce "enlightened human beings with dignity and responsibility," capable of recognizing their rights and rejecting both oppression and complicity in the oppression of others. For Rizal, political independence was only meaningful if it was anchored in inner freedom—the liberty that arises when individuals cultivate intelligence, virtue, and justice within themselves. Without this interior emancipation, national freedom risked degenerating into another cycle of tyranny.

Rizal's philosophy of education is thus best understood through the dialectics of oppression. On the one hand, colonial domination perpetuated ignorance, servility, and dependence, conditions that reproduced the subjugation of the Filipino people. On the other hand, education—properly conceived—could disrupt this cycle by awakening critical consciousness, instilling civic virtue, and fostering the capacity for collective self-determination. In *El Filibusterismo*, Rizal dramatized this dialectic by exposing how colonial schools, far from being neutral spaces of learning, functioned as instruments of control and cultural subordination. Reform, therefore, could not be reduced to access to schools alone; it required transforming education into a vehicle of liberation rather than domination.

For Rizal, reform without justice was futile, and revolution without virtue was self-defeating. His critique of colonial oppression went hand in hand with his insistence on moral regeneration, for he recognized that oppression, if not critically overcome, reproduces itself in the very structure of liberation—today's oppressed may indeed become tomorrow's oppressors. Thus, only through the regeneration of the Filipino people—through a pedagogy that unites knowledge with ethical responsibility—could a new society truly emerge. In this sense, Rizal's philosophy of education anticipates the central insight of critical pedagogy: that emancipation

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requires not only the dismantling of oppressive structures but also the cultivation of subjects capable of living out the ideals of freedom, justice, and responsibility.

Praxis of Rizal

After articulating Rizal's philosophical view of education through the metaphors in his novels, it becomes equally vital to turn to his lived practice. This shift is crucial, for it illuminates the long-standing controversy surrounding Rizal's revolutionary stance. As previously noted, only a few scholars contend that Rizal's authentic revolutionary orientation cannot be measured solely by his repudiation of armed insurrection. Instead, it must be discerned in the broader framework of his praxis—his collectivist orientation, his scientific creativity, and his civic initiatives during his exile in Dapitan. Praxis, understood here as the dialectic of theory and practice, provides the key to situating Rizal not merely as a nationalist intellectual but as an educator whose life embodied the very principles he espoused. His thought, expressed in the language of critique and possibility in the *Noli* and *Fili*, found concrete expression in his community-building efforts and pedagogical experiments in Dapitan. It is in this synthesis of reflection and action that Rizal emerges most clearly as a teacher: one who did not simply theorize education as an instrument of emancipation, but actively enacted it, modeling a pedagogy grounded in science, civic responsibility, and moral formation.

Quibuyen (2011) contends that Rizal's four years in Dapitan constitute the most essential period of his life, for in this span he demonstrated that his vision of a new society was not merely a utopian dream but a concrete alternative for emancipatory practice. In Dapitan, Rizal modeled a progressive society sustained by education, scientific inquiry, social commerce, and community development. These years thus represent not only his most productive period but also his enduring legacy.

Rizal was exiled to Dapitan shortly after returning to the Philippines, following the discovery of his newly founded organization, *La Liga Filipina*. Exile did not render him futile or inactive; rather, as Quibuyen describes, "instead of returning to the fold like the prodigal son, Rizal ended up transforming his adopted town toward his radical vision of human development and social justice." In Dapitan, Rizal embodied this vision by serving simultaneously as a medical doctor, town planner, school founder, community engineer, scientist, social worker, and cooperative organizer.

Despite his confinement as a deportee, Rizal integrated himself fully into the life of the community. In a letter to Adolph Meyer in 1893, he wrote: *"As I am only here as a deportee, I am not free to stroll everywhere as I please… Nevertheless, I shall do all that I can."* True to this resolve, Rizal transformed his idle moments into opportunities to forge a community aligned with his ideals.

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As a trained medical practitioner, he first served as the community doctor, offering free medical assistance to locals, especially the poor. With limited access to modern medicine, he turned to herbal and traditional healing as alternatives. At his Talisay residence, he built two nipa houses—*Casas de Salud*—that served as convalescent spaces for in-patients.

Beyond medicine, Rizal also founded a secular school devoted to science and history. According to Quibuyen, it functioned as both a primary and secondary school. This *Talisay school* embodied the utopian pedagogical imagination of the schoolmaster in *Noli Me Tangere*. Modeled after the German *gymnasium*, it rejected corporal punishment and emphasized holistic formation. Bantug (2008) recounts that Rizal: Rizal designed his own teaching materials and emphasized practical, hands-on learning over textbook study. Classes were held in his house or a hillside kiosko, with students sitting freely while he often taught from a hammock. Periodic exams, sometimes supervised by outsiders, recognized high-achieving students with practical rewards such as books, pens, or tools. This pedagogy is corroborated by memorabilia preserved in the Rizal Museum in Dapitan and in Fort Santiago, including blackboards, makeshift teaching aids, and zoological specimens named after him.

Rizal also undertook projects for public health and sanitation. He drained swamps and marshes to curb diseases, built a brick-and-stone water system reinforced with seashells, and organized collective labor among his students and townsfolk. He designed a coconut-oil street lighting system and constructed dams and aqueducts using recycled roof tiles, and corals. His efforts extended to economic life as well, when he initiated a cooperative that centralized local production to ensure fairness in commerce.

The very reforms Rizal had imagined in Chapter 19 of *Noli Me Tangere*—abolishing corporal punishment, fostering joy in learning, using the vernacular, translating texts, integrating practical knowledge, and cultivating civic responsibility—were the same reforms he enacted in Dapitan. In this sense, the schoolmaster's tragic struggle for reform in the novel found its redemption in Rizal's own practice. Where the fictional teacher's innovations were thwarted by clerical authority, Rizal's exile provided the relative freedom to implement them. His pedagogy of curiosity, critical thinking, and social responsibility was no longer just a narrative of the language of critique of colonial education but a lived experiment and a language of possibility in emancipatory practice.

Rizal expanded education into the realm of community development. With the assistance of his students, he conducted a detailed local mapping and scientific profiling project, surveying natural resources, and settlements. These maps not only provided scientific data but also helped the community plan for agriculture, sanitation, and public works. Rizal's school thus became a laboratory of applied science, where learning was inseparable from improving the collective life of the community. This fusion of classroom instruction with civic engagement reflected his

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conviction that education must be oriented toward social transformation, not confined to abstract knowledge.

All these undertakings were possible only because of Rizal's participatory approach. He mobilized the townsfolk of Dapitan into a cooperative community grounded in his ideals of sociality—promoting collective orientation, scientific creativity, and social entrepreneurship. In this sense, Rizal's exile was not a period of defeat but rather the fullest expression of his emancipatory praxis and his radical vision for Filipino nationhood. By embodying in practice the reforms he once articulated in fiction, Rizal demonstrated that education, as both critique and possibility, could indeed function as the foundation of liberation.

Conclusion: Traces of Critical Pedagogy in Rizal's Philosophy of Education

The traces of critical pedagogy in Rizal's philosophy of education can be discerned most clearly in the way he combined a radical critique of colonial society with a praxis that opened possibilities for emancipation. On the structural level, Rizal unveiled how the colonial order—hierarchical, clerical, and racial—shaped the very foundations of the educational system. His allegories, such as the *Bapor Tabo*, dramatize how social hierarchy and authoritarian control were replicated in the everyday structures of knowledge and power. Education, in his view, did not exist in isolation but functioned as a mirror of society: a means of reproducing domination when controlled by the powerful, or a foundation of liberation when reclaimed by the people.

This language of critique is sharpened in his portrayals of classroom life. In *Noli Me Tangere*, the frustrated schoolmaster represents the impossibility of reform under clerical domination. His attempts to humanize learning—through vernacular instruction, the abolition of corporal punishment, and the use of practical texts—were systematically suppressed by the curate, reducing education to memorized catechism and obedience. Likewise, in *El Filibusterismo's* "Class in Physics," Rizal depicts a pedagogy of humiliation, where the professor exercises authority not through rational inquiry but through ridicule, coercion, and arbitrary questioning. Here the classroom becomes a microcosm of colonial oppression, where curiosity is punished, silence enforced, and knowledge distorted into an instrument of subjugation. In these depictions, Rizal offers what Freire would later call the language of critique: an unmasking of the school as an ideological apparatus that dehumanizes learners and sustains oppressive structures.

Rizal's vision does not end in despair. His life and work also embody a language of possibility, where education becomes a site of emancipation rather than domination. This is most evident in his Dapitan exile, where he modeled a community school grounded in science, civic virtue, and collective responsibility. Integrating classroom instruction with agriculture, medicine, and cooperative labor, Rizal redefined education as a holistic process that cultivated both intellect and citizenship. This praxis resonates with Freire's conviction that the oppressed must engage in

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education that nurtures critical consciousness, so that "the slaves of today will not be the tyrants of tomorrow." In Rizal's Dapitan, education was no longer an abstract pursuit but a lived experience of liberation through shared work, inquiry, and social transformation.

In this synthesis of critique and possibility—unveiled in his novels and embodied in his exile—we locate the traces of critical pedagogy in Rizal's philosophy of education. Long before Freire, Rizal had already recognized that education could either perpetuate oppression or serve as a practice of freedom. He anticipated the essential tasks of critical pedagogy: to unmask domination, to cultivate critical reflection, and to reimagine education as a collective endeavor for humanization. Rizal, therefore, was not simply an ilustrado reformist, but a proto-critical pedagogue whose thought and praxis foreshadowed later emancipatory theories of education.

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