

Critical Pedagogy and Empowerment of Marginalized Adult Learners: A Study of Selected Schools in Chingola District

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Abstract: This qualitative case study examines the practice of critical pedagogy and its role in empowering marginalized adult learners in selected adult education centres in Chingola District, Zambia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six educators and three administrators, three focus group discussions with 150 adult learners, classroom observations, and document analysis. The study investigates pedagogical practices, learner experiences, empowerment outcomes, and constraints to implementation. Findings indicate that dialogic, problem-posing, and reflective practices are present but unevenly applied; learners report increased confidence, agency, and community participation; structural empowerment remains limited by institutional, socio-economic, and cultural barriers. The paper concludes with recommendations for educator development, curriculum flexibility, resource allocation, and policy measures to strengthen critical pedagogy in adult education. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, adult education, marginalized learners, empowerment, Chingola District

1. Introduction

Adult education is a key mechanism for lifelong learning, social inclusion, and individual empowerment (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). For marginalized adults—those affected by poverty, limited formal schooling, gendered exclusion, disability, or geographic isolation—education can serve as a pathway toward greater agency and participation (Tett, 2010). Critical pedagogy, grounded in Paulo Freire’s (1970) work, reframes education as dialogic, reflective, and action oriented, enabling learners to analyze and transform their social conditions. This study investigates how critical pedagogy is practiced in selected adult education centres in Chingola District, Zambia, and how these practices influence the empowerment of marginalized adult learners.

1.1 Background of the study

Chingola District, in Zambia’s Copperbelt Province, combines urban mining communities and peri-urban settlements where adult education programs respond to diverse needs—literacy, vocational skills, civic awareness, and livelihood improvement (Zambia Central Statistical Office, 2020). Globally, applying critical pedagogy within adult education has demonstrated positive effects on learner engagement, self-efficacy, and civic participation (Brookfield, 2005; Ndimande, 2014). Nevertheless, constraints such as limited resources, rigid curricula, and educator preparedness can impede transformative practice (Chikunda, 2012). Within Zambia, empirical exploration of critical pedagogy in adult education remains limited; this study addresses that gap by focusing on learner experiences and pedagogical practices in Chingola.

1.2 Problem statement

Marginalized adult learners often face barriers that limit the transformative potential of education: economic hardship, limited institutional support, and teaching methods that prioritize content transmission over critical engagement. There is insufficient context-specific understanding of how critical pedagogy is implemented in Chingola’s adult education centres and the extent to which it fosters meaningful empowerment. Without such knowledge, program design and policy remain inadequately informed to support marginalized learners’ needs.

1.3 Objectives of the study

The primary objective is to investigate the role of critical pedagogy in empowering marginalized adult learners in selected schools in Chingola District. Specific objectives are:

1. To examine current classroom practices that reflect critical pedagogy.
2. To explore marginalized learners' experiences and perceptions of empowerment.
3. To assess the outcomes of critical pedagogy at psychological, social, and structural levels.

1.4 Research questions

1. What critical pedagogy practices are evident in adult education classrooms in selected Chingola schools?
2. How do marginalized adult learners experience and perceive empowerment through these pedagogical practices?
3. To what extent does critical pedagogy contribute to psychological, social, and structural empowerment?

2.1 Critical pedagogy: concepts and principles

Critical pedagogy foregrounds dialogue, problem-posing education, reflection, and praxis (Freire, 1970). It rejects the "banking model" of instruction where teachers deposit knowledge into passive learners and instead fosters mutual learning and critical consciousness. Key principles include recognition of power relations in education, cultural relevance, learner agency, and commitment to social justice (Giroux, 2011; Brookfield, 2005).

2.2 Adult learning and empowerment frameworks

Adult learning theory (andragogy) emphasizes self-direction, experience as a resource, relevance, and problem orientation (Knowles et al., 2015). Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) complements critical pedagogy by describing how critical reflection and discourse lead to perspective transformation. Empowerment theory situates outcomes at individual (psychological), organizational (participation), and community (collective action) levels (Zimmerman, 1995). Social learning (Bandura, 1977) highlights modeling and self-efficacy crucial for learner confidence.

2.3 Empirical studies on critical pedagogy and adult empowerment

Studies across diverse contexts show critical pedagogy enhances learner motivation, civic engagement, and self-confidence (Ndimande, 2014; Mayo, 2004). In Zambia, research indicates participatory adult learning fosters local agency but is constrained by resource and policy shortcomings (Chikunda, 2012; Mwansa, Banda, & Chileshe, 2017). These works point to both potential and structural limits of transformative adult education.

2.4 Gaps this study addresses

While evidence suggests benefits of critical pedagogy, limited case studies examine the lived experiences of marginalized adult learners and how classroom practices translate (or fail to translate) into structural empowerment within Zambian districts. This study provides in-depth qualitative data from Chingola to inform practice and policy.

3. Theoretical framework

This study integrates Freirean critical pedagogy with empowerment and adult learning theories. Freire provides the normative and methodological lens (dialogue, praxis); Zimmerman's empowerment framework helps classify outcomes (psychological, organizational, community); and Mezirow and Knowles explain learner processes (reflection, self-direction). Bandura's emphasis on self-efficacy provides a psychological mechanism linking classroom practice to empowerment outcomes.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

A qualitative case study design (Yin, 2014) was selected to allow deep exploration of pedagogical practice and learner experiences within naturalistic settings. Multiple data sources support triangulation.

4.2 Study sites and participants

Three adult education centres in Chingola District were purposively selected for diversity in learner profile and program type. Participants included 150 adult learners (50 per centre) selected purposively to represent varied ages, genders, and socio-economic backgrounds; six educators (two per centre); and three administrators (one per centre).

4.3 Data collection methods

- Semi-structured interviews with educators and administrators explored pedagogical approaches, training, and institutional support.

- Focus group discussions (FGDs) with learners elicited collective experiences of learning, perceived benefits, and barriers. Three FGDs (one per centre) of approximately 45–55 participants each were conducted (organized to allow active participation through facilitated subgrouping and multiple co-facilitators).
- Non-participant classroom observations documented teaching methods, learner participation, and materials. Ten observation sessions across sites were conducted.
- Document analysis reviewed curricula, lesson plans, and institutional policies.

4.4 Data analysis

Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Triangulation across interviews, FGDs, observations, and documents enhanced credibility.

4.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Gideon Robert University. Participants provided informed consent; confidentiality and anonymity were maintained; participants could withdraw at any time.

5. Findings

5.1 Participant profile (summary)

Table 1 summarizes participant categories.

Table 1. Participant summary (N = 159)

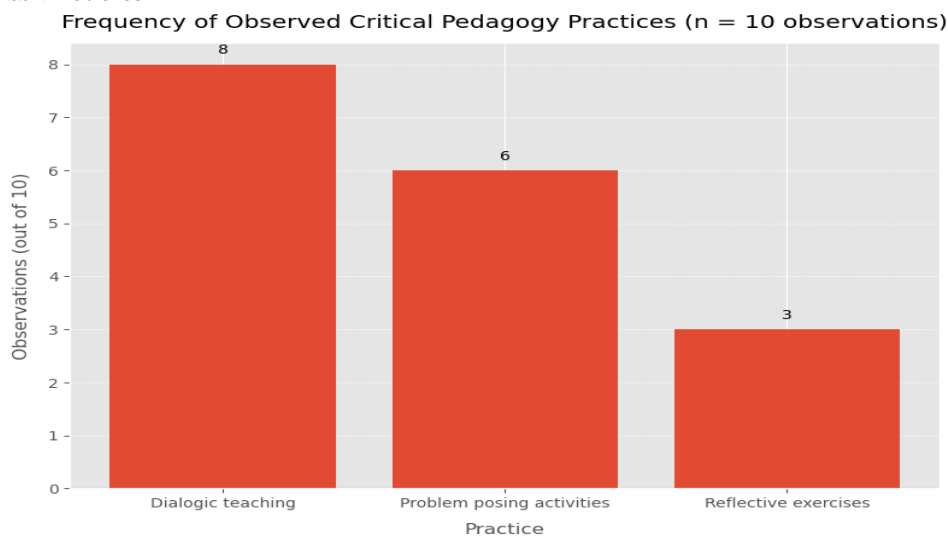
Category	N
Adult learners (FGDs)	150
Educators (interviews)	6
Administrators (interviews)	3
Total	159

(Note: Total N = 159)

5.2 Pedagogical practices observed

Observations and educator interviews indicate three core practices aligned with critical pedagogy—dialogic teaching, problem-posing activities, and reflective exercises—were present but variable in frequency and depth.

Figure 1. Frequency of observed practices (n = 10 observations)



5.2.1 Dialogue and participation

Most classrooms incorporated some level of dialogue; educators encouraged learners to share experiences and apply content to daily challenges. However, large classes and time pressures limited full participation. In several sessions, teacher talk remained dominant, constraining dialogic depth.

5.2.2 Problem posing and contextualization

Educators used real life problems—household budgeting, health, sanitation—as entry points for discussion and problem solving. Learners reported these applications increased perceived relevance and motivation.

5.2.3 Reflection and praxis

Reflective exercises (journals, group debriefs) were less consistently used but, where present, supported learners' critical awareness and plans for action. Evidence of praxis—collective actions taken in community—was emerging but limited.

5.3 Learner experiences and perceived empowerment

Learners consistently reported psychological and social gains: increased confidence, communication skills, and willingness to participate in community meetings. Representative quotes from FGDs (drawn from the expanded sample) illustrate these themes: “I can now speak in meetings” and “I plan to start a savings group.”

5.3.1 Psychological empowerment

Learners described enhanced self-efficacy: greater belief in their capacity to learn and to influence personal circumstances. This change manifested in classroom participation and taking leadership roles in local groups.

5.3.2 Social and civic engagement

Some learners reported engagement in community initiatives—health campaigns, sanitation drives, attendance at village meetings—applying knowledge from classes to civic life.

5.3.3 Structural empowerment: limitations

Despite individual and social gains, learners reported limited access to formal decision-making structures. Institutional gatekeeping, bureaucratic barriers, and limited political capital constrained translation of classroom empowerment into systemic change.

5.4 Challenges to implementation

5.4.1 Institutional constraints

Key constraints included limited learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, rigid curricula, and scarce funding. These factors impeded sustained participatory learning—challenges amplified by the larger learner cohorts (50 per centre) which constrained facilitation and individualized attention.

5.4.2 Educator preparedness

Educators expressed need for training in facilitation of critical pedagogy, classroom management for participatory approaches, and curriculum adaptation.

5.4.3 Learner related barriers

Low literacy, socio-economic pressures (work, caregiving), and cultural norms inhibiting critique limited sustained engagement for some learners.

6. Discussion

6.1 Pedagogy and empowerment linkages

Findings align with theoretical expectations: dialogic and problem-posing approaches supported psychological empowerment (self-efficacy) and social engagement (Bandura, 1977; Freire, 1970). Transformative learning processes (Mezirow, 1991) were evident where learners engaged in reflection leading to action. However, consistent with Zimmerman (1995), psychological and social empowerment did not automatically yield structural empowerment due to contextual constraints.

6.2 Contextual factors and limits

Institutional and socio-economic contexts in Chingola—resource scarcity, curricular rigidity, cultural deference to authority—moderated the extent of transformative practice. These results echo findings from comparable settings where systemic barriers limit critical pedagogy's full potential (Chikunda, 2012; Giroux, 2011).

6.3 Practical implications

To strengthen empowerment outcomes, interventions should address educator training, resource allocation, curriculum flexibility, and community institution linkages. Such multi-level strategies can support a trajectory from individual learning to collective and structural influence. Particular attention should be given to practical facilitation strategies for larger FGDs—use of breakout subgroups, training of co-facilitators, and participatory tools to ensure voice and reflection among 50-person cohorts.

7. Conclusions

Critical pedagogy practices in selected Chingola adult education centres have fostered meaningful psychological and social empowerment among marginalized learners, evidenced by increased confidence, participation, and nascent civic action. However, structural empowerment remains constrained by institutional, economic, and cultural factors. Realizing the full emancipatory promise of adult education requires systemic support: professional development for educators, flexible curricula, targeted resources, and platforms linking learners with formal decision-making processes.

8. Limitations

This study is limited by purposive sampling and focus on three centres, restricting generalizability. Although the learner sample was expanded to 150 participants, data reflect self-reported perceptions and observations within a limited timeframe. Future studies could include quantitative measures and larger, more diverse samples across multiple districts.

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Appendices

- Appendix A: Interview guide for educators and administrators (list of semi-structured questions).
- Appendix B: Focus group discussion guide for adult learners.
- Appendix C: Observation checklist (dialogue use, problem posing activities, learner participation).
- Appendix D: Ethical approval summary and consent form template.

Figures and Tables

- Table 1 (Participant summary) is included above.
- Figure 1 (Frequency of observed practices) and additional tables/figures are **available on request**.

Author declaration

I declare that this manuscript is my original work and has not been previously submitted for publication elsewhere.

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