

Binary Dualism or Complementarity? Rethinking the Teacher-Learner Relationship in Paulo Freire's Dialogical Education

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Saheed Anuoluwapo Agunbiade*Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Art, Lagos State University, Nigeria* <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9493-8384>**Abstract**

The logical underpinnings of learner-teacher relationships in Paulo Freire's idea of education remain a perennial issue in the philosophy of education. Freire, through his critique of the traditional "banking model" of education, proposes a dialogical approach in which the student-teacher relationship is restructured on the basis of mutual recognition and co-participation. In this framework, both students and teachers are granted equal rights to engage in critical dialogue, challenging the traditional hierarchy that privileges the teacher's authority over the passivity of the student. While Freire's model is often seen as an alternative that empowers the learner, a fundamental question arises: Does his framework still operate within a binary logic that merely inverts roles or does it transcend such oppositions altogether? This study examines the underlying logical underpinnings of Freire's dialogical approach to education. Through conceptual analysis and critical methods, it argues that the logic of Freire's educational philosophy is not rooted in binary opposition but rather in complementarity, a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in which both teachers and learners actively contribute to the co-construction of knowledge and the development of critical consciousness. More-so, it argues that Freire does not seek to erase the role of the teacher, but to transform it from one of authority and imposition to one of facilitation and shared enquiry; the teacher remains a guide, while the learner becomes an active agent in the learning process. Together, they participated in mutual growth, reflection, and liberation. Future research may explore how this logic of complementarity can be further systematised through indigenous frameworks, such as Ezumezu logic, thereby extending the global relevance of Freirean pedagogy.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Binary Dualism, Complementarity, Dialogical Education, Teacher-Learner Relationship.

Introduction

The teacher-learner relationship is one of the most fundamental issues in the philosophy of education. It reflects broader ontological and epistemological assumptions about human beings, authority, knowledge, and aims of education. Throughout history, the dominant models of education have often been shaped by binary oppositions that rigidly separate and hierarchise the roles of teachers and students. In such frameworks, the teacher is conceptualised as the active subject, possessor, and transmitter of knowledge, while the student is construed as the passive object, receiver, and consumer of knowledge (Burbules, 1993). This model has persisted across various philosophical traditions and historical epochs, from ancient Greece to modern industrial education systems. However, contemporary critiques, most notably those advanced by Paulo Freire, have sought to challenge these binary constructions and offer more dialogue and participatory alternatives.

Historically, the binary teacher-learner dynamic is traceable to the philosophical legacy of thinkers such as Plato, who conceptualised education as the process of guiding the ignorant toward truth. In dialogues such as

“Meno” and “The Republic”, Plato uses the character of Socrates to exemplify the role of the philosopher as midwife to knowledge, drawing it out of the learner through questioning, yet implicitly assuming the superior epistemic position of the teacher (Plato, 2007). While Socratic dialogue may appear interactive, it remains anchored in the assumption that the teacher knows what the student does not, reinforcing a binary distinction between knower and unknowing. This foundational dogma has influenced Western educational thought for centuries, sustaining a logic in which authority and knowledge are monopolised by the teacher, and the student’s role is largely receptive. During the Middle Ages, education in Europe became further institutionalized within the Church and shaped by theological orthodoxy. Here, the teacher functioned as the transmitter of divine truth, and education was oriented toward doctrinal conformity rather than critical enquiry (Ozmon & Craver, 2011). This further entrenched binary dualism, reinforcing the hierarchical structures of authority and obedience. The student was expected to absorb, not interrogate, and the teacher’s authority was underwritten by divine sanctions, rather than mutual understanding. The Enlightenment era brought new epistemological frameworks that emphasised rationality, individualism, and universal knowledge. However, even with its emphasis on reason and human perfectibility, the Enlightenment did little to dislodge the binary logic of education. Scholars such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant continued to conceptualise education as the cultivation of reason within a hierarchical structure. Locke’s view of the mind as a “blank slate” placed the learner in a position of deficiency to be filled by the teacher’s superior knowledge (Locke, 2000). Kant, also, stressed the need for discipline and obedience in early education, maintaining the teacher’s role as a moral and rational guide (Kant, 2008).

By the 19th century, industrial capitalism and bureaucratic rationality had transformed education into a formalised system focused on discipline, efficiency, and standardisation. The emergence of public schooling further institutionalized the hierarchical teacher-student binary, often modeling the classroom on the factory: teachers assumed roles of authority and surveillance, and students

were expected to conform, obey, and reproduce knowledge (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). This logic was carried into the 20th century and remains visible today in teacher-centered pedagogies, examination-driven curricula, and the emphasis on standardized outcomes. The early 20th century saw challenges to this model, notably in John Dewey’s work, which called for a more democratic and experiential approach to education. Dewey (1997) emphasized the active role of the learner and proposed that teachers should guide rather than dictate, facilitating growth through experience. While Dewey moved toward a more participatory understanding of the teacher-learner relationship, some critics argue that he did not fully deconstruct the binary opposition but instead reformed it within the framework of democratic pragmatism; he places great emphasis on the learner’s personal experience as the foundation of education. While this promotes student-centered learning, it can inadvertently privilege individualism at the expense of community values or collective cultural identities, especially in non-Western contexts. (Biesta, 2011). Despite extensive scholarship on Paulo Freire’s pedagogy, most studies have concentrated on its political, ethical, and emancipatory dimensions. However, little attention has been paid to the underlying logical structure that shapes the teacher-learner relationship in his dialogical model. Specifically, the question remains as to whether Freire’s approach merely inverts the traditional teacher-student hierarchy or transcends binary logic altogether. This study addresses this gap by analysing Freire’s educational model through a conceptual analysis and critical methods. The former is used to explain the theories, while the latter is used to identify the differences and relationship between binary dualism and complementarity in order to show the underlying logical structure of Freire’s dialogical education. In addition, this paper used *ezumezu* logic as a theoretical framework to justify the logical strive of Freire’s theory.

Therefore, this study examines whether Freire’s conception of learner-teacher dynamics promotes a student-centred or teacher-centred model of education. To address this issue, the paper will be divided into four parts. The first part analyses the logic of traditional education, focusing on the role

of binary opposition as an underlying principle in educational discourse. The second part examines Freire's arguments concerning the learner-teacher relationship and broader educational theory. The third section introduces the logic of complementarity as an alternative to binary dualism. The final section discusses how Freire's dialogical education reflects elements of logical complementarity; it examines the connection between his philosophy and the logic of complementarity.

The Logic of Traditional Education: Binary Opposition in Educational Discourse

Historically, the Logic of traditional education in philosophy can be traced back to Greek philosophy. Angulu Onwuejeogwu (1997: 74–5) affirms this view when he asserts that “this concept has its root in Greek philosophy from which Western anthropology and sociology derive their conceptual stimuli.” The principle is traced to Aristotle's philosophy in the Socratic era, where he talked about the logic of binary opposition. Binary opposition categorises concepts into strict dualism, such as good/evil, male/female, truth/falsehood, and particularly relevant to this discussion, individual/community. These dichotomies create rigid divisions, reinforced by the law of excluded middle, which asserts that a proposition is either true or false, with no middle ground. Similarly, Dismar Masolo (1994: 249) affirms that : “A and –A cannot be both true of the same thing, at the same time, and under the same situation.” Hence, The Western tradition often operates on a dualistic mode of thinking, which is reinforced by the law of excluded middle; a principle that maintains that, between two contradictory claims, only one can be true while the other must be false, leaving no space for a middle ground. This binary mode of thinking has significantly influenced not only metaphysics and epistemology but also philosophical discourse in education (Agunbiade, 2025a:81-83).

The origin of the teacher-student binary can be traced to Socrates, who, through the elenchus (dialectical questioning), positioned himself as a midwife of knowledge. Although he professed ignorance, Socrates remained the initiator, controller, and evaluator of dialogue. In Meno, he argues that:

“I do not teach, I only question.” However, the structure of his dialogue reflects asymmetrical power dynamics. The student is led to “recollect” knowledge under the guidance of the master; a subtle form of control. Platonic dialogues reinforced this structure, suggesting that the learner lacks knowledge and must ascend through levels of understanding guided by the philosopher. In “The Republic”, Book VII, Plato presents “the Allegory of the Cave”, which vividly portrays the teacher-student relationship as a journey from ignorance to enlightenment. He asserts that: “The teacher must drag the prisoner out of the cave... up the steep path into the light of the sun, which is the truth” (Republic, 514–520). Here, the teacher is likened to a liberator who forcibly removes the student from illusion. The learner is passive, is blinded by ignorance, and relies on the teacher's vision.

However, Aristotle departed from Plato's metaphysical idealism but retained hierarchical relationships in his pedagogy. In his “Nicomachean Ethics”, he asserted: “The teacher is to the student as the mature is to the immature.” For Aristotle, the rational capacities of the teacher justified their position of authority. By contrast, the student was an incompletely rational being. This naturalised hierarchy between teachers and learners links age, knowledge, and authority. Education thus became a process of imposing order from above, rather than constructing meaning together. Nonetheless, During the Middle Ages, scholasticism entrenched the teacher-student binary through rigid, doctrinal teaching. The university teacher was seen as a transmitter of sacred truths, not as a co-enquirer. The authority of Aristotle and the Church Fathers made questioning almost sacrilegious. Thomas Aquinas exemplified this, integrating theology and philosophy into a rigid hierarchy of knowledge. In this system, the teacher possessed revealed truth, and the student's role was memorization and obedience. He argues that :

If everyone were willing to believe only those things that they might know with certitude, they would not be able to live in this world. ... Therefore it is necessary that human beings believe someone about those things which they cannot know perfectly by themselves (Jenkins, J., 2000).

The dichotomy reached its peak: the teacher embodied divine authority, and the student was reduced to a compliant receptacle of doctrine. The Enlightenment marked a significant shift with the valorization of reason and the individual. However, this shift ironically reinforced binary thinking. Teachers became the agents of rationality, tasked with cultivating reason in the student.

René Descartes' philosophy marked a crucial departure from medieval scholasticism by centering on the individual's reason as the foundation of knowledge. His famous declaration, *Cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"), emphasised the autonomy of the thinking subject as the only indubitable knowledge. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes reflects on the subject's foundational role in the acquisition of knowledge, asserting: "I think, therefore I am." (Descartes, 1641: 1). In the context of education, this autonomous, self-affirming subject became the model for teachers as epistemic agents who guide learners toward rationality. Knowledge was thus conceived as objective, a set of facts that could be imparted by a knowledgeable teacher (the epistemic subject) to a passive student (the epistemic object). Descartes' emphasis on reason and self-knowledge placed the teacher as the active agent, and the student as the passive recipient of rational principles. This view perpetuated the teacher-student binary where the teacher shapes the learner's intellectual development.

On the part of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, particularly in his seminal work "*Émile*", and "*On Education* (1762)", he was one of the first to radically challenge traditional pedagogical methods. Rousseau rejected the authoritative, didactic model of teaching and instead emphasized the importance of natural education that follows the child's innate developmental stages. According to Rousseau, the teacher's role is not to impose knowledge upon the learner but to guide the learner in discovering knowledge through personal experience and interaction with the world around them. In Rousseau's words: "The teacher must not teach him the truth, but lead him to find it for himself" (Rousseau, 1762: 34). This assertion reflects Rousseau's emphasis on experiential learning over rote memorization or instruction. In addition, Rousseau argued that education should

follow the natural development of the child, allowing the learner to discover truths independently. The binary opposition between teacher and student begins to soften, as the teacher is no longer the authoritative figure imparting knowledge but a facilitator of learning. However, Rousseau still recognises the teacher as a guiding figure who shapes the environment and directs the learner's journey, which retains a certain level of authority. He avers that: "Let the curb that restrains him be force, not authority. If there is something he should not do, do not forbid him, but prevent him without explanation or reasoning" (Rousseau, 1979). This approach suggests that the teacher's role is to design situations where the child learns through experience, guiding them indirectly rather than through direct instruction.

Furthermore, Rousseau advises that the teacher should not simply provide knowledge but should create conditions for the child to discover truths independently: "The tutor must not lay down precepts, he must let them be discovered." These arguments illustrate that while Rousseau challenges the traditional teacher-student hierarchy, he still assigns the teacher a significant role in shaping the educational environment and guiding learner development.

Similarly, John Dewey, an American philosopher and educator, played a central role in the development of progressive education during the early 20th century. Dewey rejected the traditional, authoritarian model of education that emphasized passive learning and rote memorization. He argued for experiential learning, where students engage with real-world problems and learn through active participation rather than the passive reception of knowledge. Dewey's famous assertion encapsulates his educational philosophy: "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself" (Dewey, 1997: 43).

Dewey's idea was that learning is an ongoing, dynamic process, deeply connected to the real world. In his ideal classroom, students and teachers worked collaboratively in a democratic environment, with the teacher serving as a facilitator of learning rather than an authoritarian figure. Dewey envisioned classrooms in which students had the freedom to explore, experiment, and engage with ideas critically

and creatively. However, despite his focus on the learner's active role in the educational process, Dewey still maintained the teacher's authority within the classroom. While the teacher is no longer a mere transmitter of knowledge, Dewey's model still requires the teacher to set the stage for experiential learning, create the right environment, and guide the learning process. As Dewey argues:

The teacher is not a mere transmitter of knowledge; their function is to provide the conditions and the tools that will allow the learner to discover and experience knowledge themselves (Dewey, 1997:87).

This assertion reveals that Dewey, while advocating for a more democratic, student-centered approach, does not completely discard the binary opposition. The teacher remains a necessary figure in organizing the learning environment, ensuring that learning objectives are met, and guiding students through the process of discovery. The hierarchy of teacher as facilitator still exists in a sense, even though the power dynamic is more collaborative than authoritarian. Therefore, across historical epochs, from Socrates to Dewey, the teacher-student binary has persisted in various forms. Whether as transmitter, guide, or facilitator, the teacher remains structurally privileged. This enduring logic reflects a deeper philosophical issue: the grip of binary thinking on Western education. The dualism of teacher/learner mirrors other metaphysical binaries, reason/emotion, subject/object, knower/known, suggesting that to change educational models, one must change the logic that under girds them. This raises urgent philosophical questions: Must education always operate within a binary framework? Is the learner always subordinated to the epistemic or moral authority of the teacher? Is there an alternative logic that allows for mutual recognition, co-creation, and dialogical equality? These questions prepare the ground for Paulo Freire's radical intervention. However, before these questions are examined, the next section will focus on Paulo Freire's educational theory

Paulo Freire's Educational Theory: A Dialogical Approach

Paulo Freire was born on September 19, 1921, in Recife, a city in northeastern Brazil, into a middle-

class family (Taylor, 1993: 14). However, his early life was soon disrupted by the socioeconomic turmoil of the 1930s Great Depression, which introduced him to the harsh reality of poverty and hunger. In response to financial hardship, his family relocated to Jabotão dos Guararapes in 1931, a move followed by the death of his father two years later. These events not only set Freire back academically, placing him four grades behind his peers, but also immersed him in the lived experiences of the marginalised, especially through his interactions with underprivileged children during football games. Such formative interactions played a critical role in shaping his empathy for the oppressed and laid the groundwork for his educational philosophy centred on liberation and social justice. Freire's pedagogical orientation was also deeply influenced by the moral and relational values instilled by his parents. He fondly recalls his father, Joaquim Themistocles Freire, and mother, Edeltrudes Neves Freire, as embodying love, respect, and a commitment to dialogue, principles that became foundational to his later emphasis on dialogical education (Collins, 1977: 3). Thus, Freire's concept of education as a dialogical and humanising process emerges not merely as a theoretical abstraction, but as a reflection of his lived experiences and familial values.

Concerning his social influence, the oppressive social conditions in Brazil during Freire's formative years systematically excluded the poor from accessing education. Governed by an autocratic regime, the state prioritises control over empowerment, thereby entrenching social inequalities. Freire himself experienced the debilitating effects of poverty and hunger, which he acknowledged as major obstacles to his learning process. These personal hardships were not merely incidental but became a catalyst for his lifelong commitment to educational reform and social justice. His pedagogical mission was deeply revolutionary: to empower the oppressed by enabling them to reclaim their subjectivity. Drawing from Frantz Fanon's conception of the oppressed as "the wretched of the earth," Freire sought to transform them from passive objects defined by others into autonomous subjects capable of defining themselves (Macedo, 2000: 25). In this way, education for Freire was not a neutral endeavour but a political and existential act of liberation.

In his philosophy of education, what is central to Freire's critique is the rejection of the "banking model" of education, a metaphor for traditional pedagogy in which teachers are seen as the sole possessors of knowledge, which they passively transfer to students. Freire opposed this hierarchical and mechanistic approach, proposing instead a "problem-posing" model that fosters mutual learning through dialogical engagement (Franciele, 2024). In this model, both teachers and students become co-investigators in the learning process, working together to critically engage with their world. This alternative approach rests on a radical reconfiguration of the teacher-student relationship, grounded in a dialogical understanding of praxis and knowledge. Freire conceives dialogue as a human encounter mediated by the world, where individuals seek to name and transform their reality. For Freire, while deeply influenced by both Catholicism and Marxist dialectics, argues that dialogue also embodies a broader dialectical motion, evolving from thesis to antithesis and ultimately toward synthesis. At various points in his work, he uses "dialogue" interchangeably with "praxis," which he defines as the unity of reflection and action directed toward transformative change. Dialogue, therefore, is not merely a communication tool, but a central pedagogical method through which learners interrogate and reshape social and political structures, informed by a dynamic theory of knowledge production.

According to Freire, learning is fundamentally a relational process grounded in interaction and mutual engagement. He challenges the conventional view of knowledge as a static entity, something finalised, fixed, and transferable from the knowledgeable teacher to the ignorant student. Instead, Freire emphasised that knowledge is dynamic and co-constructed through dialogue and lived experiences. It cannot be reduced to isolated data or inert content; rather, it emerges through critical engagement between individuals within specific social and historical contexts. This relational view underscores his broader commitment to a participatory and transformative pedagogy, where education becomes a collaborative act of enquiry rather than a one-sided transmission of facts. Freire provides a more detailed explanation of this concept by arguing that:

I cannot think authentically unless others think. I cannot think for others, or without others. . . . Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful enquiry [people] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (2005:7).

Freire emphasized that students are not empty mind, asserting that: "no one knows everything and no one is ignorant of everything." He argued that students' lived experiences served as a significant foundation for their own knowledge. He further clarified this idea in his conversation with Donaldo Macedo:

Educators must develop radical pedagogical structures that provide students with the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis of literacy. This includes, obviously, the language they bring to the classroom (Freire & Macedo, 1995:72).

Also in "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", Freire stated, Freire argued that the foundation for structuring educational or political programs should be the current, lived reality, grounded in the concrete circumstances and aspirations of the people. Freire recognised the inherent power imbalance between students' local experiential knowledge and the academic knowledge teachers possess, which is sanctioned by formal educational institutions. At certain points, particularly in his earlier works, he was influenced by Marxist thought, viewing students' knowledge as a form of false consciousness. However, Freire consistently argued that true dialogue emerges from the dialectical interaction between student and teacher knowledge, ultimately leading to the intersubjective creation of new knowledge.

Freire's literacy pedagogy, often referred to as his "method," was rooted in the linguistic and social realities of the students. He advocated for literacy teachers to conduct ethnographic research within the students' communities, documenting their linguistic environments and identifying "generative themes" and key words reflective of local culture. This information would then serve as the basis for a dialogical process, where students could engage in a social analysis while simultaneously studying language at the phonetic and syllabic levels. Through this approach, students not only learn to "read the word" but also to "read the world."

Consequently, through the problem-posing approach that Freire introduced to redefine the learner-teacher relationship, the liberatory and dialogical nature of his educational practice emerges as a profound expression of love, grounded in mutual respect, solidarity, and the shared pursuit of human freedom. He asserts that:

Dialogue cannot exist . . . in the absence of a profound love for the world and for [human beings]. . . . Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is committed to others [people]. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is [a] loving [one], is dialogical. . . . Only by abolishing the situation of oppression is it possible to restore the love that the situation made impossible. If I do not love the world if I do not love life if I do not love [human beings] I cannot enter into dialogue (Freire, 2005, 88-90).

Freire's emphasis on love as a central element in education was influenced in part by Che Guevara's assertion that "the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love," yet his commitment also stemmed from his deep-rooted Christian humanist values. In this context, the problem-posing model of education is built upon a redefined, reciprocal, and transformative relationship between teacher and student one that is grounded in mutual respect and co-learning. Freire explains that in genuine dialogue, the traditional roles of "teacher-of-the-students" and "students-of-the-teacher" dissolve, giving rise to a new dynamic: "teacher-students" and "student-teachers." In this model, the teacher is not simply a transmitter of knowledge, but also a learner, while students actively contribute to the teaching process (Okewu, 2024: 52). According to Freire scholar Moacir Gadotti, problem-posing education is characterized by a "horizontal relationship" sustained by values such as love, humility, hope, faith, and trust. While Freire's language, suggesting an equivalence between teachers and students sparked significant debate about the teacher's function, he later clarified his stance in a discussion with Gadotti and Sérgio Guimarães. There, Freire emphasised that the teacher should be a guiding and authoritative figure, yet without being authoritarian. He asserts that:

I have never said that the educator is the same as the pupil. . . . The educator is different from the pupil. But this difference, from the point of view of the revolution, must not be antagonistic. The difference becomes antagonistic when the authority of the educator, different from the freedom of the pupil, is transformed into authoritarianism. . . . For me, it is absolutely contradictory when the educator, in the name of the revolution, takes power over the method and orders the pupil, in an authoritarian way, using this difference that exists. This is my position, and therefore it makes me surprised when it is said that I defend a non directive position (Freire, 2005, 57-58)

Thus, Freire acknowledges the real and necessary difference between teachers and students, rejecting the notion that they are identical. However, he insists that this difference should not be antagonistic or hierarchical. Instead, he warns against turning legitimate authority into authoritarianism, which would create conflict and domination. For Freire, the educator's role is directive but dialogical, grounded in mutual respect and shared learning. Nonetheless, the next section examines the logic of complementarity to determine the role that Paulo Freire's philosophy of education plays in shaping the dynamics of the learner-teacher relationship.

The Logic of Complementarity: An Alternative to Binary Dualism

The logic of complementarity offers a distinctive philosophical perspective that departs from traditional binary thinking. Rather than emphasizing conflict, opposition, or hierarchy, complementarity highlights mutual interdependence, coexistence, and dynamic balance between differing entities. In this framework, contrast does not equate to contradiction; instead, opposites are viewed as interrelated aspects of a unified whole. This contrasts sharply with classical Western logic, particularly the law of the excluded middle, which insists that a proposition must either be true or false, leaving no space for an intermediary state (Agunbiade, 2025a: 84-87). Complementarity finds a strong foothold in African philosophical thought, particularly through systems like Ezumezu logic, developed by Jonathan Chimakonam (2019). This framework not only questions rigid dualities such as male/female, self/other, or individual/community, but also emphasises

that differences can foster integration rather than division. Ezumezu logic thus proposes an alternative logic that accommodates fluidity, complexity, and contextuality in understanding reality (Chimakonam, 2019).

Ezumezu logic challenges the dichotomous structure of classical logic by introducing a trivalent system: Ezu (true), Izu (false), and Ezumezu (complemented truth). This third category allows for propositions to hold both truth and falsity depending on context (Agunbiade, 2025: 84-87). This opens up the possibility that a statement may be simultaneously valid and invalid depending on relational or experiential factors, thereby contesting the absoluteness of binary classification (Besong, 2021). Two core methods in Ezumezu logic, “Arumaristics” and “Ohakaristics”, further elaborate this model. “Arumaristics” approaches truth from the margins toward the center, favouring inclusion and peripheral insight, while “Ohakaristics” moves from the center outward, emphasizing individual identity within a collective framework (Chimakonam, 2019). These dual strategies reflect a complementary view of epistemology, allowing both subjective and objective perspectives to coexist and inform each other. Further distinguishing Ezumezu from Aristotelian logic are the three foundational principles: “Njikoka”, “Nmekoko”, and “Onana-etiti”. “Njikoka” holds that truth emerges from relational dynamics rather than isolation. “Nmekoko” formalizes the trivalent structure by establishing “C” (complementarity) as a valid truth category. “Onana-etiti” directly opposes the law of excluded middle by allowing for propositions that are simultaneously true and false (Chimakonam, 2019). These conceptual shifts offer a more adaptable and inclusive logical system, deeply rooted in lived experience, community context, and holistic understanding.

While some critiques argue that Ezumezu logic is culturally bounded, given its basis in Igbo cosmology, Chimakonam and others contend that it is universally applicable. For instance, it has been employed to rethink global issues like gender equity and social harmony, areas where binary distinctions often fall short (Besong, 2021). Scholars such as Ani (2019) and Agunbiade (2025b) support the relevance of Ezumezu logic beyond the African context,

drawing parallels with traditional binary systems and suggesting that it provides a richer understanding of dynamic systems.

Basically, complementarity, especially as formalized in Ezumezu logic, provides a significant alternative to binary thinking. It replaces rigid either/or frameworks with a “both/and” logic that allows for contradiction, nuance, and transformation. Rather than demanding exclusion, it calls for synthesis and mutual recognition, which has profound implications for ethics, knowledge systems, and social interactions. By prioritising dialogue over opposition and integration over fragmentation, the logic of complementarity reflects a worldview in which relationality is not a weakness but a strength. It reshapes how we engage with difference, not as a threat, but as a necessary and enriching aspect of existence. Nevertheless, some fundamental questions arise at this point: What kind of logic underpins Freire’s rejection of traditional teacher-student hierarchies? Does his dialogical model merely invert the binary opposition, or does it propose a fundamentally different framework for understanding educational relationships? The next section will, therefore, examine the underlying logical structure of Freire’s dialogical theory of education.

Logical Complementarity in Paul Friere’s Dialogical Approach to Education

Paulo Freire’s dialogical approach to education, especially as articulated in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005), is best understood not merely as a critique of traditional pedagogy, but as a radical reconstruction of the logic underpinning the learner-teacher relationship. While Freire did not directly refer to African systems of thought such as Ezumezu logic, his conceptual framework mirrors key principles within that logic, particularly its foundational commitment to complementarity, mutuality, and dynamic relationality. Freire’s pedagogy explicitly targets what he terms the “banking model” of education, wherein the teacher is the active depositor of knowledge, and the student is a passive recipient. This model reproduces a binary opposition in which the teacher is constructed as the knower, authority, and subject, whereas the student is

rendered ignorant, voiceless, and objectified. Freire rejects this logic, not merely because it is oppressive, but because it is ontologically and epistemologically flawed. He asserts: “No one knows everything, and no one is ignorant of everything. We all know something; we all ignore something”. (Freire, 2005: 15)

This position resonates strongly with Ezumezu logic’s rejection of absolute binaries. Just as Ezumezu logic maintains that a statement may be simultaneously true and false depending on the context, Freire maintains that both teachers and students bring partial knowledge to the pedagogical encounter. Neither is entirely knowledgeable nor entirely ignorant; rather, knowledge is co-created through dialogical engagement. This philosophical move subtly undermines the epistemic exclusivism foundational to binary thinking. Also, Freire’s concept of “teacher-students” and “student-teachers” is perhaps the clearest manifestation of logical complementarity in his work. This reconfiguration of roles suggests that the teacher and student are not fixed entities occupying mutually exclusive categories, but dynamic participants in a shared educational process. He argues : “In the problem-posing model, the students no longer docile listeners are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 2005: 81)

From the above views, Freire anticipates the Ezumezu category, a state of dynamic duality in which participants hold roles that are simultaneously distinct yet interdependent. The teacher is not dissolved into the student, nor vice versa; instead, their roles are complemented, existing in a relational synthesis that neither affirms nor denies their differences, but transcends them through dialogical unity. This corresponds to “Njikoka”, the principle in Ezumezu logic that emphasizes that truth and meaning emerge from relational interaction, not from isolated absolutes. In Freire’s dialogical space, the epistemic identities of teacher and student are constituted not independently but co-constitutively, through the shared praxis of naming and transforming the world. Freire’s idea of dialogue goes beyond methodology; it has a profound ontological and ethical orientation. He avers that “Dialogue cannot exist without humility, love, faith in humankind, and

hope.” (Freire, 1970: 89). In other words, dialogue is not merely a pedagogical tool but a mode of being that is fundamentally relational and inclusive. This stands in sharp contrast to the Cartesian model of the isolated rational subject who constructs knowledge autonomously. Freire’s subject is always with others, thinking, reflecting, and acting in relationships. This ethos aligns closely with “Onana-etiti”, the Ezumezu principle that affirms middle-ground positions and relational ontologies. Furthermore, Freire’s insistence on love and solidarity as conditions of dialogue parallels the African philosophical ethos embedded in Ezumezu logic, which sees difference not as opposition, but as necessity for unity. In both frameworks, the “other” is not a threat to the self but a condition for self-realisation. More so, one of the enduring criticisms of Freire’s model is the supposed tension between dialogical equality and the teacher’s retained authority. Freire directly addressed this tension:

I have never said that the educator is the same as the pupil... The difference becomes antagonistic when the authority of the educator is transformed into authoritarian. (Freire in Gadotti & Guimarães, 1994)

This subtle distinction reflects another key feature of Ezumezu logic: difference does not necessitate antagonism. Under the logic of binary dualism, any difference is treated as a threat, something to be corrected or overcome. But in the Ezumezu framework, and similarly in Freire’s thought, difference is relationally structured and can be harnessed constructively. The teacher may possess greater experience or specialised knowledge, but this does not invalidate the learner’s contribution. Rather, both perspectives are dialectically integrated in the shared search for truth.

Additionally, Freire’s dialogical approach to education may not explicitly draw from Ezumezu logic, yet it mirrors the structure and orientation of that logic in both form and spirit. His pedagogy constitutes a living enactment of complementarity in practice, a praxis grounded in the interplay between difference and unity, the mutuality of epistemic agency, and the co-construction of meaning within relational contexts. What Ezumezu logic offers in formal philosophical terms, a trivalent system that subverts binary oppositions, Freire articulates

through pedagogical and existential categories that define the learner-teacher relationship. In Freire's formulation, the classroom is not a space for unilateral transmission of knowledge, but a relational field in which both teacher and student participate in the process of "naming the world." He famously asserts: "I cannot think for others or without others. I can only think with others. Only through communication can human life hold meaning" (Freire, 2005:77).

This idea, that thought and knowledge arise in dialogical relation, is a clear rejection of epistemic exclusivism. It corresponds with the Ezumezu logic principle of Njikoka, which holds that truth emerges not from the isolation of discrete propositions or subjects, but from relational harmony. For Freire, knowing is not a solitary act of reflection but a collaborative engagement with others and with the world, rooted in shared historical and social contexts. The dialogical encounter becomes the epistemic site where meaning is born, neither the teacher nor the student possesses a monopoly on truth, but both become co-subjects in an intersubjective journey toward critical awareness. His use of the dual categories "teacher-students" and "student-teachers" exemplifies this vision of complementarity. These terms do not merely indicate a functional reversal; they signify a philosophical transformation in the way educational roles are conceived. The teacher retains a directive role, but not a dominant one. Freire clarifies this balance when he says:

The educator is different from the pupil. But this difference must not be antagonistic. The difference becomes antagonistic when the authority of the educator... is transformed into authoritarianism (Gadotti & Guimarães, 1994:58).

This distinction is critical. In classical binary logic, differences often give rise to opposition, where one side must negate or overpower the other. Ezumezu logic, by contrast, recognizes that difference is not necessarily antagonistic. It introduces the idea of Ezumezu, a third relationally derived category that synthesises rather than polarises. Freire's pedagogy reflects this synthesis: it neither collapses the teacher into the student nor negates the student's agency. Instead, it affirms both roles as distinct yet interdependent, with each drawing strength from

the other. The learner learns through the guidance of the teacher, but the teacher too becomes a learner through engaging with the student's lived reality. In all, Freire's ethical commitment to dialogue as an act of love provides the affective and moral dimension that resonates with the integrative spirit of Ezumezu logic. He argues:

Dialogue cannot exist... in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others (Freire, 2005:89).

Just as Ezumezu logic is grounded in the affirmation of relationality and coexistence, Freire's pedagogy rests on faith in learners' capacity to know and transform. His dialogical approach demands humility, hope, and a willingness to engage others not as deficient beings to be filled with knowledge, but as equal partners in the struggle for liberation. This ethical posture is not peripheral, it is central to the logic Freire advances: a logic where contradiction is not to be resolved through domination, but transformed through encounter. Freire's dialogical praxis exemplifies the functional structure of Ezumezu logic, even unconsciously. His pedagogy undermines the rigid binaries that define traditional education, promotes a dialogical space in which difference becomes a resource rather than a threat, and fosters a view of knowledge and identity as co-constructed, evolving, and relationally grounded. As such, Freire's work can be read as a pedagogical actualisation of Ezumezu logic, a logic that refuses the tyranny of either/or and embraces the transformative power of both and. It has been shown that Freire's dialogical model does not simply reconfigure pedagogical roles but fundamentally redefines the logic that governs them. By revealing the presence of a logic of complementarity, one that aligns with Ezumezu logic's relational and trivalent structure, the paper positions Freire's work within a broader global discourse on non-binary reasoning. This reframing contributes to the philosophy of education by offering a new conceptual ways through which teacher-learner relationships can be understood, especially in non-Western or decolonial contexts.

Hence, this paper critically examines Paulo Freire's dialogical approach to education and

argues that it transcends the binary teacher-student dichotomy entrenched in traditional Western pedagogy. Rather than merely reversing the roles of teachers and learners, Freire proposed a framework of mutual co-agency, where both participate as equals in the co-construction of knowledge. By highlighting the dialogical nature of education grounded in humility, love, and reflection, Freire rejects the logic of binary opposition and embraces a more relational and inclusive paradigm. The paper further demonstrates that Freire's concept of "teacher-students" and "student-teachers" aligns with the principles of Ezumezu logic, particularly Njikoka and Onana-etiti, which challenge rigid dualisms through a system of logical complementarity. Therefore, the Freirean model of education operates on a trivalent and co-dynamic logic, reframing the classroom as a dialogical space rooted in respect, contextuality, and shared inquiry.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that Paulo Freire's dialogical approach to education has moved beyond the binary logic that has long shaped traditional teacher-student relationships. Rather than reversing roles within a hierarchical structure, Freire proposes a relational and participatory model rooted in mutual recognition and shared inquiry. His emphasis on co-agency, dialogue, and love aligns, whether consciously or not, with the principles of Ezumezu logic, which challenge rigid opposition through the logic of complementarity. By reframing the teacher and learner as co-creators of knowledge, Freire's pedagogy exemplifies a trivalent logic in action that values differences without antagonism. Thus, his work not only transforms educational practice but also contributes to a broader philosophical shift toward relational and inclusive ways of knowledge. While this study offers a conceptual rethinking of Freire's dialogical model using Ezumezu logic, it remains a theoretical exploration and does not include empirical classroom data or comparative case studies. Additionally, the alignment between Freire's pedagogy and African logic is established philosophically, not historically; further interdisciplinary work is required to trace deeper cultural or intellectual linkages.

Directions for Future Research

Given the philosophical nature of this study, future research can further explore Freire's dialogical pedagogy through empirical and comparative lenses. Specifically:

Empirical Studies in African Classrooms: Research could examine how Freire's dialogical model functions when consciously adapted to indigenous African epistemologies and classroom practices, especially those rooted in Ezumezu logic or communal learning traditions.

Teacher Training Programs: A study on how teacher education programs might incorporate logical complementarity into pedagogical methods could help operationalise Freire's principles in practical contexts.

Longitudinal Student Impact Assessments: Empirical work could assess how students in dialogically structured classrooms develop critical consciousness over time compared to students in traditional environments.

Comparative Philosophical Analyses: Further comparative work can examine how Freire's implicit complementarity compares with non-Western logics beyond Africa, Daoist, Jainist, or Buddhist pedagogical frameworks, to deepen the global relevance of Freire's philosophy.

These directions could provide a more grounded and context-sensitive application of Freirean pedagogy and help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

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Author Details

Saheed Anuoluwapo Agunbiade, *Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Art, Lagos State University, Nigeria,*
Email ID: Saheed.agunbiade@lasu.edu.ng