

# Freinet's Concept of Teachers and Theory of Teaching

## Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to present Celestin Freinet's concept of a teacher. His theory which focuses on the teacher's personality and practice is illustrated through teaching practice and psychological theory. To understand Freinet's theory, it is necessary to analyze his psychological concepts, which were closely related to his teaching methods. His principal idea is that school should reinforce the positive traits of a child's personality by giving the child possibilities for creative work. This can be achieved by using new teaching techniques such as "slip problems," a school journal, free text, printing text by students, and school-to-school correspondence. As complementary material the author presents a brief history of the Freinet Movement in France.*

## Résumé

*Cet article a pour objet de présenter le concept de l'enseignement selon Célestin Freinet. Sa théorie, illustrée par la pratique de l'enseignement et la théorie psychologique, s'articule autour de la personnalité et des méthodes du professeur. Pour bien comprendre la théorie de Freinet, il faut analyser ses concepts psychologiques qui ont un rapport étroit avec ses méthodes d'enseignement. L'idée maîtresse est que l'école doit renforcer les traits positifs de la personnalité d'un enfant en lui donnant la possibilité de laisser libre cours à son imagination. Pour ce faire, l'enseignante peut recourir à de nouvelles techniques pédagogiques comme les méthodes actives, les journaux scolaires, le texte libre ou l'imprimerie à l'école et la correspondance interscolaire. Comme matériels complémentaires, l'auteur présente un bref historique du mouvement Freinet en France.*

*I found the dignity of my  
profession said the young teacher,  
so go in his direction.*

C. Freinet

Celestin Freinet (1896-1966) was a French educator and creator of new teaching methods and techniques based on the creative work of students. He based his research on pedagogical style and methods that are grounded in personality theory and individual initiative, and on his experience of teaching in the public schools in France. His concept of "natural learning," based on observation and experimentation, new techniques, and cooperative learning, sets him apart from many modern educators.

In addition to his theoretical work Freinet founded, in 1928 in Cannes, the Cooperative of Secular Education (*Cooperative de l'enseignement laïque*), which united teachers willing to introduce new techniques in their educational practice, and in 1935 he opened an experimental school which still operates in Vence. The school was registered in 1957 by UNESCO under the name International Federation of Movement for Modern Education (*Federation internationale de mouvement de l'école moderne*) (FIMEM).

The goal of FIMEM is to popularize Freinet's methods and to provide opportunities for teachers to exchange experiences and organize their pedagogical training. FIMEM also publishes a journal called *Lien FIMEM*. In 1968 it initiated International Meetings of Freinet Teachers (*Rencontres internationales des éducateurs Freinet - RIDEF*). These meetings are organized in different host countries where Freinet's pedagogy is practiced.

The Movement of the New School at present operates an educational institution with a seat in Cannes. It publishes two journals, *Art Enfantin* (Children's Art) and *Bibliothèques du travail*, and monographs on many subjects. It also produces educational kits and resources such as slides, movies, recordings, books, and other materials.

### Teacher's Personality

When considering the term "teacher's personality," it is necessary to analyze basic forms of their behavior such as needs, skills, and temperament. It is commonly assumed that special traits, characteristics, and dispositions, called "pedagogic talent," are required to be a member of the teaching profession. According to Trow (1960), a teacher should like children, like to help (have altruistic values), like to learn, and like to lead, as well as possess initiative and responsibility (p. 28). Shumsky (1968) stressed the importance of teachers searching for the personal meaning of course material, becoming involved with the subjects they teach, and experiencing their individual interpretation of ideas (p. 45).

According to Freinet, the elements constructing the teacher's personality are psyche, intelligence, and work. For him, psyche consists of instinct, needs, temperament, and feelings. In *L'éducation du travail* (1967), he defines "intelligence" as the ability to assimilate experience from different areas of life and specifies the following types of intelligence: artistic, abstract (in the forms of words and concepts), creative, manual, cognitive, political, and social. He explains "work" as the development of one's own pedagogical style and methods. For him work enriches the personality and helps conquer weaknesses.

Freinet's method of developing his own pedagogical style was based on intuitive search, self-education, practice, and experimentation. In *L'histoire d'une pédagogie populaire* (1974), he stressed: "Pedagogy is created by people who very often don't have teaching experience or they taught long, long ago, but who have plenty of time and the authority necessary to speak in the name of educators" (p. 278).

This conviction led him to search for his own methods and strategies of teaching, appropriate to his abilities, skills, and beliefs. In the book *Les dits de Matieu* (1959), he describes his search for the natural methods which can link school with the environment by likening the role of a teacher to that of a shepherd, gardener, or breeder. Moreover, he stresses that in addition to caring abilities, a teacher should possess a dynamically developing personality and a rich interior life. Those traits are required for everyday work, which links all domains of knowledge and the need for all kinds of skills. The teacher should be creator, inventor, poet, builder, writer, artist, and musician as well as psychologist and philosopher; thus, teachers must try to perfect themselves and their methods continuously. Freinet also stressed that the teaching profession requires continuing development in all areas of knowledge and skills. In his criticism of teachers who constantly repeat and teach routinely, he explained that an enclave is not able to grow free people. He believed a teacher should also be a model of a fighter; thus, he emphasized spontaneity, independent thinking, perseverance and courage, and liberality. In Freinet's vision the teacher is a fighter for societal change in the areas of democracy, freedom, peace, and the return of ethical values.

One goal of teaching is to impart values by creating an atmosphere of warmth, confidence, support, and hope. The climate in the classroom influences all work and it must be an encouraging one. Freinet advises teachers to: "Show your belief in children and goodness, and help, but be firm" (1969, p. 106).

In stressing the importance of teaching moral values, he criticizes contemporary schools which neglect this subject, and condemns their belief that modern technology and the higher standard of education automatically make people better and more ethical. Freinet believes that children should learn moral behavior. He observes that an artificial atmosphere exists at school; the discipline that comes with notes, exams, and competition teaches egotism, not

moral behavior. Morality at school should develop in the direction of help and cooperation. A new method, a new role for teachers, and new organizations of teaching and educating can change the model of the traditional school.

### Freinet's Psychological Thoughts

A basic assumption in Freinet's work is that the psychology of child development should guide education. He used the term "psychology of sensitivity" to mean sensitivity to all things, using all senses. Essentially the goal for teachers is to develop in pupils the ability to understand the world and be able to "feel" through using all senses, and to teach those abilities to their students.

In his book entitled *Essai de psychologie sensible appliquée à l'éducation* (1968), Freinet explains the term "sensitivity" as the study of the world in its complexity using intuition rather than scientific and academic psychology. There is also a direct link with another term, "intelligence", which is defined as assimilation of experience from different areas of life. The full development includes seven types of intelligence – manual, creative, cognitive, abstract, political, social, and artistic.

Freinet's teaching philosophy stresses that living happily is achieved by living in harmony with the world and that education should emerge from contact with life and nature. Learning in Freinet's school is based on "living mathematics," "living geography," and so on. History is learned through interviews and discovery, biology through experiments.

His school helps children prepare for life by teaching socialization through independent work and self-discipline. This is reinforced by such devices as the school journal, where children write their remarks about school; plans of work, where children learn to design their own school work; and by "slip problems," which provide autocorrection. This school is a place where children feel power as a result of accomplished work. Marking and grading are provided by awards for achievements. Freinet believes that such an approach to education helps children learn to overcome their own weaknesses.

Freinet's method of developing his own pedagogical style was based on intuition and observations of young children. He defined three phases in child development (1949, pp. 139-141):

Phase I (0-2 years) is called *Tatonnement expérimental* - "Groping in the dark." This is the period of first reactions and the beginning of learning. These reactions are provoked by stimuli from the environment; the most important responses are instinctive. This is a time of experimentation and discovery, and the child should spend this period at home in a caring and safe atmosphere.

**Phase II** (2- 5 years) is called "Arrangement." This is the time when the child tries to become established in the world. After acquiring some experience, the child starts to organize the environment according to his/her needs, and not only discovers the entire world, but also reconstructs, tries, creates. This time should be spent in nursery school, which should be modelled on the home and involve contact with nature.

**Phase III** (5 years - adolescence) - "Schooling." During this time the child is preparing to be a member of society. The dominant form of behavior is play-work and work-play. The child spends this period of life at school, which should be the first place to experience work and encouragement, and should provide positive experiences and feelings of success. The most important role of the teacher is to help children achieve a positive attitude toward work, including feelings of power and satisfaction.

According to Freinet, cognition and mastery of the world is possible with the use of intellect, emotions, and instinct. Even while "groping in the dark" children are developing. While everyone possesses "the vital potential," which guides the individual through all stages of life (birth, development, procreation, aging, and death), personal development results from search and discovery. Individuals inherit a trend toward maximal power without which development is impossible. One of the goals of human nature is the search for homeostasis, which Freinet's theory explains as realization of the individual's destination.

In the process of development, human beings encounter different obstacles. If these obstacles are successfully overcome, the fight provides stimulation, power, and satisfaction as well as direction for activities. The feeling of power, which can be found in family, society, nature, or people, is very important for human development. The shock of defeat causes regression, then action for the recovery of balance. If balance is not recovered, the result is "psychic deviation," the influence of which is felt throughout an individual's life.

The influence of others can help or weaken the individual; it can support or destroy. The worst negative influence is rejection by the parents and family. The lack of attention from parents, to the point of abandonment, is destructive and provokes a search for substitutes. However too much attention can also damage a child's personality and make him/her incapable of independent action. Reaction to negative parental behavior is a search for "provisoric stabilization" in "the life substitute," manifested in the form of disappointment, depression, or escape. However, believing in the "vital power" of the individual, Freinet assumes that after unsuccessful action, human beings look for new ways to achieve satisfaction. These can be realized by different forms of play, different types of work, or activities which Freinet identifies as sublimation.

The danger exists that in the process of looking for success and feelings of power, a person may seek fulfillment in actions which damage society. If those actions are successful and self-fulfilling they may become a tendency or even a lifestyle. The goal of a teacher is to present opportunities for children to experience feelings of power without their looking for substitutions and sublimating actions. Thus, Freinet emphasizes again the importance of an encouraging, caring, and hopeful school environment.

Children possess an enormous need for expression of their feelings, experiences, and thoughts. Real development of a child is possible if the child can find appropriate conditions for free expression. School should provide opportunities for all kinds of artistic action which can bring balance to the child's development and enrichment of personality. Artistic endeavor can be therapeutic, and can bring satisfaction, challenge, and the feeling of accomplishment, thus art serves three functions: motivation, stimulation, and therapy. In all situations Freinet prefers creative action to repetition and copying because of the liberating effect of creativity and art.

### The Teacher in the Process of Teaching and Educating

Freinet was completely committed to the teaching profession; he felt it gave him respect and dignity. Those feelings came as a result of teaching based not just on imparting knowledge and skills, but on rearing children in a way that gives them moral values and norms. He totally rejected the traditional teaching methods of Herbart, which were based on authoritarian pedagogy and repression, and which model children along one dimension, i.e., rigourism and oral learning.

In the progressive school, where the teacher is a guide and observer, rules and texts are learned actively. Students solve problems and search for sources. Freinet followed this approach. In his book *Naissance d'une pédagogie populaire* (1974), Freinet criticized traditional schools that emphasized order and strong personalities. He felt they resulted in "wasted spirits." In such places, punishment and discipline halted individualization and the development of gifted children. Freinet believed that this image of the authoritarian teacher was the reflection of an authoritarian society, controlled by means of police and soldiers. In his opinion, authority should come as a result of an appreciation for the mastery of work. Confidence, cooperation, and enthusiasm bring success and are the sources of youthful attitudes.

One of the roles of a teacher is to approach students with respect for their human dignity and different personalities. Interactions that are based on cooperation, such as shared decision-making, are the best methods of class management. In Freinet's school students make observations, act on situations, discuss matters, go on field trips, discuss, work in the laboratory, and undertake their own research. Using *fiches autocorrectives* (slip problems), children control, answer, and mark their work themselves. The motivation is provided

by the mastery of a specialization such as writing, lecturing, spelling, history, geography, and so on. The main goal of education, according to Freinet, is to arouse in students an interest in learning and to develop positive attitudes toward it. Each well-organized activity can help children overcome psychological or social "stoppage." It also provides opportunities to be useful, and while students search for work they come to understand that work can be a privilege rather than an assignment. Teaching gives specific possibilities to persons who can dream, imagine, search, and help students to construct their own futures.

### The Traits that Characterize a Freinet Teacher

A "Freinet teacher" should be the kind of person who will recognize individual values of children and base teaching on them; feel the need for emotional links with the students; give children opportunities to show their strongest points; avoid the use of discipline and instead encourage children to be interested in their work; use teaching based on the child's activities and organize situations where children can experiment; arouse the child's interest or curiosity for knowledge; inculcate the rules of cooperation, respect for people, and the value of work; develop in students all types of intelligence - manual, creative, cognitive, abstract, political, social, and artistic; use pedagogy of success instead of evaluation and marking - teach and help; have pedagogical optimism and believe in the child's potential; perfect knowledge and methods of teaching; enrich work with new exercises and techniques; understand the child (find strengths and weaknesses); create situations which will help to understand the child; involve students in every decision and action undertaken in the classroom; use "natural methods" which prepare students for life; maintain a partnership with the students; perfect themselves and their workshop (classroom); and not follow routines.

In the conclusion of her book *L'école Freinet reserve d'enfant*, Elise Freinet (Freinet's wife and coresearcher) quotes from *Les dits de Matieu*:

*Nous avons posé notre pierre.  
Nous savons qu'elle aidera et guidera  
Ceux qui viendront après nous pour  
Continuer la route. (p. 307)*

Fifty years after its first appearance in 1920, Freinet's theory is still practiced in the thirty eight countries which are members of FIMEM. In Canada, the *Mouvement Freinet* was introduced in 1966 in Quebec during *Les stages d'entraînement aux méthodes d'éducation actives* (SEMEA); however, the *mouvement* died after ten years because of organizational problems. A few teachers, such as Marc Audet, are still applying Freinet's methods. *Le collectif québécois de l'école moderne-pédagogie Freinet* in Quebec, an association created for the practitioners of Freinet's methods to exchange their ideas, was active until the 1980s.

Freinet's vision of teaching can be an answer to some teachers seeking a new teaching style and methods. In proposing his ideas about teachers' personalities and their approach to the process of teaching, Freinet presented a conception of the teacher as a creator and researcher. Finally, the inspiration of his pedagogy provides a valuable approach to modern education.

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