FRAMING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING INTERVENTIONS AND THEIR POLICY RESPONSES:

A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW OF MAINSTREAM NARRATIVES AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES

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Abstract

The mainstream literature on Early School Leaving (ESL) policies in education are presented as a panacea for inclusive practices that support an equality of opportunity agenda for disadvantaged youth and their local communities. However, critical pedagogy reveals the meritocratic ideology underpinning such reform efforts and shows how their reproductive default positioning continues to advantage the already advantaged while reductively framed as an issue of the individual. Freire argued that education is either in the direction of emancipation and human freedom or in the direction of domestication, colonisation and neutralisation. The critical literature review of ESL conducted here, as part of a doctoral study based on Freirean philosophy, draws extensively from the field of critical pedagogy. The analysis highlights a dichotomy between inequitable ESL responses framed in neoliberal deficit human capital thinking as opposed to critically aware ESL pedagogies. We conclude that critical pedagogies can offer novel turnaround narratives that re-write ESL policies in ways that are emancipatory and transformative. Disengagement from education is a long term and complex process therefore ESL policy

initiatives, if they are to be successful must be humanistic, critical, democratic and concerned with systemic issues and public interest values.

Keywords: Early School Leaving, Critical Pedagogy, Critical Literature Review, Neoliberal/Human Capital Theory, Transformative/ Emancipatory Education

INTRODUCTION

There is a deep policy and political interest in understanding why some young people leave school earlier than what was intended by the schooling system, including how to solve the problem, who should intervene and in what proactive ways (Escudero & Martinez, 2012; González-Rodríguez, Vieira & Vidal, 2019; Montero-Sieburth & Turcatti, 2022). This is referred to variously in the literature by terms, such as, 'dropout', 'attrition' and 'Early School Leaving'. In this paper, we use the term 'Early School Leaving' (ESL), within an understanding that this is a deeply contested construct that depends on the way it is framed, including the underpinning ideology, logic, design and the process of policy enactment (Tarabini, 2015).

There is currently an urgent need to critically scrutinise the policy (political) priorities of governments and state agencies who seek to address the issue of ESL (Tarabini et. al., 2018). We argue that ESL interventions can be framed in deficit ways that provides a reductionist focus on the behavioural and psychological traits of the individual, rather than in proactive, whole school and systemic approaches that take into account the economic and social structures that bear down on young people from marginalised backgrounds (Stancu, 2020).

Framed in a limited way, ESL can fail to take into account the cultural problems of alienation and disengagement and the dehumanizing forces operational within and outside of schools, manifested in behaviours such as passive resistance, withdrawal, truancy, disruptive activities, violence, and self -harm (Wadley, 2022). In this review of the problem of framing of ESL, we are interested in conducting a critical analysis with advocacy for replacing deficit concepts of 'individual failure' with that of a realistic, humanising and

emancipatory language, agency and activism that is not fatalistic and can offer hope.

The mainstream literature on Early School Leaving (ESL) policies in education is presented as a panacea for inclusive practices that support an equality of opportunity agenda for disadvantaged youth and their local communities (Namukwaya & Kibirige, 2014; Omoeva & Gale, 2016). This frames the problem of social class, intersectionality, poverty and disadvantage as issues of the individual and their local community and denies the moral responsibility of the state, national structures and the wider society (Anyon, 2014; Lim, 2016). Theorists in the field of critical pedagogy reveal the meritocratic ideology underpinning reform efforts and their reproductive default positioning as public policy interventions advantaging the already advantaged, and when reductively framed as an issue of the individual. We agree with Freire (1970, 1998, 2016) when he asserted that education is political because it is either in the direction of human freedom and emancipation or in the direction of domestication, colonisation and neutralisation.

The critical literature analysis conducted here, as part of a doctoral study underpinned by Freirean philosophy, draws extensively from the field of critical pedagogy (Author A & Author B, 2017; Author A, 2020).

In our study, we advocate for framing ESL as emancipatory practices that are relationally and culturally responsive practices, requiring interaction and dialogue that is in the direction of human freedom and for the greater good of society, the environment and planet (Author A, 2023 a; Fraser 2022; Lynch, 2022). This requires education for the wider public good, for radically dreaming new spaces for the commons rather than as some bespoke private commodity for the individual (Author A, 2023 b). We argue that critical pedagogies imbued with transformative possibility can offer alternative narratives that can re-write public policies in emancipatory ways that work to address the complex issues of ESL. Disengagement from education is a long and complex process. Therefore, ESL initiatives if they are to be successful must be humanistic, critical, and democratic and connected to public interest values.

We have structured the article as follows. First, we draw from Freirean philosophy and the field of critical pedagogy as an extensive theoretical literature connected with education and ESL as practices of human freedom (Freire, 1970, 1998; Lim, 2016; Lipman, 2008). These theoretical perspectives ground our study theoretically and methodologically. Second, we outline the research methodology for the study (Creswell, 2014) and show how we arrived at a select literature with a global reach which we later used as an affirmative basis for a more in-depth critical study of ESL policy in Ireland (Author A & Author B, 2017; Author B, 2020). Third, we present our findings revealing how dominant mainstream imperatives are reflected in ESL policies and, in addition there is increasingly research studies that reveals an authentic search for alternative narratives with advocacy for ESL as an emancipatory praxis. Finally, we present our discussion and raise critical questions arising from the study that have implications for ESL policies, principles and praxes [i.e. theory rich practices] now and into the future.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

We grounded the study within a Freirean philosophy of emancipatory education, research and teaching. This emancipatory paradigm enabled us to conduct rigorous research from a particular theoretical perspective while advocating for ESL as a practice of emancipation and freedom. This viewpoint differs from the contemporary mainstream view of learning as a commodity for the individual, as a private good based on an ideology of meritocracy that lies outside power relations and the public interest values and the common good of a just society. In human capital theory, presented nowadays as a good enough theory showing how humans react to change, the economy takes the prime position, and all other concerns with being human and living well with others – the moral, cultural, social, political and the planetary - are assumed to be secondary and subsidiary (Tan, 2014). By contrast, taking an expansive emancipatory view, there is an implicit understanding that the ethical and political journey of 'human becoming' [a subject] takes precedence and is deeply connected to learning how to live well for a good life in

associated living with others in a pluralist democracy and in a just and sustainable global world.

This critical pedagogy stance asserts that the objective in research studies is always in the service of the subject and the subjective. In this regard, ESL is relational and happens in the dynamic interactions between the teacher and the student rather than something to be done to the individual (ideal) student by the competent teacher so that students and young people learn to step up and conform to an allocated set-place in a fixed social hierarchy of dominance.

Lim (2016) warns of the dangers inherent in any education model framed using a meritocratic ideology, which selectively ignores different power relations and intersectional issues of social class, race, disability, gender etc. and that argues that each person achieves success based on talent, merit and hard work alone. Lim maintains that appeals to principles of non-discrimination are naïve and can give meritocracy a veneer of equality while simultaneously reproducing the advantages and disadvantages differentially distributed across society. Given how economic and cultural capital from one generation is often converted into the educational capital of the next (Bourdieu, 1986), meritocracy in practice often translates into an ideology of inequality and injustice, a belief that some unequal distribution of resources will benefit the general, if not, the entire population.

Lipman (2015) focuses on the increased power of venture philanthropy in influencing education policies particularly in urban communities of colour in the US. Philanthropists capitalize on austerity politics while they wield enormous influence with the state and state organisations and the restructuring of urban school districts that serve low income African American, Latin and other minority students. The agenda for restructuring aims to serve economic competitiveness and the opening of the public education sector for capital accumulation (Wolch, 1990). Lipman (2015) asserts that through the interrelation of venture capital and government policies of disenfranchisement, including public school closures, privatization and appropriation of black urban space, a new colonialism is performed.

Penalising schools serving those most in need through new quality management and public accountability systems provides us today with an example of a rigid and oppressive social structure. Freire's (1994/2001) theory of oppressive cultural action states that naïve professionals emphasise a focalized reductive view of problems rather than seeing them as dimensions of a much bigger totality. The more schools are colonised in this way, the more alienation is intensified and the easier it is to divide local communities (p.115).

Challenging neoliberal explanations of educational 'failure' or 'dropout' is an important step towards formulating an alternative policy agenda. Darling- Hammond (2004) proposes a shift in thinking from student deficit policies to policies that guarantee every student the right to equitable education. Ladson- Billings (2021) also argues for movement from a discourse of 'achievement gap' to a new language of 'education debt'. She argues this debt has accumulated over time and can only be rectified by collectively addressing the full spectrum of historical, economic, socio-political and moral failings of previous generations. Policies based upon exclusion and containment pathologize poverty and shift the discourse from one of economic and social redistribution to one of individual behaviour modification.

Lipman's theorisations in Lipman & Haines (2007) and in Lim (2008, 2011, 2015), call for an effort to equalize school resources and transform the structural aspects of schools that reproduce inequality and marginalization. Anyon (2014) claims that we need to get to the roots of inequitable educational opportunities and outcomes, as well as an expanded policy paradigm. This could include strategies to increase the minimum wage, invest in job creation and training and provide funds for college completion. Fraser & Naples (2004) framework for social justice provides the educational resources and economic redistribution policies that will work to assure the highest quality education for everyone as well as reduce poverty. The framework has three dimensions.

- Economic redistribution through political- economic restructuring.

- Cultural recognition going beyond recognizing cultural differences to transforming what counts as valorised culture and knowledge for all.

- Political representation through radical democratization.

Lipman (2008, 2011, 2015) makes no apology that such a justice framework may seem utopian in a period of neoliberal dominance. Freire's (1998) strategy for transcending fatalism provides inspiration that the current dominance of neoliberalism solutions do not have to be inevitable. Freire wrote against 'an immobilising ideology of fatalism, with its flighty postmodern pragmatism, which insists that we can do nothing to change the march of social-historical and cultural reality because that is how the world is anyway. The most dominant contemporary version of fatalism is neoliberalism' (pp. 26-27).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the study, we needed to show coherence between the theory and method in the study. It was therefore important that the selected paradigm for the study aligned with our ethical values and principles and our understanding of the nature of knowledge and ways of knowing (Creswell, 2014). The key questions guiding our literature review aimed to open the critical question of who benefits in the contemporary mainstream ESL policy landscape and how we might productively advocate for alternative and emancipatory practices:

- What are the key international policy responses to the phenomenon of Early School Leaving? Who Benefits?

- How can educational practitioners as well as policy makers offer hope and resistance against a seemingly dominant hegemony of human capital theory of ESL education?

We conducted the select literature review using a logical process drawing from the data base SCOPUS and inputting some selected search words, including (School Completion) AND/OR (Early School Leaving). We applied inclusion and exclusion criteria, wanting peer-reviewed articles dating between 2 April 2002 and 2 December 2022. Our critical analysis process involved a close reading of the abstracts of the studies as we started to make some preliminary selections by

rereading abstracts, scanning content, and retaining articles that were of most relevance to the study and had a global reach.

The SCOPUS search of relevant articles included terminology, such as 'educational disadvantage', 'educational underachievement' and 'school dropout' and yielded mainly deficit-based discourse responses. We wanted our select literature review to demonstrate the fullest spectrum of possible responses to the key questions guiding the study. Selecting and settling on a key search term was an important factor ensuring Yin's (2014) ideas of construct and internal validity using multiple sources to establish a chain of investigative evidence.

We finally categorized our ESL policy responses into two distinct positions (a) neoliberal style responses that relayed a market-led human capital and deficit-based ideology and (b) policy responses that framed the problem of ESL using turnaround narratives that were emancipatory and transformative. The findings that follow summarise the studies emerging from our critical interpretive analysis of this select literature.

FINDINGS

We report the findings from the review under two headings (a) Deficit Discourses of Early School Leaving that positioned the problem as that of the individual student and their traits and (b) Turnaround Narratives of ESL that viewed the problem as a deep systemic and cultural problem with transformative possibilities for public interest values.

DEFICIT DISCOURSES OF ESL

The distinguishing feature in all deficit discourses is their framing of ESL as a problem of the individual or the institution rather than a systemic problem. With the focus on the individual, interventions are mostly concerned with outcomes connected to behavioural and psychological traits, improving access to education and retention statistics. Government funded ESL interventions also move toward the repressive apparatus of the state, for example, through statutory regulations and punitive measures such as imposing fines.

In accordance with governmental aims of making Australia a competitive economy, many young people are being kept at school whether they want to or not (Te Riele, 2011). Government and business groups argue that improved educational outcomes play a critical role in determining employment and productivity, improved social cohesion and inclusion, reduced crime and improved personal wellbeing and health (BCA, 2003; Rudd & Gillard, 2008). Policies of the federal, state and territory governments in Australia reflect the consensus that ESL needs to succeed for the human capital argument concerned with primacy of the economy.

In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments passed the National Partnership agreement on youth attainment and transitions (CoAG, 2009). Te Riele et. al., (2023) provide an overview of a suite of punitive policy reforms in relation to ESL interventions. Parents and guardians can become prosecuted and fined if their child fails to comply with ESL school retention policies. In New South Wales, legislative amendments will 'make a child over 15 personally responsible for complying with the compulsory schooling requirements in place of their parents' in specified circumstances' (NSW DET, 2009, p.3). These coercive solutions include legislative measures in most Australian states to raise the school leaving age from 15 to 16 years, and in some cases to 17 years. The Federal government calls this a *Compact with Young Australians* (Te Riele, 2011). A 'Learn or Earn' policy was introduced for young people up to age 17 with new restrictions on access to welfare benefits for 'under-qualified' young people up to the age of 21 years, if they have not yet attained a year 12 or equivalent qualification. Te Riele (2011) concluded that authentic ESL requires recognition of a more expansive range of measures, an architecture of supports for re-entry to second chance education rather than coercing young people to remain in schooling against their will.

In studies reporting ESL interventions in Africa, the researchers acknowledge the transformative potential to improve enrolment retention and cite studies by Gelli et al., (2007) from 32 countries of Sub-Saharan Africa where school meals were provided. In Niger, Takahashi & Narahara (2009) showed positive correlations with rates of enrolment and retention. In Uganda, Namukwaya & Kibirige's

(2014) investigated the impact of selected government interventions on enrolment and retention in primary schools in a Ugandan district known as Kotido. The results showed no significant correlation and concluded that effective participation of children will remain low unless more expansive strategies are designed. Omoeva & Gale, (2016) examined the effectiveness of Uganda's *Universal Secondary Education* policy (USE) and found no evidence to suggest that the policy improved the rates of school attendance or retention. As the first USE policy for Sub Saharan Africa it earned attention from researchers as the policy imperatives aimed "to expand access and improve attendance in secondary education", "reduce the high cost of secondary education" and "increase equitable access to secondary education" (p. 42). The study found that between 2005 and 2011 lower secondary attendance rates increased only slightly, and that rural areas showed the lowest attendance rates while urban areas had two to three times higher attendance rates. However, the study was unable to find a causal association between receipt of the capitation grant and retention, leading Omoeva & Gale (2016) to conclude that. 'Without an explicit focus on equity, it is likely that modest grant schemes such as the USE will be less than likely to achieve the objective of large-scale increases in access for less advantaged groups' (p. 48).

Deficit models of ESL interventions in Europe, in particular, in Sweden, Ireland and the Netherlands, were found to operate mainly through statutory regulation and legislation stressing the importance of public accountability and performance-based measures (Allodi, 2013; Li & Cabus, 2013; Looney & Klenowski, 2008). Allodi (2013) shows how public accountability policies and procedures may affect the overall functioning of the education system by drawing from a case study of one school serving a diverse student population. The school as an organisation was fully captured by measures of performance, external events, contextual and selection variables. The measures failed to take account of relevant variables that influence the school's needs for relevant personnel and pedagogical resources, such as for improving students' language proficiency and special educational needs. Given that policy makers are not comparing 'like with like',

and may be using erroneous performance measurements, the school may find itself targeted with severe, and unjust reforms.

In the Netherlands, Li and Cabus (2013) examined 'dropout' prevention measures and analysed their influence at the level of the individual and institution. Their study found that most policy measures correlated negatively with the so-called dropout decisions, only "mentoring and coaching" (i.e., matching students with a coach from public or private organizations), "optimal track or profession" (e.g., work placement) and "dual track" (i.e., re-entering education) had any significant impact on what was perceived as the individual's dropout decision.

In a study in the US, Prevatt & Kelly (2003) reviewed the literature on 'dropout' prevention for school-aged children. The ESL interventions employed with greatest frequency emphasized academic attainment, psychosocial skill development, and parent/teacher behaviour management training. The study concludes that there is no one best practice to address the problem of ESL even though some interventions appear to hold promise.

TURNAROUND NARRATIVES OF ESL

The mainstream discourses discussed above tended to confine the framing of ESL to a deficit construct of individual and institutional failure and not-measuring-up, often coupled with the perception of 'absences' in the local community. In such instances young people and their talents are no longer recognised and respected (Fraser, 2022; Lynch, 2022). Besides these mainstream discourses, we found evidence of alternative discourses, what Harding (2010) called 'turnaround discourses' where teachers, schools and educational researchers worked from the 'presences' found through making relational spaces and taking the side of the students.

Maxine Greene's (1988) concept of 'wide-awakeness' and Paulo Freire's (1970) 'conscientizacao' question tradition and authority and invite learners and educators to reach beyond 'limit situations' toward the untapped possibility of what can be. Working from 'presences' enables critical pedagogies as trust building interventions that involve an ensemble of multiple actors and pedagogies and hold in play the

necessary hope for ESL as a practice of freedom and transformative possibilities.

Ethnographic studies from government-funded ESL interventions in Australia seeking to retain alienated youth, marked as in-danger of early leaving in the school system, are reported in the literature by McInerney (2009), and in later studies by Smyth & McInerney (2013, 2014). The studies are all informed by Freirean philosophy and praxis and include an affirmative critique of the dehumanizing forces that operate within and outside schools. McInerney (2009) reiterates that prevailing explanations for barriers to success focus on psychological traits and individual deficits, rather than on the economic and social structures that oppress young people.

McInerney's (2009) research advocates a circumnavigation of the systems of oppressive requirements such as public accountability and 'what works' in student's lives and communities. A critical pedagogy where students and teachers engage in a humanising discourse as an empowering pedagogy (Shor, 2012, p.33-35), that asserts: "when students have little power over their learning, when learning has little relevance to their lives, and aspirations, or when they are devalued or marginalized, they are likely to engage in acts of resistance or withdraw their assent altogether from schooling" (McInerney, 2009, p.24). Moreover, this critical framing of ESL is not naïve and acknowledges that critical pedagogic enactment alone while necessary will not be sufficient to change students' lives or their sources of alienation (Shor, 1987,) but can help reveal injustices and offer new affordances for teachers and students to move beyond reproduction of the status quo. The studies highlight tensions and contradictory responses to alienation. On the one hand, encouraging support for school practices fosters a sense of belonging, well-being, and community while on the other, policies often aim to control the behaviours of young people.

The global phenomenon of ESL is clearly one of deep concern to policy decision makers, in deciding how best to encourage students to remain in education (Rumberger & Lim, 2008, Rumberger, 2011). Less frequent in the literature yet also important are studies on 'second chance education' for those wishing to re-enter education either within

the schooling system or outside of it (e.g., Mc Gregor, Mills, Te Riele & Hayes, 2015; Mc Gregor & Mills, 2013; Nordlund, Stehlik, & Strandh, 2013; Ross & Gray, 2005). One r*adical care model of ESL by Johannesson & Bjarnadottir's (2016)* in Iceland reveals how students benefitted from a trust-building repertoire of critical pedagogical approaches when they returned to upper secondary school. The researchers drew from interviews with students aged 20-24 years, who left school early and re-entered schools known to be receptive to non-linear forms of educational attainment. They found that a supportive school ethos, good student- teacher relationships, online learning platforms and the use of formative assessment all contributed to an emancipatory culture enabling young people to re-enter and to remain in school.

In the UK, Yosso adopted critical race theory (CRT) as a framework to theorize, examine and change the often hidden and assumed ways that race and racism affect social structures, practices, and discourses' (Schlesinger, 2013, p.1). Using CRT, Yosso (2005) reimagined the cultural capital of young people using the concept of a 'turnaround narrative' of *Community Cultural Wealth,* conceptualised as 'knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by *Communities of Colour* to survive and resist macro and micro- forms of oppression' (p.69). Yosso's (2005) 'community cultural wealth' reveals how certain actors, such as teachers can promote a personal sense of achievement. Tett (2016) found that adults positioned by schools as 'failures' often adopt positionalities and 'learner identities' that are 'constituted by the dominant discourses of education where people are divided into high or low achievers, intelligent or ignorant, capable or incapable' (p.439).

In a similar study in the UK, Wright, Maylor & Becker (2016) focused on the framing of ESL in relation to black males excluded from school. They assert that if unchallenged notions of 'failure' become internalised and the resulting negative identities become difficult to escape. There is evidence in the UK data of an urgent issue in relation to the educational achievement for young black men and black student exclusion (Mocombe et al., 2013). Racial-ethnic and gendered disparities in exclusionary practices need to be foregrounded in any policy response relating to closing achievement

gaps for black youth (e.g. Gillborn, 2008; Strand, 2010, 2014). Using a 'turnaround narrative', male participants in the study by Wright, Maylor & Becker's (2016) were considered to exhibit an empowering form of capital described as: aspirational, resistant, familial, social and navigational. Aspirational capital coincided with an alternative narrative of resistance and fostered a 'culture of possibility' (Yosso, 2005, p.78). In this regard, 'turnaround narratives' can offer new affordances to overcome the 'failure label' often found in ESL policies and use forms of capital to learn for contradictory purposes, such as personally, socially and work-wise (Te Riele, 2011; Yosso, 2005; Johannesson & Bjarnadottir, 2016).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, the select literature critically reviewed was unique in giving an overview of the multiple ways ESL policy initiatives are framed in mainstream policies, and how they can therefore get enacted in praxes in narrow limited ways or more expansive ways. The study revealed that when it comes to ESL policies there is clearly no one definite approach or silver-bullet solution to answer the complex socio-political, structural and systemic issues underpinning non-school completion, poor attendance and/or participation for disadvantaged young people. To imbue the transformative possibility of human freedom, any intervention to prevent school dropout clearly needed to be holistic, emancipatory, expansive and multifaceted, to listen to students' needs, to keep aspirations high and to take into account out-of-school factors such as social, cultural and economic inequalities (Choules, 2007).

Freeman and Simonsen (2015) conducted a systematic review of the ESL literature and concluded that further research is needed to provide guidance to schools regarding the integration of multiple efforts to address ESL with related school initiatives. Their study acknowledged the complex factors involved and the need for addressing many of the out-of-school factors which contribute to ESL. Likewise, Nguyen & Fahey (2001) present evidence that while quantitative data from a study undertaken among Vietnamese students shows a significant relationship between achievement scores and ESL,

qualitative data showed that there are cases that do not illustrate this trend. Their findings conclude that: "Other factors such as government economic and education policies; employment opportunities, school fees, pedagogical issues, gender, economic status and parents' attitudes are augured to interact with each other to influence early school leaving" (Nguyen & Fahey, 2001, p.65).

The critical review of a select literature conducted here shows a prevalence of mainstream human capital led deficit-based policy regarding ESL. Dominant discourses frame the policy response in the direction of the individual student, or teachers and the school as an institution, and do little or nothing to address structural inequalities and injustices in the first instance.

However, despite several examples of government led coercive policies (Te Riele, 2004, 2011), there were also examples cited of non-linear educational attainment that afforded an affirmative and robust critique of policies and praxes (e.g., Mc Gregor, Mills, Te Riele & Hayes, 2015; Mills & Mc Gregor, 2013; Nordlund, Stehlik, & Strandh, 2013; Ross & Gray, 2005).

Johannesson & Bjarnadottir (2016) and Yosso's (2005) 'turnaround narratives' offer alternative strategies which may prove beneficial in reframing issues of ESL. These critical pedagogies of resistance and hope, advocated by Freirean philosophy demonstrate that non-acceptance of the meritocratic, inequitable and coercive deficit-based models of ESL policy and practice are possible, practicable and real.

Whatever the future holds it is clear from this critical analysis of a select literature that new spaces for turnaround narratives are emerging and urgently needed for proactive educational engagement that moves beyond the status quo (Montero-Sieburth & Turcatti 2022). Freire reminds us of the importance of radically dreaming for a process of human becoming that is not fatalistic and is always in the direction of the greater good of public life and the planet (Author A, 2003b). It is human nature to dream and to be an active shaper of history. For "There is no change without dream, as there is no dream without hope" (Freire, 2017/2021, p.81).

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