

# 21st Century Conscientization: Critical Pedagogy and the Development of Competitive Capacity in Colombian Corteros

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Keywords: competitive capacity, conscientization, critical pedagogy, HRD

**Abstract:** The Colombian sugarcane industry presents a unique 21<sup>st</sup> century opportunity to analytically examine an emergent Human Resource Development (HRD) problem of the “corteros”, key stakeholders of this lucrative industry. Critical pedagogy, competitive capacity, and conscientization theoretically frame the discussion, solution, and implications of the relationship between Adult education and HRD.

## Introduction

Globalization and Colonialism have existed as parallel societal phenomena for a long time. Today, globalization has outpaced colonialism, “intensified by the mobility of capital and labor to transcend national boundaries” (Cunningham, 2004, p. 235). Both forms of social structure have been premised on inequities in the balance of power between the citizens, the state and the market, with the market having the greatest privilege and control. The sugarcane industry in Colombia offers a contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century opportunity for the re-examination and application of critical pedagogy and conscientization to the development of the “corteros” (the sugarcane cutters) as key stakeholders of this lucrative industry. This paper explores conscientization and critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework for the analysis of an emergent human resource development problem. The problematic predicament of the “corteros” and assumptions about human beings in relationship will be described and contextualized within social structures of power, educational agendas, and legal or politically driven industry changes. A solution for resolving the presenting problem by emancipatory development of human competitive capacity through adult education will be discussed, along with implications for the relationship between Adult Education and Human Resource Development.

## Theoretical Framework

One of the biggest issues in labor relationships, and in any other type of relationship between fellow human beings, is the paradigm or set of assumptions through which the perceptions of others are formulated. Organizations, industries, or associations and their leaders develop policies, systems, decisions making processes, and structures based on the formulated perceptions. In turn, the people’s response is influenced by perception of their actual reality and the structures of power in place. Organizations have come to believe that the value of human beings lies in their capacity to produce; as a result economic growth is often promoted at the expense of social justice (Cunningham, 2004).

Cunningham (2004) points out that critical pedagogy for the development of human capital occurs in a broad social context that involves multiple stakeholders, such as the community, the workers, the society, the state, and the market. The development of human capital should not be based on performance only; but should ideally result in a balance between the market, the state and civil society. This balance is designed to “offset the intrusive power of

both the market and the state on the citizenry”(Cunningham 2004, p. 235). Cunningham, Freire, and Gramsci have all highlighted the importance of understanding the assumptions, value, dimensions, and characteristics of human beings. For instance, Cunningham (2004) declares, "the human being is more than an economic being; we are social, aesthetic, cultural, sexual beings, and we have many selves, many intelligences, and many rationalities" (p. 226). Freire (1998 b) refers to human beings as “conscious beings” (p.499). In turn, Gramsci (2002) makes it clear that all human beings are characterized by their capability of intellectual functions regardless of the job they perform (p. 82). Human beings then, are intellectual, conscious, and social beings capable of thinking, relating, reflecting, and acting on or rejecting inequalities in relationships and of transforming their reality.

Freire (1998 b) traces the roots of the social inequalities of the poorly developed Latin American societies to colonial establishment of closed societies and shaping the relationships of power between the “culture of silence” and the “culture who has voice.” (p. 505). Mayo (1999) attributes the silence (about the inequalities) to consent, or the unwitting acknowledgement of the power and influence of hegemonic practices or systems. The ‘culture that has voice’ enjoys access to economic resources, education, health services, and work opportunities. Conversely, those who belong to the “culture of silence” are silenced by the lack of access to the same opportunities and resources. Welton (1995) argues that “these societal structures hinder or impede the fullest development of humankind’s collective potential to be self- reflective and self-determining historical actors” (p. 14). Latin American societies, including Colombia, are conditioned by social structures that promote inequalities, the status quo, and a clear distinction between those who dominate and the dominated. Paternalistic relationships, so common within the rigid hierarchical structures of the Latin American society, foster dependence on the decisions, attitudes, and visions of the dominator; and "the infrastructure of the dependent society is shaped by the director society's will”(Freire, 1998 b, p. 504). This provides a salient rationale for the initially uncontested acceptance of the creation of the CTA’s (Cooperativa de Trabajo Asociado)/ Cooperative of Associated Work) and labor inequities; and makes room for Freire’s concept of *conscientization* as vital for these workers to learn how to reflect and act upon their conditioning elements until “radical structural changes transform the dependent society” (Freire, 1998 b, p. 504).

### **Description of the Sugarcane Industry**

During colonial times, sugar cane was brought to Valle del Cauca by Sebastian de Belalcazar. The industry’s development began at the beginning of the 20th century when Manuelita Mill established the first production facility; at the end of the century there were twenty two mills with 200,000 hectares or 494,000 acres of sugarcane along the Cauca River. In 2005, Colombia produced 2.7 million tons of sugar: a commercial value of 800 million dollars, including 250 million dollars in exports. Internal consumption of sugar is 1.5 million tons while 1.1 million tons are exported annually. Among the most important international clients are: Ecuador, Peru, United States, and Venezuela. The sugarcane industry not only produces refined sugar but other by-products such as: fertilizers, alcohol, sugar syrup, sulfuric acid, acetic acid, sucrose, energy from bagasse, and ethanol (Asocana, 2002). The sugarcane industry generates around 36,000 direct and 216,000 indirect jobs. The sugarcane industry is prosperous and productive. Approximately one million people depend on the sugarcane industry in the Valle del Cauca region: 30% of Valle del Cauca’s people or 2.4% of the Colombian population benefit from the industry. However, the industry is facing a tough social and cultural issue.

## **Description of the Problem**

The high numbers of employment in the sugarcane industry hide the labor inequity that “corteros” live (Aricapa, 2007). In 1990 when a major labor law reform took place, CTA’s were born as a solution to get a more flexible labor relationship between workers and businesses. The spirit of the cooperatives is to generate work not employment. CTA’s are nonprofit organizations whose associates are owners, workers, and managers of the cooperative with the objective of offering personal production of goods and services (Presidencia de la republica de Colombia, 2007). The sugarcane industry was one of the first in using this model to reduce labor costs and to increase productivity. This was very important because mills were trying to compete in the international market. Aricapa (2007) suggests that the formation of CTA’s is a major cause of the problem. More than 90% of “corteros” belong to such CTA’s. The “Corteros” were downsized; asked to create the CTA’s and increase productivity levels; work is increasingly mechanized with government approval; salaries & benefits from the sugar mills changed to pay-for- production. Low levels of literacy and education characterize these workers who are primarily Afro-Colombian and indigenous men from the Pacific and Cauca regions; and most of them do not know any other type of work. After voicing their discontent with the new labor relationship and economic system initiatives, “corteros” were granted control over their CTA’s, a responsibility they were not experientially or educationally prepared for; this resulted in instability, vulnerability, and resentment among “corteros”. “Corteros” wanted to negotiate with the mills’ leaders so they would be hired back. Of course, this was not an option for the mill’s leaders. Somehow the poor management of the CTA’s was confirmed by the Ministry of Social Protection in February of 2007, when it was reported that 118 CTA’s were fined because they were found practicing labor intermediation.

## **Discussion**

The creation of the CTA’s introduced a conflicting paradigm shift in the labor relationship between “corteros” and mills that is based on two aspects of organizational structure and changed expectations. Before, the “corteros” were salaried; but when the CTA’s were created pay became based on productivity, or pay-for-performance. Though the “corteros” did not like the new model, the mill’s leaders influenced the “corteros” decision-making process to create the CTA’s. The “corteros” were not prepared to face changes in the game rules; rules that were established more than a century ago.

### *Organizational Structure*

Colombia inherited the hierarchical structure that Spain embodied through its monarchical model and from the unfortunate practice of slavery at the time. All aspects of society adopted the hierarchical model, including businesses. In the sugarcane industry, status is given to people on the basis of class, education, and position. The organizational structure of a typical mill is highly hierarchical, with few people at the top and many people at the bottom. Needless to say that “corteros” are at the bottom of the pyramid. “Ascription-oriented organizations justify their hierarchies by ‘power-to-get-things-done.’ This may consist of power over people and be coercive, or power through people, which is participative” (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 237). The authors contend that this industry uses power through people when talking about quality systems and improvements; however, they will use power over people when the bottom line is at stake.

Furthermore, the organizational structure of the sugarcane industry is family-oriented; certainly, not only because all mills were established and developed by the wealthiest families of the

region but because they have kept this model through the time. The relationship between the mill's leaders and the "corteros" continue to be paternalistic. The result of family-oriented organizations is a power-oriented corporate culture, "in which the leader is regarded as a caring father who knows better than his subordinates what should be done and what is good for them" (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 163); demonstrating the power and influence of hegemonic practice and concomitant hindrance to the development of the collective potential of the "corteros". Even after the "corteros" were removed from the payroll of the mills they still respect the authority of the mills' leaders. "The authority in the family model is unchallengeable..." because it is based on ascribed status (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 165). This practice is what Sire (2004) terms as "radical ethical relativism:... the good is whatever those who wield the power in society choose to make it" (p. 227). In sum, one can conclude that on one hand the mills have increased productivity and competitive levels of the industry; but on the other hand they have diminished the quality of life of numerous afro-Colombian and indigenous descendant groups; who continue living in conditions of poverty and ignorance. The contrasting differences in values and objectives between hierarchy levels is that the upper levels want the industry to become more productive, efficient, and profitable; the "corteros" simply want higher quality of life, a just salary, and to be recognized as an important part of the sugarcane chain. Sire (2004), explains postmodern societies as moving "...from medieval hierarchy to enlightenment, universal democracy to postmodern privileging of the self-defining values of individuals and communities" (p. 215). If critical thinking and social action does not occur, the movement to universal democracy will not be realized, opening the door to postmodern privileging.

### **Proposed Solutions**

The solution is based on a principal strategy or agent for change: Education. The authors envision a purposive educational curriculum that is centered on conscientization and critical thinking skills for the Colombian educational system.

#### *Education*

Education for emancipation will require that the traditional educational system be reformed to deconstruct the status quo (Gramsci, 2002); to include the needs of all societal constituencies (Cunningham, 2004); and to develop the competitive capacity (Kotter, 1996) of the workers. The curriculum would specifically address ethical decision making and imbalances of power where educators would "propose problems about the codified existential situations in order to help the learners ["corteros" and leaders] arrive at a more and more critical view of their reality" (Freire, 1998 a, p. 490) and be better prepared for life-long learning requirements.

*Deconstructing Status Quo.* The sugarcane industry must be transformed from a culture that promotes inequalities to a culture that promotes social change and economic success for all its participants. Central to these topics is the concept of conscientization that Freire (1998b) explains as being "vital for people to take charge of their own lives" (Freire, 1998 b, p. 501). He further explains how all constituencies of society are responsible for the conscientization process and that it "is viable only because men's consciousness, although conditioned, can recognize that it is conditioned. This "critical" dimension of consciousness accounts for the goals men assign to their transforming acts upon the world" (Freire, 1998 b, p. 501) which translate into eventual social action. The sugarcane industry has developed and reached high levels of competitiveness in the international market; however, "corteros" as the weakest link of the chain were not ready for the changes implemented. It is important to clarify that the implementation of

new technologies is not the problem; the problem is how people are prepared to face the challenges of evolution and transformation of industries and societies. "Critically viewed, technology is nothing more nor less than a natural phase of the creative process that engaged man from the moment he forged his first tool and began to transform the world for its humanization" (Freire, 1998 b, p. 517).

*Competitive capacity.* The Colombian sugar cane industry must design an educational program aimed at developing competitive capacity for "corteros" and all people in similar circumstances. The purpose of Human Resources Development is generally perceived as the propeller of performance; however, it can also serve as a catalyst for life-long learning and adaptation to new challenges. HRD must start strategizing for "learning for living" rather than "learning for avoiding downsizing" or economic survival Cunningham (2004 p. 229). Life long learning combined with competitive drive may be the key for adaptation, freedom, and growth. Kotter (1996) explained the importance of developing competitive capacity as a composite of competitive drive and life long learning. He stated "competitive drive helped create life long learning, which kept increasing skills and knowledge levels, especially leadership skills, which in turn produced a prodigious ability to deal with an increasingly difficulty and fast-moving global economy" (p. 178). This type of learning will prepare them not only to see new alternatives to the actual situation but will prepare them for future changes. They will learn to be more self-directed, so they not have to wait until the "father" decides what is good for his "children".

*Constituent needs.* Consequently, the purpose and point of views from which education is implemented are crucial to the learning process. Reforming the educational system becomes a requirement, otherwise the status quo will never be challenged (Gramsci, 2002). Cunningham (2004) defines the purpose of education as the betterment of society as determined by all its constituencies (p. 226). "The educator's role is to propose problems about the codified existential situations in order to help the learners arrive at a more and more critical view of their reality" (Freire, 1998 a, p. 490). An integration of both perspectives will be required for optimal outcomes: both industry leaders and "corteros" must learn to challenge the status quo. Sugarcane leaders, "corteros", and other stakeholders must learn how to think critically and make decisions in the face of ethical dilemmas: it is an ethical dilemma in this instance to keep performance as the main focus for people's development instead of "promoting educability" Webster (1997, p. 181). The top levels of the hierarchical system and other stakeholders would want to reject a curriculum that will take out power of their hands. Companies are not always interested in a critically thinking workforce. Cunningham (2004) points out: "obviously, it is not in the interest of the corporations to have an independent critical workforce, much less an independent critical citizenry mobilized into a strong civil society. Such a situation would balance the distribution of power not only in the workplace but also at global forums..." (p. 235) meeting the needs of all constituents.

A guiding coalition needs to be formed (Kotter, 1996) and led by an independent entity such as the government to increase chances of success. Members of the guiding coalition should be carefully selected to represent all stakeholders. The government needs to participate for two main reasons: their responsibility to protect the people and because they have the economic resources to implement the proposal. This is a long term solution. The curriculum must be developed through the educational and communication system which includes public and private schools, universities and technical institutions, public radio, television, and of course the Sugar Cane Educative Network (Red Educativa Azucarera). Other channels to implement such

curriculum are the various sugarcane industry associations. Stakeholders may want to see some short-term gains; however, the speed of change will depend on the people's capacity for learning.

### **Implications for Adult Education**

In conclusion, this paper has analyzed the sugarcane industry in the region of Valle del Cauca in Colombia in terms of multicultural issues. The authors analyzed inequities in the relationship between sugarcane mills and "corteros". The strategic solution is anchored on the implementation of an educational curriculum that is based on the development of critical thinking skills as a means for conscientization and social action. Implications for adult education include highlighting the significance and validity of conscientization and critical pedagogy as viable for 21<sup>st</sup> century industry globalization needs. Furthermore, adult education should be vigilant regarding the increasing need for developing worker's competitive capacity, literacy, skills development, and critical pedagogy, within an emancipatory curriculum that creates dynamic learning communities and empowers the learners to be active transformative agents of the work and life worlds. Such a collective and social movement toward a balance will result in a ROI that includes not only those who have invested financially, but also the worker, and the community (Cunningham, 2004). Critical pedagogy could facilitate a shift from a performance-only focus for human resource development toward development of industry social capital where "voices that were previously silenced can speak as agents of social change and personal destiny" (Denzin and Lincoln 1998, p. xxi).

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**The remainder of references are available upon request.**