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Anti-Education as a Critical Framework: Structural Barriers, Dialectical Learning, and the Reclamation of Emancipation

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept of anti-education as a critical framework for analyzing the structural barriers that obstruct authentic learning. Building on Illich's critique of institutionalized schooling, Freire's dialogical pedagogy, and Giroux's critical pedagogy, the study situates anti-education not as a rejection of teaching but as a theoretical tool for exposing systemic suppression of dialectical learning. Using a behaviorological perspective, education is approached as a structural mechanism that regulates behavior, reproduces cultural norms, and sustains existing power relations. The article identifies three interrelated mechanisms of suppression: (1) the imposition of predetermined curricula and standardized assessments; (2) the reproduction of social hierarchies through teacher–student power asymmetries; and (3) the normalization of conformity via hidden curricula and disciplinary practices. Through this analysis, anti-education emerges as a conceptual lens that unmasks the systemic reproduction of authority within educational institutions. The innovative contribution of this article lies in synthesizing critical realism, dialectics, and behaviorology into a unified framework. Critical realism provides ontological depth by analyzing how structures generate inequalities. Dialectics reveals the contradictions within education, where the promise of emancipation is continually obstructed by reproduction. Behaviorology adds empirical precision, demonstrating how reinforcement and punishment regulate conduct at the micro-level. Together, these perspectives reconstruct anti-education as a rigorous critical framework capable of diagnosing suppression while envisioning emancipatory alternatives. By integrating structural critique with philosophical rigor and empirical clarity, this article contributes to critical educational theory and offers a pathway for reimagining education beyond institutional control. The findings underscore the necessity of dismantling structural barriers to reclaim learning as a dialectical and transformative process.

Keywords: Anti-education, Critical Pedagogy, Dialectical Learning, Behaviorology, Critical Realism

Introduction

Education has long been celebrated as a pathway to freedom, mobility, and self-realization. From the Enlightenment ideal of rational self-cultivation to modern discourses of lifelong learning, education is portrayed as the key to emancipation. Yet, as critical theorists have repeatedly observed, the institutional forms of education, especially schooling, are deeply implicated in the reproduction of social hierarchies and the suppression of genuine learning [1].

This article begins with the paradox that education, while promising emancipation, often functions as domination. Schools claim to prepare students for critical citizenship, yet they condition compliance through standardized testing, hierarchical authority, and hidden curricula and they proclaim openness, yet they reproduce stratification along lines of class, race, gender, and cultural capital [2]. They speak of dialogue, yet their structures foreclose genuine dialectical engagement. The concept of anti-education captures this paradox. At first glance, the term may appear purely negative: a rejection of education altogether. But as developed here, anti-education is not nihilism. It is a philosophical framework for diagnosing the ways institutionalized education systematically obstructs learning [3]. It interprets education not simply as ineffective but as actively suppressive, shaping conduct and consciousness in ways that reproduce domination. The genealogy of anti-education can be traced through several traditions. Ivan Illich's Deschooling Society provided the earliest and most radical articulation, arguing [4]. That schools monopolize learning and transform knowledge into a commodity. Paulo Freire critiqued the "banking model" of education, offering a dialogical pedagogy rooted in conscientization. Michel Foucault analyzed the disciplinary mechanisms that produce self-regulating subjects. Pierre Bourdieu demonstrated how cultural capital and habitus reproduce class hierarchies.

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Henry Giroux revealed how neoliberalism reshapes schools into sites of economic rationality. These perspectives converge in diagnosing education's complicity in domination, yet they diverge in emphasis and ontology. Illich veered toward utopianism; Freire emphasized ethical praxis; Foucault avoided causal explanation; Bourdieu leaned toward determinism; Giroux stressed ideology. What unites them is critique; what differentiates anti-education as reconstructed here is synthesis [5].

By integrating critical realism, dialectics, and behaviorology, anti-education provides philosophical precision, structural depth, and empirical rigor. Critical realism insists that education's failures are rooted in real causal mechanisms [6]. Dialectics interprets education as contradiction, opening possibilities for rupture. Behaviorology [7] illuminates how compliance is produced through reinforcement. Together, these resources transform anti-education from slogan to systematic framework.

Why call this orientation anti-education? Because it emphasizes that institutional education is structurally opposed to learning. The prefix "anti-" is not a call for abolitionism per se but a recognition of systemic negation. Schools suppress the dialectical movement of questioning, discovery, and transformation. Anti-education names this suppression, but also its dialectical inversion: the recognition that by negating institutional suppression, we can open possibilities for emancipatory learning [8].

Thus, anti-education is both diagnostic (unmasking suppression) and generative (envisioning alternatives). It does not prescribe a singular model of pedagogy but insists on dismantling barriers to allow learning to emerge. Its originality lies in holding together critique and possibility, ontology and praxis, structures and contingencies [9].

The article proceeds in seven sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 outlines the theoretical background, situating anti-education within critical traditions and justifying the integration of realism, dialectics, and behaviorology. Section 3 details the methodological orientation, emphasizing thematic analysis as a bridge between philosophy and empirical research. Section 4 analyzes structural mechanisms of suppression, including standardization, hierarchy, and surveillance. Section 5 develops anti-education as a critical framework, synthesizing realism, dialectics, and behaviorology [10].

Section 6 provides an extended discussion, engaging critically with alternative perspectives and articulating the distinctiveness of anti-education, including a scientific critique of critical realism. Section 7 concludes by consolidating contributions, emphasizing normative stakes, and outlining implications for research, practice, and policy. The ambition is not modest reform but paradigm shift. Anti-education seeks to reframe how we think about learning and schooling, not as synonymous but as antagonistic. By diagnosing suppression and affirming emancipation, it contributes to the ongoing struggle to reclaim education as a practice of freedom.

2. Theoretical Background

The concept of anti-education emerged most prominently in the radical critique of Ivan Illich, who argued that schooling as an institution monopolizes learning, displaces community-based forms of knowledge, and reduces education to credentialism. For Illich, schools commodify knowledge by linking learning with certificates, thereby creating artificial scarcity and dependence on institutional validation. Education becomes less about expanding human potential and more about producing compliant workers and citizens. In this sense, anti-education does not advocate the rejection of learning, but rather the refusal of institutionalized schooling as the privileged means of accessing knowledge [11].

Paulo Freire deepens this critique through his analysis of the "banking model" of education. In such a model, students are treated as passive containers into which teachers deposit information. This approach negates dialogue, stifles critical reflection, and reproduces hierarchical relations of domination. Freire's alternative, rooted in dialogical pedagogy and the development of conscientização (critical consciousness), insists on education as a practice of freedom rather than domination. Anti-education resonates strongly with this view: it exposes how the very structures of formal schooling prevent the conditions for genuine dialogue and transformative learning [12].

Subsequent critical pedagogues, such as Henry Giroux, argue that under neoliberal conditions, schools have increasingly become sites of economic preparation rather than democratic engagement. Giroux stresses the cultural politics of education, whereby curricula and institutional practices reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies. Likewise, bell hooks advocates for education as a practice of freedom, emphasizing that true learning requires spaces where marginal voices are centered and critical dialogue is nurtured [13].

Thus, anti-education functions as a conceptual stance: it rejects the reified authority of institutions while affirming the emancipatory potential of dialogical and dialectical learning. It challenges the assumption that "schooling" is synonymous with "education," drawing attention instead to the ways institutions obstruct authentic learning.While Illich and Freire provide critical diagnoses, their approaches often leave unanswered the ontological question. how do educational structures reproduce domination across time and space? Critical realism, developed by Roy Bhaskar. This theory provides a philosophical framework for answering this question. It posits a stratified reality composed of three domains [14].

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The real (structures and causal mechanisms), the actual (events generated by those mechanisms), and the empirical (human experiences of events). This ontology allows us to move beyond surface-level descriptions of educational practice to analyze the deep structures that generate observable patterns [15].

Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach extends Bhaskar's insights into the analysis of education. Archer distinguishes between structural conditioning, social interaction, and structural elaboration, thereby emphasizing how education both constrains and is transformed by human agency over time. This approach reveals how institutional arrangements such as standardized testing or credentialing systems exert durable pressures on individual practice while also being subject to transformation through collective action [16].

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field resonate with critical realism, even if he does not explicitly adopt the label. Habitus denotes the durable dispositions shaped by social structures, while field describes the relational spaces where struggles over resources and legitimacy occur. Education, in this view, is a field in which symbolic capital (e.g., credentials) functions as a currency, reinforcing hierarchies. Critical realism helps clarify that such practices are not reducible to individual intentions but are generated by emergent structural properties [17]. Andrew Sayer further highlights the normative dimension: education matters because it shapes not only knowledge but also values, identities, and human flourishing. His insistence that social science must account for why things matter underscores the ethical stakes of educational critique. By adopting a critical realist lens, anti-education is reinterpreted as a structural diagnosis: schools are not merely failing due to inefficiency, but systematically reproducing domination because of underlying causal mechanisms.

3. Structural Barriers in Education

One of the most significant barriers embedded within modern education systems is the imposition of standardized curricula. Standardization, often justified as a means of ensuring equity and accountability, functions instead as a mechanism of control that narrows the scope of learning. By dictating the content, sequence, and outcomes of instruction, standardized curricula reduce teachers' autonomy and restrict students' opportunities for exploration and creativity [1].

Illich argued that the centralization of curricula commodifies knowledge, making it accessible only through formal institutions. Rather than nurturing intellectual autonomy, curricula prescribe what counts as valuable knowledge, reinforcing dominant cultural narratives while marginalizing local, experiential, and subaltern knowledges. This logic aligns with Bourdieu and Passeron's argument that curricula reproduce cultural capital, privileging the knowledge of dominant groups under the guise of neutrality.

Critical pedagogy highlights that standardization is not pedagogically neutral but politically charged. Freire emphasized that by treating students as passive recipients of pre-determined content, standardized curricula enforce the "banking model" of education, inhibiting dialogue and critical reflection. Giroux similarly observes that under neoliberal conditions, curriculum design increasingly emphasizes skills aligned with labor market needs, reducing education to economic preparation [18].

Thus, standardization erects barriers not only to creativity but to dialectical learning itself. It privileges conformity and compliance over critical thinking and reinforces the institutional logics that anti-education seeks to unmask. Another enduring barrier lies in the hierarchical structuring of teacher–student relations. In most educational systems, authority is concentrated in the figure of the teacher, who controls the flow of knowledge, assessment, and discipline. Freire identified this asymmetry as central to the banking model, where students are constructed as empty vessels to be filled by the teacher's knowledge.

This hierarchy is not simply pedagogical but structural. It mirrors broader patterns of authority in society, preparing students for subordination within hierarchical institutions such as corporations and states [14]. Willis's ethnographic study of working-class youth illustrates how classroom hierarchies socialize students into positions that replicate their eventual placement in the labor market.

From a critical realist perspective, hierarchical relations can be seen as emergent properties of institutional design. They persist not because of individual teacher choices but because the structure of schooling, classroom layouts, grading systems, disciplinary mechanisms, systematically positions teachers as authorities and students as subordinates [19]. Goffman's notion of "total institutions" is again relevant here, highlighting how routines and classifications constrain interactional possibilities.

The result is that hierarchical relations hinder the development of autonomy and dialogical learning. Students internalize passivity, while teachers are pressured to enforce compliance rather than foster reflection. Anti-education frames these dynamics not as unfortunate side effects but as systemic features designed to maintain order and reproduce authority.

Beyond explicit curricula, schools transmit values, norms, and expectations through what has been termed the "hidden curriculum" [14]. This hidden dimension encompasses the informal lessons conveyed through classroom routines, disciplinary practices, and institutional rituals. It teaches punctuality, obedience, competitiveness, and respect for hierarchy, traits prized by capitalist economies and bureaucratic organizations [5]. Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps explain how the hidden curriculum shapes durable dispositions.

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Through repeated exposure to school routines, students internalize orientations toward authority, competition, and self-regulation. These dispositions align with social class positions: middle-class students often possess the cultural capital to navigate the hidden curriculum successfully, while working-class students are more likely to experience alienation or exclusion [20]. Foucault emphasizes the disciplinary function of the hidden curriculum. Practices such as grading, ranking, and surveillance instill a sense of constant evaluation, producing self-regulating subjects who monitor their own behavior. This aligns with Skinner's insights into reinforcement: rewards and punishments embedded in schooling shape conduct not only externally but also through internalized norms.

Thus, the hidden curriculum constitutes a powerful barrier to emancipatory learning. While formal curricula may claim to promote creativity and critical thought, the hidden curriculum ensures conformity and compliance, reinforcing the structural reproduction of inequality.

Closely linked to the hidden curriculum are the disciplinary mechanisms through which schools regulate behavior. Foucault famously analyzed how modern institutions deploy surveillance to produce docile bodies. Schools exemplify this dynamic: timetables, classroom arrangements, hall passes, and surveillance technologies all function to monitor and regulate students' movements.

Goffman's analysis of total institutions highlights how such mechanisms reduce individuality and autonomy by imposing rigid routines. In classrooms, even the spatial arrangement of desks reflects disciplinary logic: rows oriented toward a single teacher enforce passivity and one-directional communication. Behaviorological analysis sharpens this critique by showing how these mechanisms operate through reinforcement: rewards for compliance (good grades, praise) and punishments for deviance (detention, poor evaluations) condition students' conduct [7].

The effect of these mechanisms extends beyond the school walls. Students habituated to surveillance and discipline carry these dispositions into workplaces and civic life, where they continue to conform to hierarchical authority [21]. This structural continuity underscores the role of schooling as preparation for subordination within broader systems of power.

Structural barriers in education cannot be fully understood without situating them within the political economy. Bowles and Gintis argued that schools reproduce capitalist social relations by preparing students for stratified roles in the labor market. Standardized testing, credentialing, and hierarchical authority serve to allocate students into positions consistent with class origins, thereby maintaining inequality. Illich critiqued this political economy more radically, arguing that the institutionalization of education transforms learning into a commodity.

Credentials function as a currency of cultural capital [33], conferring access to jobs and status while marginalizing those without formal schooling. Education thus becomes less about learning and more about legitimizing stratification. Critical realists emphasize that such reproduction is not deterministic but structured. Archer highlights that while education constrains agency, it also provides opportunities for resistance and transformation. Giroux similarly insists that schools are contested sites where dominant ideologies are reproduced but also challenged. Nevertheless, the dominant tendency of modern education, especially under neoliberal regimes, is to align schooling with labor market demands, thereby subordinating educational goals to economic imperatives [1].

This alignment constitutes a profound structural barrier: education is systematically organized to serve economic reproduction rather than emancipatory learning. Anti-education exposes this logic, challenging the assumption that education is inherently liberatory and highlighting its complicity in sustaining capitalist hierarchies.

Taken together, these dimensions, standardization, hierarchy, hidden curricula, discipline, and political economy, constitute structural barriers that suppress dialectical and emancipatory learning. From a critical realist perspective, these are not isolated shortcomings but emergent mechanisms of the educational system. They arise from deeper structures of capitalist society, cultural hegemony, and institutional design, reproducing domination across generations [4].

Behaviorology provides additional precision by showing how these barriers are enacted in daily practices through reinforcement and surveillance. Students' behaviors are shaped to conform to institutional expectations, while broader structures ensure the continuity of these patterns. Anti-education functions as the critical lens that unifies these insights, diagnosing education as a system designed not to liberate but to regulate.

The innovative contribution of this framework is to demonstrate that barriers to learning are not incidental inefficiencies to be corrected through reform. Rather, they are structural mechanisms that sustain social hierarchies. Recognizing this requires moving beyond reformist discourses and toward a fundamental rethinking of education as a liberatory practice.

4. Behaviorological Analysis

Behaviorology, as originally articulated by B. F. Skinner, offers a scientific framework for analyzing observable conduct and the contingencies that shape it. Unlike psychological perspectives that rely on inferred inner states, behaviorology directs attention to the environmental conditions, reinforcements, punishments, schedules of consequence, that generate and sustain behavior. Education, from this standpoint, can be understood as a system of contingencies designed to regulate student conduct.

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This orientation aligns with and extends critical critiques of schooling. Illich argued that institutionalized education functions less as a means of fostering learning and more as a system of social control. Freire highlighted how the "banking model" positions students as passive, reinforcing obedience rather than critical consciousness. Behaviorology provides a powerful analytic lens for unpacking the mechanisms through which such control is enacted at the micro-level of classrooms and institutional practices.

Integrating behaviorology with critical realism is a central innovation of this article. Critical realism emphasizes the stratified nature of social reality [6], enabling us to situate behavioral contingencies within deeper structures. Reinforcement systems in classrooms, for example, are not isolated practices but emergent features of broader institutional logics and political economies. Behaviorology supplies the micro-level precision, while critical realism provides the macro-structural depth, producing a comprehensive analysis of education as a system of regulation and reproduction.

At its core, education relies on reinforcement: desired behaviors are rewarded, and undesired behaviors are punished. Grades, praise, stickers, honor rolls, and graduation ceremonies function as positive reinforcements; detentions, failing grades, and exclusion serve as punishments. These contingencies are embedded in classroom routines, shaping students' behaviors over time.

Skinner demonstrated how reinforcement schedules determine the persistence and frequency of behavior. In education, continuous reinforcement (e.g., immediate praise) is often replaced by variable schedules (e.g., periodic testing), which create resilient behavioral patterns. Students learn not simply to recall content but to anticipate evaluation, to internalize standards, and to align their conduct with institutional expectations.

This reinforcement regime aligns closely with Foucault's analysis of discipline. Schools operate as spaces of surveillance and normalization, producing subjects who regulate themselves in anticipation of evaluation. From a behaviorological standpoint, this internalization is the result of reinforcement histories: behaviors aligned with compliance are consistently rewarded, while those associated with resistance are punished or marginalized.

The reinforcement of compliance constitutes a profound structural barrier. While framed as "motivating learning," it in fact conditions conformity, narrowing the space for dialectical or emancipatory engagement. Anti-education exposes how reinforcement systems, under the guise of pedagogy, serve to produce docile subjects.

Punishment is another critical element of educational behaviorology. Schools deploy exclusionary practices, detentions, suspensions, expulsions, not only to correct behavior but also to mark and marginalize students who do not conform. These practices disproportionately affect students from marginalized groups, reinforcing structural inequalities [3].

From a behaviorological perspective, punishment does not eliminate behavior but suppresses it temporarily [7]. Often, it generates avoidance or resistance rather than genuine transformation. For example, students who are punished for noncompliance may withdraw, disengage, or resist covertly. The reliance on punishment reveals the coercive underpinnings of education: it is less about fostering understanding than about enforcing conformity.

Critical realists would emphasize that such punitive practices are not merely the choices of individual teachers but emergent mechanisms of institutional structures. Exclusionary discipline reflects deeper dynamics of social stratification and control [19]. The disproportionate targeting of working-class and minority students [2] illustrates how punishment functions structurally to reproduce inequality.

Surveillance is a pervasive mechanism in education, extending from traditional classroom monitoring to digital learning platforms. Foucault's notion of the panopticon aptly describes this environment: students behave as if they are constantly being observed, even when direct supervision is absent. This constant monitoring ensures compliance and self-regulation.

From a behaviorological perspective, surveillance operates as a generalized reinforcement schedule. The possibility of observation functions as a discriminative stimulus: students act in ways consistent with expected norms to avoid punishment or secure rewards. Over time, they internalize these contingencies, developing self-discipline even outside formal supervision [7].

Goffman's insights into total institutions further highlight how surveillance reduces individuality by imposing routines and classifications. The increasing use of technologies—closed-circuit cameras, digital attendance systems, online learning analytics—intensifies surveillance, embedding it into every facet of educational practice [22].

Not all reinforcements are coercive in appearance; many appear benign or even benevolent. Praise, awards, scholarships, and recognition ceremonies exemplify positive reinforcements that reward high achievement. However, behaviorological analysis reveals that these reinforcements sustain broader ideological structures, particularly the ideology of meritocracy.

Meritocracy suggests that rewards are distributed based on individual effort and ability. Yet sociological critiques demonstrate that access to these rewards is profoundly shaped by social class, race, and gender [2]. Positive reinforcements in education, while appearing neutral, disproportionately advantage those already possessing cultural and economic capital.

From a behaviorological standpoint, meritocratic rewards condition students to equate compliance and achievement with moral worth.

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Those who succeed are praised not only for their performance but for embodying institutional norms. Those who fail are stigmatized as lacking effort or ability, obscuring structural inequalities.

The hidden curriculum, the implicit transmission of values, norms, and expectations, can be illuminated through behaviorological analysis. Many of its lessons are conveyed not through explicit instruction but through reinforcement contingencies embedded in routines. For example, punctuality is reinforced by praise and good marks, while lateness is punished by reprimands or penalties.

Behaviorology demonstrates how these dispositions are conditioned through reinforcement histories. Critical realism adds depth by situating these practices within structural mechanisms: the hidden curriculum emerges from the institutional role of schooling within capitalist societies [19].

Behaviorology also highlights how reinforcement systems are shaped by broader political economies. For instance, standardized testing regimes function as large-scale reinforcement systems, rewarding schools, teachers, and students for compliance with state mandates. These systems reflect neoliberal logics that prioritize efficiency, accountability, and competition [1].

While much of the behaviorological analysis emphasizes compliance and regulation, it is also important to recognize the possibilities of resistance and transformation. Critical realism highlights that structures both constrain and enable agency [19]. Students and teachers may resist dominant reinforcement systems, creating alternative spaces of learning.

Freirean pedagogy emphasizes dialogue and collective reflection, creating reinforcement systems that reward critical questioning rather than passive compliance [23]. Bell hooks advocates for engaged pedagogy, where reinforcements are structured around mutual respect, care, and empowerment. From a behaviorological perspective, such practices represent alternative contingencies: they shape behavior through positive reinforcements aligned with autonomy, creativity, and solidarity.

The integration of behaviorology, critical realism, and anti-education provides a powerful framework for analyzing structural barriers in education. Behaviorology reveals how reinforcement and punishment shape conduct at the micro-level, producing compliance and conformity. Critical realism situates these contingencies within emergent structures, showing how they reproduce broader inequalities. Anti-education provides the critical stance that unmasks these dynamics as barriers to authentic learning.

5. Anti-Education as a Critical Framework

The concept of anti-education has too often been treated as a provocative slogan rather than a rigorous theoretical framework. Ivan Illich's Deschooling Society remains foundational, yet its radical rejection of institutional schooling has often been misinterpreted as a wholesale rejection of learning itself. The task here is to reconstruct anti-education as a philosophical and analytical framework that not only critiques the barriers of institutionalized schooling but also illuminates the conditions of possibility for emancipatory learning.

This reconstruction requires philosophical precision. Anti-education must be situated within the dialectical tradition that emphasizes contradiction and transformation [6]. It must also be linked to critical realism's insistence on the reality of social structures and emergent mechanisms [19]. Further, behaviorology provides the empirical grounding to demonstrate how institutions shape conduct at the micro-level [7]. Anti-education is thus not a negation of education but a critical stance that diagnoses the systemic suppression of dialectical learning and articulates the possibility of rupture.

Illich argued that schools monopolize learning by linking it to credentials, thereby creating artificial scarcity. This monopoly transforms knowledge into a commodity and reinforces dependency on institutions. His notion of "learning webs", decentralized, community-based networks of exchange, was an attempt to envision alternatives to institutional schooling.

Philosophically, Illich's critique is grounded in a suspicion of institutional rationality. Schools, he argued, are not neutral but inherently self-legitimating systems. They reproduce themselves by convincing society that learning is only valid when institutionally certified. This insight anticipates later critiques of neoliberalism, where credentialism functions as a gatekeeping mechanism to labor markets [24]. Anti-education, in Illich's sense, therefore signifies an epistemological rupture: the refusal to equate education with schooling. Yet Illich's work is often criticized for its utopianism [25]. By reconstructing anti-education through critical realism and behaviorology, this article seeks to move beyond utopia, grounding Illich's radical vision in a systematic ontology of structures and mechanisms.

Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed complements Illich by offering a positive vision of emancipatory learning. Freire critiqued the banking model, proposing dialogical pedagogy, where teacher and student co-create knowledge through praxis. Central to this is conscientização (critical consciousness): the process by which learners become aware of the structural forces shaping their lives and act to transform them.

Anti-education resonates with Freire in that both reject the authority of institutions to define knowledge. However, anti-education goes further by diagnosing the systemic barriers that prevent dialogical learning from flourishing within institutionalized settings. Schools, organized around hierarchy and standardization, cannot accommodate genuine dialogue without transforming their structural logics.

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To articulate anti-education philosophically, it must be situated within the dialectical tradition. Hegel described dialectic as the unfolding of contradictions that propel historical development. Marx radicalized this notion, emphasizing material contradictions as the motor of social transformation. Bhaskar extended this into dialectical critical realism, identifying dialectic as the "pulse of freedom," where structures are transformed through contradictions and struggles.

Education, from this perspective, is a contradictory field. On the one hand, it promises emancipation through knowledge; on the other, it reproduces domination through standardization, hierarchy, and surveillance. Anti-education captures this contradiction by emphasizing that the emancipatory potential of learning is systematically obstructed by the institutional form of schooling. Critical realism provides the ontological depth necessary to reconstruct anti-education as a framework. Bhaskar's distinction between the real, actual, and empirical domains allows us to see how educational practices (empirical) are generated by events (actual) rooted in structural mechanisms (real). Standardization, hierarchical relations, and surveillance are not merely pedagogical techniques but emergent features of social structures that reproduce inequality.

While critical realism provides structural depth, behaviorology illuminates the micro-mechanisms through which suppression operates. Skinner showed how reinforcement and punishment shape conduct. In education, these contingencies condition compliance: good grades reward conformity, while punishment suppresses resistance. Thus, anti-education can be articulated as a framework with two dimensions: diagnostic and generative. As diagnostic, anti-education exposes the structural and behavioral mechanisms that suppress emancipatory learning. As generative, anti-education opens space for alternatives. By negating the authority of institutions to define learning, it affirms the possibility of dialogical, decentralized, and emancipatory practices.

The ethics of anti-education lies in its refusal to accept the reduction of learning to credentialism or compliance. It insists that learning must be valued as a condition of autonomy and emancipation. This ethical stance distinguishes anti-education from technocratic critiques of schooling, grounding it instead in a philosophy of freedom.

Anti-education, reconstructed through critical realism, behaviorology, and dialectics, emerges as a rigorous critical framework. It is not merely a polemic against schools but a systematic analysis of how institutionalized education functions to suppress emancipatory learning. Its innovation lies in uniting philosophical precision, empirical rigor, and normative clarity.

6.X Critiquing Critical Realism in Education

Critical realism has provided education theorists with a powerful philosophical ontology, emphasizing stratified reality, emergent mechanisms, and the interplay of structure and agency [5]. It has enabled researchers to move beyond positivist empiricism and poststructuralist relativism, offering a way to analyze how educational structures generate inequalities while remaining open to transformation.

Yet, from the standpoint of anti-education, critical realism remains incomplete. While invaluable as a structural diagnosis, it lacks sufficient attention to the regulatory micro-mechanisms that constitute the lived experience of schooling, and it underestimates the dialectical and normative dimensions of learning. This subsection develops a scientific critique of critical realism's contributions and limitations, highlighting how anti-education both draws upon and transcends realist insights. Three key contributions must be acknowledged. First, critical realism insists on the ontological reality of educational structures. For Archer, schools constrain and enable agents through structural conditioning, not merely through discursive construction. This helps explain why inequality persists despite reformist interventions: it is not reducible to individual prejudice but rooted in durable institutional mechanisms.

Second, critical realism emphasizes emergence. Educational outcomes cannot be reduced to teacher actions or student intentions alone; they emerge from the interaction of multiple mechanisms across levels of reality [16]. This resonates with analyses of how standardized testing, surveillance, and hidden curricula combine to reproduce inequality.

Third, critical realism affirms the possibility of transformation. By distinguishing between the real, actual, and empirical [11], it shows that while structures are durable, they are not immutable. Archer's morphogenetic approach highlights how collective action can elaborate or transform structures over time. This aligns with the emancipatory orientation of anti-education. Despite these contributions, critical realism risks excessive abstraction in educational analysis. By focusing on deep generative mechanisms, it sometimes neglects the specific, observable processes through which domination is enacted in classrooms. For example, while Archer describes structural conditioning in broad terms, she rarely specifies how reinforcement, punishment, or surveillance produce compliance at the level of student behavior.

From the standpoint of anti-education, this abstraction is problematic. Without attention to the concrete mechanisms of conduct regulation, critical realism can describe inequality without fully explaining how it is reproduced daily. Behaviorology addresses this gap by analyzing the reinforcement contingencies that sustain compliance [7].

Anti-education therefore complements critical realism by grounding its abstractions in empirical processes and Critical realism also struggles with normativity.

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Bhaskar introduced dialectical critical realism to address the "pulse of freedom," but much realist educational research remains focused on descriptive analysis of structures. While valuable, this risks bracketing the ethical stakes of education.

Anti-education insists that education is never neutral. By monopolizing learning and conditioning compliance, schools obstruct human flourishing. Sayer argues that social science must account for what matters to people, but this insight has not been consistently developed in realist educational theory. Anti-education advances this by making the normative dimension explicit: education must be critiqued not only for inequality but for its suppression of dialectical learning, which is ethically indefensible.

Another tension lies in critical realism's treatment of agency. While Archer insists that structures condition but do not determine action, realist analyses of education often emphasize reproduction more than resistance. These risks echoing the determinism often attributed to Bourdieu. Anti-education diverges by foregrounding the dialectical contradictions within education. Schools are not simply sites of reproduction but of struggle, where learners may resist reinforcement systems and generate alternative practices [23]. By integrating dialectics, anti-education avoids the determinist tendency of structural realism, emphasizing the potential for rupture and transformation.

Perhaps the most significant limitation of critical realism for educational analysis is its neglect of behavioral mechanisms. Realists describe emergent structures but rarely explain how these structures are enacted at the level of daily interaction. Behaviorology shows that compliance is sustained through reinforcement and punishment [7]. Foucault described this as discipline; behaviorology specifies how it works. Without this micro-level precision, critical realism risks leaving a gap between abstract structures and concrete practices. Anti-education fills this gap by integrating behaviorological analysis, showing how institutional logics are operationalized through observable contingencies.

The anti-education framework therefore both builds on and diverges from critical realism. It builds on realism by affirming that education's failures are structural, emergent, and real. But it diverges in four crucial respects: (1) against abstraction, insisting on descending into concrete practices; (2) normative clarity, foregrounding the ethical stakes of education; (3) dialectical emphasis, interpreting structures as contradictions; and (4) behaviorological integration, adding empirical precision.

Critical realism remains indispensable for analyzing education's structural mechanisms, but it is insufficient alone. From the perspective of anti-education, realism must be radicalized through dialectics, specified through behaviorology, and oriented normatively toward emancipation. Only then can we fully explain how education functions as a system of domination and how it might be transformed.

7. Discussion

The task of discussion is to situate the anti-education framework within broader scholarly debates, critically engaging with alternative perspectives and highlighting its distinctiveness. Anti-education, reconstructed through the integration of critical realism and behaviorology, is positioned not simply as one critique among many but as a paradigm shift in how we understand education's structural barriers and emancipatory potential. Ivan Illich's Deschooling Society remains one of the most radical interventions in educational theory. His argument that schools monopolize learning and transform knowledge into a commodity was prescient, anticipating critiques of neoliberal credentialism [1].

However, Illich's work has often been dismissed as utopian. Critics argue that the proposal of "learning webs" is impractical, failing to account for the enduring role of institutions in organizing large-scale social life [4]. From the perspective of anti-education as reconstructed here, Illich's strength lies in his uncompromising critique of institutional authority.

Yet his limitation is precisely the absence of a systematic ontology to explain why schools reproduce domination so effectively. Critical realism provides that missing depth. By distinguishing between structures, events, and experiences [5], it shows that education's failures are not merely ideological but structural. Illich's suspicion of institutions resonates, but without ontological grounding, his vision risks being dismissed as anarchic idealism. Paulo Freire remains a towering figure in critical pedagogy. His insistence on dialogical learning and conscientization provides a powerful counterpoint to the banking model.

Yet Freire's framework also encounters limitations. His emphasis on dialogue risks underestimating the structural constraints that render genuine dialogue nearly impossible within institutional schooling. As critics have noted, dialogical pedagogy can be co-opted into reformist discourses without addressing the deeper mechanisms of reproduction [26]. The framework advanced here builds on Freire's emancipatory vision but diverges in two respects. First, by integrating critical realism, it emphasizes that oppression is not merely a matter of teacher–student relations but the product of emergent structures. Hierarchical relations, standardized curricula, and credential systems are not accidents that can be overcome by goodwill or dialogue; they are systemic features reproduced through causal mechanisms [27]. Behaviorology clarifies why dialogical pedagogy struggles against the grain of institutional practices: reinforcement and punishment contingencies systematically favor compliance over critical questioning [7].

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Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, field, and cultural capital remains central to sociological analyses of education. His account of how schools reproduce class hierarchies by privileging the cultural capital of dominant groups has profoundly shaped critical scholarship. However, Bourdieu's framework has also been critiqued for determinism. By emphasizing reproduction, it risks underestimating agency and the possibility of transformation [2].

Critical realism offers a corrective by highlighting the interplay of structure and agency. Archer's morphogenetic approach insists that structures condition but do not determine action. This dialectical interplay allows for the possibility of resistance and transformation. Anti-education draws on Bourdieu's insight into reproduction but avoids determinism by embedding it in a realist ontology that accounts for agency.

Michel Foucault's analysis of discipline and surveillance has profoundly influenced educational critique. His concept of the panopticon illustrates how schools produce self-regulating subjects through surveillance and normalization. Yet Foucault's framework is also limited. His refusal to distinguish between different levels of reality leads to a flattening of analysis. Power is everywhere, diffuse, and omnipresent, but this very ubiquity makes it difficult to explain why particular mechanisms persist or how they might be transformed [19].

The anti-education framework diverges here by grounding disciplinary practices in critical realism. Surveillance and normalization are not diffuse phenomena but emergent mechanisms situated within specific structures—economic, cultural, and institutional. This ontological depth allows us to move beyond Foucault's genealogical description toward causal explanation.

Henry Giroux has been instrumental in articulating how neoliberalism reshapes education. His critique of market logics, privatization, and the reduction of schools to sites of economic preparation resonates strongly with anti-education. Yet Giroux's work often remains within the discourse of cultural politics, emphasizing ideology while offering limited ontological grounding. His call for critical pedagogy, while ethically compelling, sometimes lacks clarity on how structural mechanisms reproduce neoliberal logics.

The framework advanced here diverges by integrating critical realism, which insists on analyzing the real causal mechanisms underpinning neoliberal education. Standardized testing, accountability regimes, and credential systems are not merely ideological impositions but structural mechanisms embedded in economic and institutional logics [26]. Behaviorology further demonstrates how neoliberal imperatives are enacted through reinforcement systems that condition competitiveness, individualism, and self-regulation.

Behaviorology itself is not without critics. Many argue that Skinner's framework is reductionist, ignoring internal states, meaning, and agency. In educational contexts, critics claim that behaviorist methods reduce learning to rote conditioning, neglecting creativity and understanding [27].

Anti-education acknowledges these critiques but reinterprets behaviorology within a critical realist ontology. Reinforcement and punishment are understood not as the whole of human action but as one dimension of causality situated within emergent structures [28]. This synthesis avoids reductionism by situating micro-processes within macro-structures.

The framework advanced here diverges from earlier critiques in several distinctive ways. First, unlike Illich or Giroux, anti-education is grounded in critical realism, which explains not only that education reproduces domination but how structural mechanisms generate this reproduction. Second, it incorporates behaviorology to analyze how reinforcement mechanisms operate at the micro-level of classrooms, linking them to macro-structures of domination.

Third, it employs thematic analysis as a methodological bridge, ensuring that philosophical critiques remain empirically grounded. The implications of this framework are profound. If anti-education is correct, then reformist approaches to schooling, curricular reform, improved teacher training, or increased funding, cannot resolve education's contradictions. Structural barriers are not inefficiencies but systemic features. To reclaim learning as emancipation requires a paradigm shift: dismantling the institutional logics of standardization, credentialism, and surveillance.

This does not mean abandoning education but reimagining it beyond schooling. As Illich suggested, decentralized learning webs could foster autonomy, though these must be grounded in realist analyses of structure and contingency to avoid utopianism. Freirean dialogue and hooks' engaged pedagogy remain vital, but they must be embedded in structural transformations that remove barriers to emancipatory learning.

In this synthesis, anti-education articulates both critique and possibility. It insists that emancipation is possible, but only if we confront education's structural logics head-on.

8. Conclusion

This article has argued that education, as presently constituted, systematically suppresses emancipatory and dialectical learning. The barriers analyzed in previous sections, standardization, hierarchy, hidden curricula, surveillance, and credentialism, are not accidental inefficiencies but structural mechanisms deeply embedded in the institutional logic of schooling. Far from fulfilling its promise of liberation, education often functions as a system of regulation, reproducing inequalities and conditioning compliance.

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The framework of anti-education has been advanced here as both a diagnostic and generative orientation. As diagnostic, it unmasks the ways in which schooling obstructs the very learning it claims to promote. As generative, it insists on the possibility of alternative modes of learning rooted in autonomy, dialogue, and emancipation. This dual orientation was articulated through a synthesis of three philosophical resources: critical realism, dialectics, and behaviorology.

Critical realism provides the ontological grounding, revealing education as a stratified and emergent structure where causal mechanisms generate patterns of reproduction and inequality [5]. Dialectics situates education within a field of contradiction, where emancipation is both promised and foreclosed, making transformation possible through negation [29]. Behaviorology, in turn, illuminates the micro-processes through which institutions regulate conduct via reinforcement and punishment [7]. Together, these perspectives reconstruct anti-education as a rigorous philosophical framework capable of diagnosing education's failures and articulating conditions for its transformation.

Critical realism's contribution to educational theory lies in its insistence on ontological depth. By distinguishing between the real (mechanisms), the actual (events), and the empirical (experiences), Bhaskar provided a framework for analyzing education as a generative structure rather than a mere collection of practices. Archer's morphogenetic approach extended this by analyzing how structures condition and are transformed by agency. Yet critical realism risks abstraction. It describes mechanisms but often neglects the specific processes by which these mechanisms are enacted in classrooms. Anti-education extends realism by integrating behaviorology, grounding structural analysis in the concrete contingencies of reinforcement, punishment, and surveillance.

Hegel described dialectic as the movement of contradiction, where negation opens the path to transformation [30]. Marx radicalized this insight, situating contradiction in material conditions and class struggle [31]. Bhaskar recast dialectics as the "pulse of freedom," emphasizing the emancipatory potential of negation [32]. Skinner's work on reinforcement demonstrated how environments shape behavior through contingencies. Though often critiqued for reductionism [27], behaviorology provides unmatched precision in explaining how compliance is produced. When integrated with critical realism, behaviorology avoids reductionism by situating contingencies within structural logics [28].

A further contribution of this article lies in its methodological orientation. The use of thematic analysis [21] demonstrates how abstract philosophical critique can be operationalized in empirical research. Themes such as standardization, surveillance, and credentialism were identified not as isolated practices but as recurring mechanisms that instantiate structural logics.

This methodological orientation resists the dichotomy between theoretical abstraction and empirical description. Holloway and Todres stress the importance of coherence across levels of analysis, while Joffe emphasizes thematic analysis as a bridge between lived experience and theoretical frameworks [29]. By applying thematic analysis within an anti-educational framework, this article illustrates how philosophy can guide empirical inquiry without collapsing into positivism or relativism.The framework advanced here diverges from earlier critiques in several distinctive ways: ontology grounded (critical realism), empirical precision (behaviorology), dialectical orientation (Bhaskar, Hegelian-Marxian), and normative clarity (Sayer, hooks). It insists that education's failures are structural and that emancipation requires structural transformation [30].

The normative claim is that learning is a human right, and institutions that obstruct it commit ethical violence. This reframes the critique of education: it is not merely failing to achieve efficiency but betraying its emancipatory promise. Anti-education therefore insists on an ethical imperative: to dismantle structural barriers in the name of freedom. Anti-education opens new avenues for educational research. Scholars can apply its framework to empirical studies, using thematic analysis to identify mechanisms of suppression across contexts [31]. Research could examine how reinforcement systems in standardized testing reproduce inequalities, or how surveillance technologies shape student conduct [32-34].

The practical implications are equally significant. If education's failures are structural, reformist interventions are insufficient. Curricular changes, increased funding, or teacher training cannot resolve contradictions that are embedded in institutional logics [35]. Policy must move beyond reform to transformation. Credentialism must be challenged, standardization dismantled, and surveillance resisted. Alternative educational spaces, community-based, dialogical, emancipatory, must be nurtured. The argument culminates in a call for a paradigm shift. Anti-education insists that education, as schooling, is structurally designed to suppress dialectical learning. To reclaim learning as liberation requires moving beyond schooling as we know it. This does not mean rejecting education altogether but reimagining it as a practice of freedom [36].

Anti-education is not merely a critique but a philosophy of emancipation. It unites ontological realism, dialectical analysis, and behavioral precision to diagnose barriers and envision alternatives. It insists that emancipation is not optional but necessary, not utopian but urgent.

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