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The politics of literacy

Colin Lankshear

Education Department, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

In the past teachers, researchers, curriculum developers, and other agents closely associated with education generally assumed that literacy was not political. Reading and writing were typically thought of simply as skills or techniques. Consequently, research into reading and writing mainly took the form of trying to understand more about the cognitive and motor aspects of reading and writing, and applying such insights to the teaching learning process. Rarely did researchers and educators step back and ask why it was so important to teach literacy, or whether any of our basic assumptions about reading and writing were suspect or inadequate. In recent years many of the old unquestioned assumptions about literacy have been brought into the open, and challenged. New forms of research and new questions are now being asked. New assumptions are emerging. One of these - around which a whole cluster of issues and concerns focus - is that literacy is political. Literacy has a politics. The politics of literacy are such that the teaching and practice of reading and writing are closely tied to the battery of social and ideological processes that produce and maintain patterns of advantage and disadvantage, domination and subordination across class, race-ethnic, and gender lines. Those who spearheaded the challenge to old views of literacy, and the old research and teaching practices, operated with a different view of society from the liberals. I want to begin by setting out some features of this alternative view of society, because it underlies much of what I want to say about the politics of literacy.

Introduction

In the past teachers, researchers, curriculum developers, and other agents closely associated with education generally assumed that literacy was not political. In fact, the mere possibility that reading and writing had political force by and large did not occur to educationists. Reading and writing were typically thought of simply as skills or techniques. It was in the interests of each child to acquire these skills. Moreover, it was important for society to ensure that its population was literate. The personal and social significance of literacy, however, was almost never seen in political terms. It wasn't a question of politics. It was simply in the interests of all people that literacy be universal: in their economic, occupational, emotional, functional, and personal interests. Ensuring that all were literate favoured no particular groups, individuals, or sectional interests. Literacy was a universal benefit that was essentially neutral.

Consequently, research into reading and writing mainly took the form of trying to understand more about the cognitive and motor aspects of reading and writing, and applying such insights to the teaching learning process. What are the best ways to teaching reading and writing? What sorts

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of instructional materials, texts, and learning 'tricks' seem to work best, and on which kids? How should we approach remedial work with those who experience 'learning difficulties'? These were the typical research and methodological concerns. In other words, most research was concerned with refining technique: precisely because literacy was perceived essentially in technical terms: as a (neutral) skill.

Rarely did researchers and educators step back and ask why it was so important to teach literacy, or whether any of our basic assumptions about reading and writing were suspect or inadequate. Still less was it asked whether the way that people ended up practising reading and writing contributed to patterns of advantage and disadvantage. Rarely was it asked whether reading and writing actually are discrete skills: that is, whether reading and writing are in fact the same thing for everyone; and if they are not, whether the differences are important.

In recent years many of the old unquestioned assumptions about literacy have been brought into the open, and challenged.[1] New forms of research and new questions are now being asked. New assumptions are emerging. One of these - around which a whole cluster of issues and concerns focus - is that literacy is political. Literacy has a politics. The politics of literacy are such that the teaching and practice of reading and writing are closely tied to the battery of social and ideological processes that produce and maintain patterns of advantage and disadvantage, domination and subordination across class, race-ethnic, and gender lines.

One of the main reasons why these new questions have emerged and previous assumptions are now challenged is because a number of educationists have rejected the old liberal myth of an harmonious, egalitarian and more or less classless society, within which all individuals - regardless of birth - have a fair chance to make the most and best of themselves, and to determine through their own efforts and abilities where they will end up in life.

Those who spearheaded the challenge to old views of literacy, and the old research and teaching practices, operated with a different view of society from the liberals. I want to begin by setting out some features of this alternative view of society, because it underlies much of what I want to say about the politics of literacy.

A Structure and Conflict View of Society

Four features of society seem especially important:

1. Society is made up of persons who have interests - as individual human beings and as members of groups. By 'interests' I mean things that are important for their well-being, development as persons, and satisfaction.
2. Various interest groups exist within society - the more so in complex societies. Interest groups are clusters of individuals who have, or identify themselves as having, a certain interest or interests in common, and/or who share a common base (e.g., as women, Maori, workers, tenants, employers, etc.) from which they define and pursue their aspirations.
3. The interests of certain groups are brought into conflict by capitalist, racist and patriarchal structures. Competing interest groups are created such that promoting the interests of some groups necessarily involves undermining, denying, or subordinating the interests of other groups.
4. Some interest groups are systematically better placed to ensure that their interests are served than are other (competing) groups - because they have greater opportunities to exercise power (and opportunities to exercise greater power) by which to promote their interests. What this means is that the social relationships involved in daily routines, within institutions and the many social processes and practices within which interests are pursued, are such that greater power is systematically available to some groups than to others. To say that a society is capitalist, or patriarchal, or monocultural, etc., is to imply that employers, males, or whites are invested with greater power within social relations by

which to serve their ends than are workers, females, or 'people of colour': and that this inequality is built into the very structure or logic of these social relations.[2]

Politics, Power and Social Structure

This view of society offers a valuable way of defining politics and what it means for a process or consequence to be political. Politics is really about the way that power is made available and is exercised within social processes and routines. It is naive to think of politics simply in terms of governments, voting, and other formal institutions and procedures. A political context exists wherever power is arranged into some kind of system where certain people have greater access than others to a voice and other means through which to promote/serve their interests.

Politics, then, is really about power, but not just about power. It is about the structuring of power. To understand politics is to analyse and understand the processes and mechanisms - many of them subtle and invisible - which operate within everyday routines to ensure that within social interactions certain 'players' are better placed than others to have their voices heard, their wills met, and their views and values upheld.

To understand the politics of literacy it is necessary to understand something important about power itself. Power is not a 'thing' or a commodity that some people simply have and carry around with them. People aren't born with power in the kind of way that they are born with brown eyes, or fair hair. We take our brown eyes and fair hair in the same degree and in the same way with us wherever we go, and we have them in all social contexts and exchanges. These attributes abide regardless of the social settings and relationships we are in.

Power is different. Power only exists within social relations and processes. It comes (and goes) with social roles and social positions, and these can change. The most powerful corporation director becomes disempowered if the corporation collapses, or s/he gets fired, or find themself in a completely alien setting. For people to be empowered is not simply to give them some thing, or for them to acquire some thing. It is either to change some aspect of the structures they live and interact within, or for them to acquire some quality which is already valued or functional within certain relationships and processes, or to make some quality they possess recognised as relevant for exercising power.

What this means is that creating and maintaining hierarchies of power and privilege is about creating and maintaining social relations and structures that operate on the assumption that people with certain qualities or attributes are placed in a position where they can exercise greater power than others who lack these qualities or attributes. School Certificate passes, for example, are only a basis for greater power and reward within social contexts which recognise such a qualification as valid for getting certain Jobs or other rewards and recognitions. Once this link is broken, access to (relative) power disappears.

Literacy, Power, and the Politics of Literacy

These points bear on literacy in two main ways.

1. Agents acting within established power structures effectively determine what literacy will be for other people. They actually shape the ways in which other people come to practise reading and writing and to form a view of the nature and purpose of reading and writing. (Often these agents do this more or less unwittingly - but the effect is what is important). This has major consequences for patterns of advantage and disadvantage within society.
2. The way in which people come to understand and practise literacy is a vital part of the wider social processes which maintain inequalities of power and privilege.

These dimensions are linked, because the views and practices of reading and writing which evolve, and are taught. and reinforced within social contexts of unequal power, tend to be forms of reading and writing which – one way or another - help to maintain these same structures and relationships of inequality. The politics of literacy, then, are the politics of creating and reproducing hierarchies and elites.

To see this more clearly we have to look more closely at what literacy is. This means seeing literacy in a different way from how most people involved in education and research continue to see it.

Rethinking Literacy .

Even today educators tend .to see literacy as a particular thing, and assume that it is the same 'thing' for everyone. To become literate 1s seen as a matter of acquiring a particular skill or technique.

But literacy is not a single specific 'thing'. Nor is it the same for all. People actually read and write in very different ways. And these different ways are far from equal in terms of their potential for enabling individuals and groups to have their interests met. Despite these differences, however, one thing that typical modes of reading and writing have in common is that they serve to maintain the status qua. Let us look at these points in more detail.

(a) Literacy is Many

Brian Street says that 'literacy' is 'a shorthand for the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing.[3] Instead of seeing literacy as a particular skill or technology which people may choose to use in different ways or for different purposes once they have 'it', we should focus on the very different ways of reading and, writing that people acquire within the process of learning to read and write and in actually using print. It's not a matter of all people basically learning the same thing and then going on to put it to their own uses and understanding its potential and purposes in their own way. Rather, different people come to use and understand reading and writing in different ways from the very beginning and to have these uses reinforced in their daily experience. Different people are initiated into quite different modes of reading and writing within their educational and wider social experience.

Two simple examples - one historical, the other local and contemporary - can make this point quite clearly.

Hannah More[4] worked with children of coalminers in England during the late 18th century. She ran Sunday Schools in which the children were taught religious doctrine and 'proper' forms of behaviour. She also taught them to read. This was in a revolutionary period when radical writers were very influential. Powerful defenders of the existing social order were fearful that if the poor learned to read and write they would be opened up to revolutionary ideas. More was criticised on the grounds that her War increased the chances of revolt and sedition.

She replied to these criticisms by stating 'the political value of religion' for maintaining the existing hierarchy. She said that the social order was 'beautiful when each (person) according to their place, pays willing honour to their superiors .... when high, low, rich and poor .... sit down satisfied with their own place'. This was where religious doctrine came in, because it taught that the existing social order was God's will and plan.

So far as More was concerned, the point behind teaching the poor to read was to impress upon them God's will that they accept the status qua and their position within it. She said she allowed 'no writing for the poor. My aim is not to make them fanatics, but to train up the lower classes in habits of industry and piety'. She realised that if children were taught to read in a context where material was carefully chosen, and where they were given firm messages about what they should read and

why they should read, there was every chance that they would come to see the point of reading as to have access to God's will and word. In this way they would build their reading practice around the Bible and other religious material. Besides teaching reading, More also wrote large numbers of religious stories and tracts designed to supplement the reading matter available to the poor and to keep them on the straight and narrow. So these children were not simply learning the mechanics or the skill of reading. They were also being introduced to a definite view about what they should be reading, why they should be reading it, and how they should read.

More was only teaching a minimal form of reading. She taught an approach to reading by which children could absorb ideas: not question or challenge them. The poor were being socialised into a view and practice of reading which More saw as appropriate to their social rank: one which would keep them passive and accepting. Her approach contrasted dramatically with that of radical working class organisations which taught reading and established study groups based on material designed to actively encourage working people to understand and reject the social order - and, as far as possible, to organise struggle against it. The ideas and practices of reading promoted by Hannah More and by radical worker groups were the exact opposite of each other.[5] They were not so much different uses of the same skill or technology. They were completely different literacies, which had quite different implications for how people responded to their world, and whether or not they would passively accept their lot.

Alison Jones' work in an Auckland school throws further light on these matters. She observed the classroom practices of two streams within a single form year. One was a top stream class, made up mainly of white middle class students. The other was a lower stream class, made up mainly of Pacific Island and Maori students.[6]

Among the many things her data reveal is the fact that the two streams had quite different views of what was involved in classroom reading and writing. The lower stream brought to school with them certain ideas about the role of the teacher and what it meant to learn school knowledge (a view which the teachers themselves reinforced through their teaching approaches). For them the teacher was the source of the knowledge they needed to pass their exams. Their efforts were concentrated on copying down the teachers' words - 'getting the notes' - and reading them up later in order to memorise them for tests and exams. They had no notion of the teachers' words/notes as being ideas to be approached questioningly: to be discussed, interpreted, thought about, related to wider ideas, shaped into arguments, or even to be understood. They had no conception of grasping underlying principles, abstracting from general to particular (and vice versa), ordering and expressing ideas and using reading and writing for these purposes. Consequently, they failed to read and write in these ways.

The top stream class had a quite different view of what school-based reading and writing is for. And they read and wrote accordingly. For them, syllabus content was to be thought about and organised into arguments. The teacher was seen as a resource, along with books and other sources of information. But she wasn't the only resource, or even necessarily the most important one. They saw school literacy as involving much more than just copying down the teacher's notes, or absorbing information for regurgitating later. It was to provide them with material to operate on intellectually, as well as the medium for expressing their intellectual work.

These examples are just some of the hundreds that could be provided to show that literacies are many: not just one. There are, however, three other important points to make.

(b) Literacies are not 'equal'

The students in these two streams both had the same scholastic goal: to pass School Certificate. Unfortunately, only one of the literacies Jones describes was appropriate for passing. School Certificate doesn't simply reward memorised notes. The exam is designed to test for evidence of thinking, and for the ability to organise material into arguments, comments, etc. The literacy of the

top stream class was more adequate - more equal - than that of the lower stream. Moreover, the unreflective literacy of the lower stream was not even sufficient to ensure that the students copied down information accurately. Because they did not relate reading and writing to the importance of understanding and thinking about what they were reading and writing, they quite often copied down 'information' incorrectly: writing into their notes things that were false or else simply made no sense. These errors presumably showed up in exams.

All this is political. The example shows how literacy becomes part of the process of reproducing hierarchies of advantage and disadvantage. Those who had the 'right' literacy were being set up to pass exams and enjoy the rewards that come from being qualified. Those who had the 'wrong' literacy were set up for failure and disadvantage. It's not that the literacies are right or wrong in themselves. Rather, they are 'right' or 'wrong' given a particular context: namely, what is being tested for officially in school exams. Such official requirements, of course, are established by people with educational power: who just happen to be similar sorts of people to those who inhabit top stream classes. It is precisely these sorts of mechanisms and processes operating throughout social life generally that define what politics is really all about.

(c) The Social Production of Illiterate Citizens.

1990 has been designated International Literacy Year. I like the idea of thinking of it as International Illiteracy Year, and spending some of our time and resources not simply pondering how to make more people literate, but also about how and why it is that so many people are rendered illiterate within. a modern, sophisticated, high-tech world.

What I call 'the social production of illiterate people' is an intensely political phenomenon. There is time here only to touch on a few brief aspects, but hopefully these will suggest avenues for further discussion. We can begin from two simple points.

First, learning to read and write is not a difficult thing. After all, the overwhelming majority of humankind learn to speak well enough - and literacy is really just speaking with visual symbols. I think it is useful to ask the question: if learning to read an write is not all that difficult, how come so many people throughout the world fail to do it?

For many people in Third World settings, the answer is that they are denied opportunities to learn. Quite simply, no formal provision is made for whole sectors of the population. And the wider reality of life for children in these groups is such that they also lack informal opportunities to learn - e.g., because their families and neighbours are illiterate as well.

In countries like our own the explanation is more complex. It is not so much that formal opportunities to become literate are denied. For schooling is practically universal here. In part it is that for many children the way provision is made and the kinds of opportunities given are not very appropriate. Partly, also, it's that the daily demands for print competence have increased greatly in recent times. So there are many people who can read and write to a limited extent, but their level simply is not functional relative to daily demands. Finally, we must recognise that within our society certain groups of people are effectively prevented from being able to take advantage of formal provision and opportunities on equal terms with other groups.

This raises the second simple point about the social production of illiterate people. It is well known that within modern societies there exist distinct patterns of illiteracy. Higher rates of illiteracy are found among particular groups than others. We have to ask what these patterns are, and how they are created.

It is important here not to be fobbed off by the claim that 'illiterate people are of all types. They come from all sorts of backgrounds'. It is true that individuals who seek learning assistance as adults, or who end up in school remedial learning programmes span the social spectrum. But this doesn't

show that equal proportions of people experiencing literacy difficulties come from all social groups. Where good data is available, in the U.S., for instance, the patterns are clear.

In their extensive study of present day illiteracy in the U.S., Hunter and Harman establish that those persons who lack sufficient reading and writing skills to function effectively in mainstream society 'are found in large numbers wherever there are poor people and whenever there are congregated racial and ethnic minority groups'.[7] We are talking proportions rather than absolute numbers here. In the U.S. 16% of white adults are functionally or marginally illiterate. The rate is 44% and 56% for black and Hispanic citizens. It was predicted that by 1990 the figure would reach 50% among the younger generation of black American adults. Figures for Britain, Australia and, where they are available, New Zealand, confirm the same broad pattern.

It is quite easy to identify social factors which help explain such patterns, and which certainly make it reasonable to expect many young people to give up the effort and resist the 'opportunities' given them to become literate. I will mention just a few of these factors here. They require little elaboration, and are mostly well documented in research. They have a clear political ring to them.

1. The teaching of literacy is officially centred on the school. Of course, many children can already read by the time they get to school - although there are class and ethnic patterns to this as well. Writing is generally mastered at school.

School, however, reflects and rewards some 'cultures' more than others. 'Culture' here takes in both race-ethnic and social class aspects. The fact is that school fits certain cultural backgrounds and styles more than others, and children from the 'right' backgrounds are better 'fitted' to school. Learning comes more easily in contexts which are familiar and affirming.

2. In addition, there is an expectation that much of what is learned in school will be continued and refined in the home. Yet not all homes are equal in the relevant terms. Some children bear heavy responsibilities in the home - minding siblings, doing housework, etc. - where adults have to work. In many of the same homes, the adults are themselves marginal in terms of formal school education and are simply unable to assist with their children's learning (beyond giving encouragement). Economic and housing difficulties can often be added to these experiences - with children moving through several schools, and often suffering inferior health and nutrition.

There is no need to elaborate the picture further, except to note that what underlies all this is the issue of economic and cultural power. Poor families are relatively economically powerless. Their impoverishment and stress, their lack of time and formal skills, all reflect this shortfall in power. They also lack the power to have their experience, values, and ways of being, reflected in the character of schooling on an equal basis with other groups. We are talking here about political matters, since the inequalities of power are woven into the social structure of work, education, housing arrangements, official views of support and remediation, etc.

3. For most students school remains effectively monolingual. This creates obvious learning impediments/disadvantages for non English-speaking migrants. Beyond this there are issues of dialect within English. Dialect differences become important at the point where learning and 'ability' are formally measured and assessed by tests that privilege certain dialects over others.

4. It is important to recognise the extent to which school functions precisely to create and legitimate failure. We generally think of school as a learning institution. It is, however, very much a failure creating institution, and this is one of its key political functions. The streetwise latch onto this very quickly and know that, for them, school is a ritual system in which they are most likely to be initiated into failure. This is where school performs a complementary political task, by 'teaching' those groups bound for failure that the reasons lie within themselves: either they are 'dumb' or they don't work hard enough. Alison Jones' work shows this process in operation very clearly.

Yet the truth is otherwise, as I am trying to suggest here. The very way school learning is structured and the way it is conceived as a selection agent makes it highly effective in creating patterns of failure.

5. An important related factor here is the phenomenon of credential inflation. Since school has the important political function of creating failure in accordance with its social selection role, it is necessary to keep credentials in scarce supply. At times this means ensuring that not all credentials are real. So, for example, if most students were to come up to a level previously seen as one of being properly qualified, it would be necessary to recognise still higher qualifications as the ones that really count for the more desired social rewards. As Hunter and Harman show for the U.S. case, this process of credential inflation has a demoralising effect on entire groups of learners.

Hunter and Harman note that groups at the bottom of the social and economic heap in the U.S. last century were led to believe that literacy and other educational achievements would enhance their life opportunities. But as the number of people within these groups gaining educational credentials increased, so too did the level of qualifications demanded for the same jobs. 'Each time competing ethnic minorities reached the educational levels they had been told would lead to economic success and prestige, the game rules were changed ... Given the resulting inflation of educational credentials ... disillusionment is likely among those who purchase such credentials through school attendance when the promised pay-off fails to materialise. The disappointed groups may drop out of the difficult process of schooling'.[8] They do drop out and, in many cases tune out from an early stage.

6. We live in a period of rapidly escalating functional demands as far as literacy is concerned. To tune out early, and to drop out after falling behind, is likely to render an individual functionally illiterate.[9]

When these sorts of factors come together to create patterns of literacy and illiteracy across class and race-ethnic lines, we have an important political dimension of literacy.

(d) Different Literacies and Maintaining the Status Qua

There is a further dimension to the politics of literacy which is very important, but which I can only touch on briefly here. This turns on the fact that the forms of literacy acquired and practised by young people within school are, despite their differences, all essentially uncritical literacies in an important sense. The (differing) ways in which print is used within school are unlikely to involve students in coming to understand the politics of their society and how power, advantage, disadvantage, success, and failure are created and maintained.

Take, for example, the case mentioned above of two unequal literacies. We saw how the two streams within the same form year understood and practised reading and writing within the curriculum in two quite different ways. The outcomes were opposed: one enabled exam success; the other virtually ensured failure. Both literacies, however, share a crucial point in common. Neither actually involves students in coming to understand their world critically from a political point of view.

Where criticism exists within school literacy it is usually in terms, say, of criticising a novel or play, or preferring the character development of one author over another's. Mostly, reading and writing are employed in understanding the natural world via Science, the domestic world via Home Economics, the business world via Commerce subjects, the world of technology and construction through Design, Workshop Technology, Computer Science, etc. Students are encouraged to grasp theories of physics, processes of erosion and glaciation, the number of bytes to an Apple, how to balance ledgers, etc. These, no doubt, are important things to learn. But they have nothing to do with coming to understand and challenge structures of unequal power, or patterns of

advantage/success and disadvantage/failure. School literacy, quite simply, is depoliticised. Given the wider politics of inequality, this is for it in fact to be profoundly political.

Here again we can see the poverty of understanding literacy in terms of technique or skill alone: We can only understand literacy accurately if we also look at it in relation to curriculum: in relation to the ways students are directed to use reading and writing. Within the school curriculum - which marks the official sanctioned view of what reading and writing are for - literacy is predominantly uncritical.

This becomes clear when we look at approaches to teaching and shaping up reading and writing taken by people like Paulo Freire, Chris Searle, Ira Shor, Marilyn Frankenstein, and others.[10] We also see it in the differences between literacy campaigns of the type conducted in Cuba and Nicaragua, and the approach typically taken in Third World countries.

These people teach and further enhance literacy in the context of understanding and challenging the politics of inequality and injustice. Their students acquire and enlarge the ability to read and write in the process of critiquing daily routines and social structures which foster inequality. These educators reject the antiseptic approach to curriculum adopted by schools, within which prevalent conceptions and practices of reading and writing are shaped up. The literacy they promote is intended to stimulate challenges to the status quo by those who are disadvantaged within it.

Disadvantaged groups face a difficult choice in schooling. Disproportionately few of them succeed in formal terms- - i.e., getting higher level qualifications, recognised credentials, etc. Yet, taking their chances, slim though they are, often appears the only option available. So long as it is the cultural capital of elite groups that characterises schooling, disadvantaged groups will inevitably experience high levels of scholastic failure. Consequently, for the great majority of students from disadvantaged groups, being drawn into the monolingual, eurocentric, depoliticised, academic mainstream of education in the quest for formal qualifications, creates a total loss situation. They provide raw material for the social creation of legitimated failure through schooling. Many, experiencing learning as a futile, traumatic, and alienating experience, fail even to attain minimal literacy and numeracy - tuning out and developing 'negative attitudes' along the way. At the same time the standard school curriculum, by its uncritical nature, effectively denies them any chance of acquiring attitudes, beliefs, and skills that might contribute to their future empowerment (and that of their group(s)), through struggle grounded in critical awareness of their social world.

The Politics of Literacy: a summary statement

To understand the politics of literacy is to grasp the ways in which our everyday practices and views of reading and writing are linked to the distribution and exercise of power within social relationships, processes, and institutions. I have tried to pull out some of the most important aspects of the political character of literacy. These include:

1. Different literacies can be identified. Within a school setting different literacies are not equal, but form part of the process of selecting students for life chances and social rewards.
2. Mastery of the 'right' literacies for school success appears to be correlated with class and/or race-ethnic background. Different literacies are linked to possession of different cultural capitals. To this extent literacy is strongly implicated in the (political) process of reproducing an unequal society.
3. Elite groups have the power to shape what will count as appropriate reading and writing practice within the curriculum and selection processes of school. Insofar as what becomes appropriate reflects the values, aspirations, attitudes, and styles of elite groups, literacy is part of the process by which these elites maintain their own advantage.
4. Illiteracy is patterned by social class and race-ethnic status, and reflects differences in access to economic, cultural, and social power. Patterned illiteracy, then, is a political

phenomenon. It has increasingly important ramifications in an age when the demands for minimal functional literacy are increasing rapidly.

5. The forms of reading and writing that are taught and reinforced within school are characteristically uncritical. Students are not encouraged to read and write in ways that promote understanding of how social processes and outcomes are built on the principle of inequality. Hence, typical literacy practices are important mechanisms for maintaining the status quo: either by failing to prompt challenges to it, and/ or by drawing people into ideological views of the world which favour already advantaged groups.

Toward a Literacy Agenda for the 1990s

When taken together with other current trends in our society, the ideas presented above give clear directions for a school literacy agenda. Six general points can be made by way of a start, and some of their implications for literacy identified.

1. We need to think much more about literacy in association with curriculum: because they are tied together. Literacy Is not a pure technique or skill which we (can) somehow teach as a separate subject, or as part of English or Language. Reading and writing always come 'dressed up in clothes'. They come in some garbed form or other. The most influential 'dressing up' of reading and writing is effected within curriculum.

2. Existing approaches to curriculum and literacy are part of the overall 'machinery' of reproducing inequality.

3. Changes within the economy and in technology are intensifying the extremes of inequality. Jobs at the bottom of the heap are either boring, repetitive, casual, and poorly paid, or else they are non-existent. Those doomed to the bottom face increasing depths of misery and alienation. Indeed, writers in the U.S. and Australia have identified the creation and consolidation of an underclass as one of their greatest social concerns.

4. We should not underestimate the importance of addressing literacy and curriculum together in trying to reduce the prospects of creating an underclass and extremes of social misery in this country. At a time when functional literacy requirements have grown enormously, the social creation of illiterate people increases the likelihood of misery, stress, and alienation among those who are rendered incapable of using print in their daily lives. It also helps to self-select victims of unemployment - either by disqualifying them from the hired labour market, or by preventing them from working as self-employed people who can administer their businesses, run their own accounts, etc.

5. Concentrations of disadvantaged people within distinct areas create a real risk of 'ghetto schools' emerging, especially when accompanied by zoning policies which permit flight to other schools which are perceived as 'better': Ghetto schools partly reflect the existence of an underclass. They also quickly become a major contributing factor to the consolidation of an underclass.

6. We need also to look at literacy in relation to the practice of social selection by schools. I have tried to argue that the mechanisms and processes operating within classrooms on a daily basis which work to create failure in formal exams and assessments also contribute to the outright incapacitating of (disadvantaged) students. In other words, those who are the victims of inappropriate or insensitive curricula and assessment procedures (because they are on the wrong side of cultural capital, economic power, etc.), who know they are bound for scholastic failure, and who - in short - know that they are other within school culture, are at high risk of not learning anything that will serve them in adult life. They do not even learn the possibility of constructive opposition to the social order that makes them into victims. Curriculum, literacy, and selection have to be addressed together within a comprehensive literacy agenda.

In the light of these points, let me make some brief suggestions for a literacy agenda for the 1990s.

Our aim for the 1990s must be to work toward ensuring a truly functional literacy for every school leaver. This aim has three main implications.

1. I. It calls for organising the curriculum around the competencies and attitudes required for being functionally literate.
2. It requires us to challenge the traditional selection role of schools, by which many students must necessarily fail, and to replace our emphasis on certifying students with a commitment to (what I call) capacitating them.
3. It requires us to challenge the tyranny of the English language within schooling.

Organising the Curriculum around Functional Literacy Demands

The literacy demands of daily life for the early part of the 21st century will be quite different from those of earlier generations. We cannot yet tell exactly what they will be, but we can make some educated guesses. The important moral is that we must be much more forward-looking in our approach to literacy than we have been in the past, and we must consciously develop curricula with an eye to the print needs - including computer print - of life in the decades ahead.

We know two broad things about these literacy demands. One is that the minimum requirements for mere survival literacy are higher now than ever before, and that they are likely to increase. The other is that the changing economy and occupational structure will require people at large to be 'literate' in areas they haven't needed to be literate in before: e.g., technologically literate, literate in administrative ways, in entrepreneurial ways, in ways that enable us to ensure that our health and security needs are met, and so on.

Society has become more individualistic, more competitive, more impersonal, and the State has withdrawn from key welfare and caring roles. While we may not like this - and I don't - we must educate people to be able to survive in this kind of jungle during the period in which we set about trying to change it into something more humane and humanising.

The curriculum task is to identify what these functional print needs actually are, and to set about designing curricula which develop the relevant competencies - e.g., understanding legal jargon, knowing how to write a C.V. or prepare for interviews, how to market what we produce, how to handle domestic and business economies, etc.; and which show students how to use print resources to seek out and use information, ideas, skills, etc. necessary for them to pursue their goals.

To repeat one of my main points, it's not enough just to teach print skills and assume that students will somehow transfer these to, e.g., administrative or inventive or critical ways of thinking. We need to build print activities around these modes of thinking and acting into curricula in a conscious way.

A More Consciously Political Curriculum

I have written in several places[11] about the need to adopt a richer and more radical view of functional literacy than one which simply helps people to cope with everyday print needs. It's not enough to aim at helping disadvantaged groups simply to cope. Coping is a struggle: one is always struggling to keep up. Rather, we have to aim at putting groups which are currently disadvantaged on top of life. We have to get beyond mere coping - which is about keeping up with demands and responding to situations imposed by others or by forces beyond our control - to actually putting ourselves in positive control of our lives.

Above anything else, this means enabling all young people to understand how power is currently distributed and exercised in our society - i.e., unequally, and in the interests of a minority - so that they can challenge the structures and relations of daily life and work toward changing them in the direction of equalising power in the interests of all.

Curricula, then, must aim at developing in all students the ability to understand and analyse power relations critically, and to use print in the struggle to build a more truly democratic society. This is a matter of teaching students (and ourselves!). how to think and imagine sociologically - in C. Wright Mills' sense of the term.[12] The ideas of people like Paulo Freire, Chris Searle, Ira Shor, Alice Walker, Jean Anyan, Kevin Harris, Linda and Graham Smith, Jim Cummins, Michael Apple, and others are valuable here.

We become critically literate in the process of using print to think critically. The same is true for becoming politically literate. Ira Shor's description of a Utopia course developed in the context of studying literature provides an excellent introduction to how the sorts of curricula that promote political awareness can be developed.[13]

A 'Capacitating' Curriculum

Earlier I noted the social selection function of schools and linked this to a tendency on the part of many who intuit that they are bound for failure to tune out quickly from schooling and end up illiterate, innumerate, etc.

There is a virtual inevitability about this, which has to do with the very logic of selection. For schools to be involved in social selection necessarily entails the creation of failure. The model is that only some can be certified: others, by definition, must fail. The price we are currently paying for this is that large numbers of students - disproportionately from disadvantaged social groups - are failing in school in a double sense. They fail to win certificates/credentials, and they are failing to even learn.

Things become different if we take the capacitating of students as our educational goal. Whereas selection implies failure, capacitation does not. It is possible to capacitate everyone, since it is not a matter of competition.

This offers an important alternative for schools which draw on concentrations of disadvantaged students, especially given the possibilities for developing distinctive school characters created by recent educational reform and the curriculum 'vacuum' that exists at present. I believe that many schools would do well to withdraw as far as possible from the shackles of traditional selection and certification practices, and to work actively with their communities and curriculum developers to produce curricula which give the promise of providing for all students the capacities that will serve them in tomorrow's world.

I see this as our best defence against the creation of ghetto schools. A major problem at present is that many parents are unwittingly sacrificing their children's right to capacities in a forlorn and misguided quest for national certificates. Schools perceived as 'inferior' are losing students to schools seen as ‘better' - e.g., because they have higher exam pass rates. The point, however, is that there is a logical limit to the number of students who can obtain bona tide credentials. The prospects of disadvantaged children succeeding in exams may appear in theory to improve through the simple act of attending a different school, but in practice the difference is negligible.

Where schools lose students to flight, their chances for being effective are reduced even further. The answer is to address the cause of the rot: the selection game itself. If communities would invest in their local school, become involved in the curriculum development process and the wider dialogue necessary for achieving an informed view of what is required to capacitate students, and seek - together with teachers - to understand the politics of selection and certification, considerable advantages should follow. These would. include affirmed and energised teachers challenged by new creative demands; heightened community and school morale; 'literated' students; improved

and sensitively applied research; and the power that comes from understanding one's society and world in order to inform education - and, ultimately, to transform the society itself.

In the event of achieving strong learning records focused on the capacities genuinely needed for optimal functioning as citizens, schools would be well placed to take control of the credentialling process itself. Educationists and employers alike have long been aware that formal examinations often bear little relationship to the actual demands of daily life. For those groups who are failed by the status quo in education, it makes sense to take control of curriculum and credentialling alike. This, however, would necessitate strong school-community links, and demonstrated learning achievement on the part of students.

There is a final aspect that I want to consider. It concerns the tyranny (within school literacy) of the English language.

The argument here parallels that made for oral language within the school. It seems reasonable that when foreign language migrants enter a new country they will need to acquire at least functional competence in the local language. It does not, of course, follow from this that the local language should be the language of learning and print within school. This seems especially obvious in the case of children who are already of school age at the time of migrating.

The modes of thinking and understanding that schools are charged with teaching are taught via language: oral and (especially) written language. The important principle must be to ensure mastery of the kinds of thought and understanding that define school learning. Insofar as this mastery is possible in various languages, it seems to me that children should be taught through the language they know best.

The rationale for this is simple. It is much easier to acquire a second language and to transfer intellectual operations (already acquired in one's own language) from a first to a second language than it is to try and learn these operations in a new language that one is struggling to master. Even with my pathetically limited Spanish, I can tell jokes, write formal letters, frame arguments, arrange and conduct interviews, negotiate meetings with government officials, etc. When I am in Nicaragua this is possible because I already know how to do these things in English. The point is to learn how to do them in the first place. Transferring them across languages comes naturally with learning those languages. Indeed, they provide frameworks within which to learn other languages.

The only 'reason' I can see for requiring migrant children to be taught and examined in English is in order to Anglicise, uniformise or domesticate them. This is a political act that disempowers and disadvantages those who are 'other'. It is to privilege sameness over difference. As far as I am concerned, this is to dehumanise others.[14] It also makes a society less interesting to live in. Boring even.

If we are seriously committed to efficiency in education, it makes much more sense to make students competent in the educational goals we uphold in their own language - since it maximises the likelihood of learning - and to leave them to acquire English at the point and pace that they need it. And if they find they don't need so much of it, and can do much of their living in their language of birth, so what?

There are even utilitarian arguments to support this. Allan Levett tells us that in the coming decades New Zealand's major trading partners will be in East Asia, and that we need people who understand East Asian cultures and can communicate with people from that part of the world. We also claim to be a Pacific nation, and have close economic, aid, diplomatic, cultural, and political links with (other) Pacific countries. These can only be enhanced through Pacific people representing New Zealand being fully versed in Pacific languages and ways. It makes perfect sense in these terms to educate migrant children via their own linguistic medium, within cultural milieux they are familiar with, so that they achieve in their new country the highest possible competence in things that have international value.[15]

The confidence, competence, sensitivity, qualifications, etc. needed by migrants to live well, play a full part in the life of their adopted society, achieve their fullest potential as human persons, and enjoy control over their own lives, seem most likely to come from an education that builds on existing strengths. This makes new strengths much more likely.

It should go without saying that the same point holds for Maori. The language of instruction, assessment, remediation, etc. should always be the language in which chances of success are greatest and/or in which the student feels most at home. Learning English can then be left to take care of itself. For it will.

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14. I am using 'dehumanise' in Freire's sense. See, for example, his Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Education: the practice of freedom, both op. cit.
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