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RECEIVED 25 July 2024

ACCEPTED 07 March 2025

PUBLISHED 10 June 2025

CITATION

Cross BM (2025) The pharmacology of the
oppressed: decolonizing *Cannabis* science in
higher education.
Front. Educ. 10:1470700.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1470700

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The pharmacology of the oppressed: decolonizing *Cannabis* science in higher education

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This analysis explores the potential of Paulo Freire's pedagogical framework to decolonize *Cannabis* science education, focusing on the dynamic relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor within the context of *Cannabis* criminalization and legalization. It examines the historical, cultural, and racialized dimensions of *Cannabis* policies and their implications for marginalized communities, particularly American Indigenous, Black and Latinx populations. Drawing on Freire's critique of traditional, hierarchical models of education, the paper argues for a dialogical, participatory approach to *Cannabis* education that fosters critical consciousness and social transformation. The analysis discusses the role of *Cannabis* science in perpetuating or challenging systemic injustices and proposes a curriculum that integrates diverse perspectives from biology, sociology, and history. By incorporating Freire's principles, *Cannabis* education can empower students to critically engage with both the science of *Cannabis* and the broader societal impacts of its criminalization and commercialization. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for *Cannabis* education to not only teach the science of *Cannabis* but to also challenge inequities and promote social justice, advocating for a holistic, interdisciplinary curriculum that empowers students to become agents of change in *Cannabis* policy and practice.

KEYWORDS

stem education, cannabis education, Paulo Freire, decolonial methodologies, social justice, higher learning institutions

Introduction

The intersection of *Cannabis* education and social justice in contemporary society provides an opportunity not only to explore the pharmacology and therapeutic potential of *Cannabis* but also to critically examine its historical, cultural, and racialized implications. While much of the academic focus has centered on the scientific aspects of *Cannabis*, it is crucial to recognize that the *Cannabis* plant's social, political, and cultural narratives are equally significant. The War on Drugs, which began in the 1980s, has had profound and far-reaching consequences, particularly for Black and Latino communities. These groups have been disproportionately affected by harsh *Cannabis*-related criminal justice policies, with arrest rates and incarceration disproportionately impacting these populations despite comparable usage rates across racial lines (Alexander, 2011; Daniels et al., 2021). As a result, *Cannabis* policies have become deeply embedded in systemic racism, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization and oppression for communities of color.

The persistent legacy of racial discrimination within *Cannabis* policies continues to shape not only criminal justice outcomes but also the educational narratives surrounding *Cannabis*. *Cannabis* science education, traditionally rooted in mainstream, Western frameworks, often overlooks the critical intersections of science, race, and social justice. As *Cannabis* becomes increasingly legalized in various parts of the world, the conversation around its use and regulation remains predominantly focused on economic, legal, and medical aspects, while failing to address the ways in which these developments impact marginalized communities (Falcon, 2021). Consequently, *Cannabis* education has remained somewhat disconnected from the broader racial justice conversations and policy reforms that are urgently needed (Brown, 2022; DiLoreto, 2022).

This disconnect between *Cannabis* science and social justice calls for a reimagining of how *Cannabis* is taught in academic settings. Paulo Freire's pedagogical principles, outlined in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, offer a transformative framework for *Cannabis* education. Freire critiques traditional educational models, which he describes as the “banking” concept of education, where knowledge is merely deposited into passive students. This hierarchical structure perpetuates inequality and hinders critical thinking, as students are denied the opportunity to engage with knowledge as active participants. Freire's alternative approach emphasizes dialogue, collaboration, and critical reflection, encouraging students to connect their lived experiences with academic learning and to challenge oppressive systems of power (Freire, 1970). By applying these Freirian principles to *Cannabis* education, we can cultivate a learning environment where students are not only empowered with scientific knowledge but also with the tools to critically engage with the racial, political, and historical contexts that shape *Cannabis* policies (Held, 2023; O'Neill et al., 2023).

Through this lens, *Cannabis* science education becomes an avenue for social transformation, one that confronts the longstanding legacy of *Cannabis* criminalization and explores how current policies continue to perpetuate inequality. In particular, the application of Freire's pedagogy provides a means to bridge the divide between scientific inquiry and social justice, allowing for a more holistic and inclusive approach to the study of *Cannabis*. Here, we explore the potential of Freire's pedagogy as a tool for decolonizing *Cannabis* science education. This is an analysis of the power dynamics between the oppressed and the oppressor and how these dynamics are deeply embedded in *Cannabis* policies and educational practices (Sreenivasan et al., 2022). Furthermore, it proposes how a decolonized *Cannabis* curriculum, informed by Freire's principles, could empower future *Cannabis* scholars to understand not only the science behind the plant but also the broader social implications of *Cannabis* use, criminalization, and legalization (Higgins, 2021; Ordoñez, 2025).

By integrating both scientific knowledge and critical social justice perspectives, a Freirian *Cannabis* curriculum offers students the opportunity to engage with *Cannabis* not only as a scientific object of study but also as a symbol of resistance, social change, and cultural significance. In doing so, it creates a space where students are encouraged to question the status quo, challenge inequities, and

become agents of change within both the field of *Cannabis* science and the broader societal context. Ultimately our analysis calls for the development of a more inclusive and socially just *Cannabis* science curriculum—one that empowers students to understand the complexities of *Cannabis* within a broader framework of social, cultural, and political justice (Canevez et al., 2022; Casto, 2022).

Freire's pedagogical principles: the need for a dialogical approach in *Cannabis* education

In Paulo Freire's framework, the traditional “banking” model of education is a tool for oppression, in which the educator “deposits” knowledge into the passive student. This creates a hierarchical, one-sided relationship where students are expected to absorb and memorize information without engaging critically or reflecting on the broader implications of what they are learning. According to Freire (1970), this model diminishes the student's agency, dehumanizes the learning process, and stifles critical engagement. Freire advocates for a dialogical approach to education, where learning is a mutual, participatory process between teacher and student, each co-creating knowledge through shared reflection and action. This pedagogical shift challenges the traditional, one-way flow of knowledge and instead emphasizes critical thinking, collaboration, and the construction of knowledge that is based on lived experiences and the contextual understanding of students (Freire, 1970; Cicek et al., 2023). By applying this framework to *Cannabis* education, we move beyond simply conveying scientific facts about *Cannabis* and toward fostering an environment where students critically engage with the subject matter in relation to their own lives and social contexts.

In the context of *Cannabis* science education, a Freirian approach would go beyond teaching students about the chemical properties of *Cannabis*, its biological effects, or its therapeutic uses. While these topics are indeed important, they must be framed within broader historical, social, and political contexts. *Cannabis* has been criminalized and marginalized, particularly within communities of color, and this criminalization continues to shape public attitudes toward the plant and its users. The War on Drugs, and its lasting legacy, has had a profound impact on Black and Latino communities, who have faced disproportionate arrests, convictions, and social stigmatization related to *Cannabis* use (DiLoreto, 2022; Ordoñez, 2025). These historical injustices must be critically examined in the classroom as part of any meaningful *Cannabis* education.

A Freirian approach would encourage students to critically engage with the complex relationships between *Cannabis*, criminal justice, public health, and race. For example, the disproportionate targeting of Black and Latino individuals for *Cannabis*-related offenses has persisted despite changing legal frameworks around *Cannabis*. Arrest rates for *Cannabis* possession are consistently higher among these communities, even in states where *Cannabis* has been legalized, reflecting systemic racial inequities in both law enforcement practices and the broader criminal justice system (Higgins, 2021). Freire's dialogical model allows students to explore how such systemic injustices shape public perceptions of *Cannabis*, its users, and the policies that continue to perpetuate stigmatization. Engaging with these issues through dialogue and reflection can empower students to question long-held assumptions about *Cannabis*, encouraging them

Abbreviations: CBD, Cannabidiol; CBDA, Cannabidiolic Acid; THC, Tetrahydrocannabinol; THCA, Tetrahydrocannabinolic Acid; PUIs, Predominantly Undergraduate Institutions; HSIs, Hispanic-Serving Institutions; BSIs, Black-Serving Institutions.

to challenge historical narratives and reconsider the role of science in perpetuating societal inequities (Held, 2023; O'Neill et al., 2023).

Moreover, Freire emphasizes that education should be rooted in the lived experiences of the students. This is particularly important in the context of *Cannabis* education, as students' personal and community experiences with *Cannabis* are integral to understanding the broader societal implications of the plant. A Freirian *Cannabis* curriculum would not be top-down or detached from students' realities. Instead, students, particularly those from marginalized communities, could share their personal experiences with the plant, whether related to legal challenges, medical use, or cultural significance. These personal narratives would help to co-create an educational experience that reflects the diversity of students' backgrounds and lived realities (Canevez et al., 2022; Casto, 2022).

By incorporating students' experiences and knowledge into the curriculum, a Freirian approach fosters a sense of ownership and agency over the learning process. This collaborative environment makes the science of *Cannabis* not only relevant to students' lives but also empowers them to see their education as part of a larger social struggle for equity and justice. Through active participation in this learning process, students are encouraged to see themselves not just as consumers of knowledge, but as active agents of change in the fight for racial justice and decriminalization. Additionally, this approach promotes a deeper understanding of *Cannabis* beyond the biomedical model, integrating perspectives from the humanities, social sciences, and critical race theory (Held, 2023; O'Neill et al., 2023).

Finally, a Freirian *Cannabis* curriculum encourages students to consider how science itself can be a tool of both liberation and oppression. For example, medical and scientific research on *Cannabis* has often been shaped by political agendas, leading to narratives that focus on the dangers of the drug while ignoring its medicinal and cultural significance for marginalized communities (Room et al., 2010). Freire's pedagogy promotes critical reflection on how scientific knowledge is constructed and how it can perpetuate or challenge systems of power. By examining these issues through a dialogical approach, students can develop a nuanced understanding of this plant and its complex role in society. This process not only empowers them to challenge existing systems but also equips them to contribute to a more just and inclusive future of *Cannabis*, itself (Held, 2023; O'Neill et al., 2023).

The oppressed/oppressor dynamic in *Cannabis* education

Paulo Freire's concept of the oppressed and the oppressor provides a critical lens through which to analyze the current state of *Cannabis* education, particularly when considering the historical, social, and economic dimensions of *Cannabis* criminalization. Freire's pedagogy emphasizes the importance of recognizing the power dynamics between the oppressor and the oppressed, and how these dynamics shape knowledge production, power structures, and the perpetuation of inequalities. Historically, *Cannabis* has been wielded as a tool of control, especially against marginalized communities. The legal and societal framework surrounding *Cannabis* has been influenced by racial prejudices and class divisions that have consistently targeted Black, Latino, and immigrant communities (Sreenivasan et al., 2022).

In the early 20th century, *Cannabis* became linked to racialized communities—particularly Mexican immigrants and Black Americans. During this period, *Cannabis* was demonized in the media as a dangerous substance that incited violence, criminality, and moral degradation, further cementing its role as a tool for social control. This vilification was closely tied to racial and class-based fears, and the portrayal of *Cannabis* as a “threat” to white middle-class values became an effective mechanism for enforcing racial hierarchies (Sreenivasan et al., 2022). This created a framework in which *Cannabis* use was equated with marginalized groups, further deepening societal divides and fostering racial tensions.

As *Cannabis* became criminalized, its possession and use disproportionately impacted Black and Latino communities. Despite the legalization of *Cannabis* in various states, racial disparities in *Cannabis*-related arrests, charges, and convictions persist. Research has shown that people of color, especially Black individuals, are more likely to be arrested for *Cannabis* offenses than their white counterparts, even in states where *Cannabis* has been legalized (Daniels et al., 2021). These racial disparities in *Cannabis* enforcement are a direct extension of the historical criminalization process, with law enforcement practices continuing to reflect systemic biases and a deep-seated racial hierarchy. Furthermore, as the *Cannabis* industry has expanded, it has remained predominantly white, with Black and Latino communities still facing significant barriers to entry into the legal *Cannabis* market. This economic exclusion highlights the persistence of racial inequities in both the criminal justice system and the *Cannabis* industry, even as legal frameworks evolve (Reed, 2021).

These dynamics of oppression and control are not limited to the criminal justice system or the *Cannabis* industry; they are also mirrored in *Cannabis* education. Traditional *Cannabis* education, particularly within scientific and medical disciplines, has often neglected the historical, cultural, and political contexts of *Cannabis* use and its criminalization. The emphasis has typically been on the chemical properties of *Cannabis* and its therapeutic benefits, often ignoring the racialized history of *Cannabis* prohibition and its impact on marginalized communities. By excluding these critical dimensions, *Cannabis* education inadvertently perpetuates the dominant narratives of *Cannabis* as a criminal or illicit substance, reinforcing the very systems of oppression that have shaped *Cannabis* policy (DiLoreto, 2022; Ordoñez, 2025).

Freire's model of education as liberation presents a transformative approach to *Cannabis* education, offering a counterpoint to these conventional narratives. In a Freirean *Cannabis* curriculum, students would be encouraged to critically examine the relationship between *Cannabis* prohibition, criminalization, and social control. This would involve an in-depth exploration of how the War on Drugs, particularly the targeting of Black and Brown bodies, has been used to uphold the racial and economic status quo. Students would reflect on the ways in which *Cannabis* policies have served as mechanisms for maintaining racial inequality and social control, not just through direct criminalization, but also through the stigmatization and marginalization of affected communities (Alexander, 2011; Ordoñez, 2025). Freire's pedagogy would empower students to not only understand the science of *Cannabis* but also interrogate how this knowledge can be used to challenge inequities and injustices that have been historically embedded in *Cannabis* laws and policies.

Moreover, Freire's pedagogy calls for the oppressed to reclaim their agency and disrupt the power structures that have

marginalized them. In the context of *Cannabis* education, this means not simply learning about *Cannabis* from a detached, scientific perspective, but engaging with it in ways that critically address and challenge the inequities ingrained in *Cannabis* policies and industry practices. By centering the voices and experiences of those most impacted by *Cannabis* criminalization—particularly those from marginalized racial and economic backgrounds—this decolonized *Cannabis* curriculum can empower students to reshape *Cannabis* policy and practice in ways that promote racial justice and social equity (Held, 2023; O'Neill et al., 2023).

Subtle forms of oppression can manifest within *Cannabis* education in various ways, particularly through exclusionary or reductive teaching methods that overlook the lived experiences of marginalized communities. For instance, the overemphasis on the clinical or therapeutic properties of *Cannabis*, without considering its historical criminalization and cultural significance, can be seen as a form of epistemic violence. This approach invalidates the rich cultural and social narratives of *Cannabis* within Indigenous, Black, and Latinx communities, relegating these voices to the margins of the educational discourse (Canevez et al., 2022).

Additionally, the lack of representation of marginalized groups in the *Cannabis* industry and in *Cannabis* education perpetuates a cycle of exclusion. When curricula and professional networks are dominated by white, male, and cisgender individuals, it reinforces existing power structures and limits access to educational and economic opportunities for people of color. For example, in many states where *Cannabis* has been legalized, the industry remains predominantly white, despite the fact that the criminalization of *Cannabis* has disproportionately affected communities of color (Reed, 2021). This subtle form of exclusion from the economic benefits of legalization serves to further entrench racial and economic inequalities.

Moreover, even within progressive *Cannabis* education programs, subtle forms of oppression can emerge through the perpetuation of colorblind or “neutral” approaches to teaching about *Cannabis*. While such curricula may avoid overt racism or discrimination, they can inadvertently erase the historical and ongoing effects of racialization in *Cannabis* policy. By failing to address these issues head-on, educators risk perpetuating an illusion of equality while leaving systemic inequities unchallenged. A Freirian approach would resist this neutralizing tendency, instead highlighting how *Cannabis* education can become a tool for activism and resistance, fostering critical consciousness among students and encouraging them to challenge both explicit and subtle forms of oppression (DiLoreto, 2022; Ordoñez, 2025).

The oppressed/oppressor dynamic is deeply embedded in the history of *Cannabis* criminalization and continues to influence both *Cannabis* policy and education today. A Freirean *Cannabis* curriculum, centered on dialogue, critical reflection, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities, offers a powerful means to disrupt these power structures and empower students to become agents of change. By engaging with both the scientific and socio-political dimensions of *Cannabis*, students can develop a holistic understanding of the plant, one that is grounded in the pursuit of social justice and racial equity. In doing so, *Cannabis* science education can serve as a site of resistance, where knowledge is co-created, power structures are questioned, and the voices of the oppressed are centered in the fight for a more just society (Freire, 1970; Held, 2023).

Conclusion

Decolonizing *Cannabis* science education is not merely an academic exercise; it is a critical step toward achieving a more just and equitable society. For centuries, *Cannabis* has been tied to systems of racialized criminalization, economic marginalization, and social control. As *Cannabis* legalization spreads across various jurisdictions, it is crucial to acknowledge the legacies of these systems in shaping contemporary *Cannabis* education and policy. Integrating Paulo Freire's pedagogy into *Cannabis* education creates an opportunity for students to explore the plant not just through scientific lenses, but through a broader socio-political and historical framework. By doing so, *Cannabis* education can become an active site of resistance to the oppressive systems that have marginalized people of color, particularly Black and Latino communities.

Freire's (1970) pedagogy emphasizes the need for education to be a transformative, dialogical process—one that fosters critical consciousness and empowers individuals to challenge and change unjust systems. In the context of *Cannabis* science education, this approach allows students to engage with the complexities of *Cannabis* policy, the social implications of criminalization, and the economic dynamics of legalization. By learning about the science of *Cannabis* while simultaneously unpacking the racial, historical, and political factors that have shaped *Cannabis* laws, students are given the tools to critically interrogate the systems of oppression that have sustained these injustices. As they gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted role *Cannabis* has played in society, they are also encouraged to consider how they, as future leaders, can actively contribute to the creation of a more equitable and just *Cannabis* landscape.

Furthermore, by integrating a decolonial perspective, *Cannabis* education is not confined to a narrow scientific or legal understanding. It expands to encompass a more holistic view of *Cannabis* as a cultural, social, and political symbol. The decolonization of *Cannabis* education creates space for Indigenous, Black, and Latinx communities to reclaim their historical and cultural relationships with the plant, which have been systematically erased by centuries of colonialism and criminalization. For example, marginalized peoples have long used *Cannabis* and other plants for medicinal and spiritual purposes, but their knowledge and practices were often marginalized or demonized by colonial powers (Abel, 1980). Recognizing the contributions of these communities within *Cannabis* education is an essential aspect of challenging the coloniality of *Cannabis* prohibition and creating a more inclusive and culturally respectful curriculum.

Decolonizing *Cannabis* science education also requires addressing the subtle, often overlooked forms of oppression that persist within academic institutions. These forms of oppression can manifest through curricula that exclude or minimize the cultural significance of *Cannabis*, ignoring the voices of those most impacted by its criminalization. When *Cannabis* education is framed exclusively through a clinical or legalistic lens, it risks reproducing the same hierarchical power structures that have historically disenfranchised marginalized communities. By incorporating diverse perspectives—particularly those of communities of color—educators can ensure that *Cannabis* education is not only scientifically robust but also socially relevant and just.

As *Cannabis* education evolves, it must be seen as a platform for social justice and liberation. Empowering students to engage with *Cannabis* beyond its pharmacological properties means empowering

them to challenge the inequities embedded in laws, policies, the broader social system, as well as science itself. The students educated in this framework can become active agents of change, shaping the future of *Cannabis* science, policy, and industry in ways that center racial justice and equity. In doing so, *Cannabis* education moves beyond its scientific roots and becomes a powerful tool for dismantling the systemic inequities that have long plagued marginalized communities.

Finally, decolonizing *Cannabis* education requires a deep and sustained commitment to questioning the status quo. It is a call for action that not only critiques existing *Cannabis* policies but also strives to create a new, more equitable framework for *Cannabis* education, research, and practice. Such an undertaking involves a collective effort from educators, researchers, policymakers, and activists to create spaces where the voices of the oppressed are heard and their experiences are integrated into the curriculum. Through this collaborative process, we can foster an educational environment that promotes justice, inclusivity, and liberation for all, especially those communities most impacted by *Cannabis* criminalization. As *Cannabis* science education becomes increasingly relevant in an evolving landscape of legalization and social change, it is imperative that it be approached with an unwavering commitment to equity. The road ahead involves not just a reevaluation of the past but a deliberate and inclusive effort to reshape the future. The decolonization of *Cannabis* education offers an opportunity to align scientific knowledge with social justice, creating a more just, equitable, and inclusive society for generations to come.

Author contributions

BC: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration,

Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2025.1470700/full#supplementary-material>

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