

8-1-2005

# Critical Literacy vs. Reading Programs: Schooling as a Form of Control

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## Schooling as a Form of Control

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### Abstract

*In the United States, despite years of educational research demonstrating the ineffectiveness and harm caused by reading programs based upon a behaviorist paradigm, political mandates of state and federal programs insist upon their continued use. One might conclude that this insistence is born out of ignorance, however, it seems clear that the populations most harmed by these programs are the poor and minorities. Privileged class students are also harmed because of the “litalcyl” (shallow “literacy”) these programs produce. I discuss the politics of literacy and language programs in the United States and how they serve to oppress as they reproduce the status quo. I also offer solutions anchored in generative ways of coming to know and expanded definitions of teaching, learning and literacy.*

**Keywords:** Behaviorism, Reading programs, Critical literacy, Teacher preparation

### Discussion of Terminology and Methodology

Use of the term litalcyl (Bahruth 2000a) in this text is due to the eventual realization that “shallow literacy” is an inaccurate description of what reading schemes based upon a behaviorist paradigm emphasize and produce since they are predicated upon narrow definitions of literacy and are completely antithetical to the author’s understanding of the broad and rich dimensions of literacies in the world, including the wisdom of oral traditions that have no written codes, as well as the ability to read the world by people who cannot read the written word. (Fishermen read the stars to navigate at night and hunters read the tracks of animals, etc.) These behaviorist schemes leave students with false impressions of what literacy actually represents to authors and scholars of critical literacy. The author uses the term “basalization” to represent a process whereby “caring” and well-intentioned teachers superimpose the behaviorist paradigm of trivial, but easily measured and scored questions with accompanying official right answers on trade books and literature originally written for the higher purposes of art and didactics. Pedagogically, a dialectical approach to literature would produce a disposition to look for deeper and multiple interpretations of text and metaphor in relation to the multiple world experiences and perspectives of students in the classroom.

Caring has been addressed by numerous scholars in education (Hayes, Bahruth, Kessler 1991; Noddings 1992; Valenzuela 1999) and while the author agrees with the findings, definitions, and assertions, an additional dimension of caring offers the possibility to focus on what is necessary to institutionalise a commitment to teaching for social

justice. The author would like to introduce scholarship as an expression of caring (Bahruth 2003a) in response to Giroux’s call for “teachers as intellectuals” (Giroux 1988). Scholarship is a form of authorship, which is linked to authority. Studying education critically in social, political, historical and economic contexts supports the development of critical literacy whereby educators become more adept at identifying systemic problems that often go unexamined, since failure to learn is rarely linked with a failure to teach in culturally and developmentally appropriate ways. Authority allows for the development of strong commitments to a philosophy of education that breaks from the longstanding tradition of blaming the victims through a language of deficit. Authority allows for teachers to advocate for their students, and to pose embarrassing questions to the status quo in order to focus attention on the systemic reasons why children get sorted into winners and losers along a bell curve that is anything but “normal.” The bell curve can also be read as statistical data useful in questioning the pedagogical validity of schools. Authority allows teachers to create pedagogical spaces conducive to learning even when they are unrecognisable to the status quo. Finally, authority born out of scholarship provides teachers with the courage to teach in ways that promote critical consciousness and the democratisation of education.

Just as the eventual clarity of terminology has been generative for the author, understandings of the political aspects of education and schooling have emerged through dialectical engagement with research publications, colleagues, students, teachers and friends over the course of a thirty-year career. Perhaps it is time to consider lifelong scholarship and critical examination of a wide range of



paradigms as a methodology for arriving at philosophical assertions.

**If we are not Teaching Toward Social Justice, we are Perpetuating Social Injustice.**  
**Roberto Bahruth 2003 (Author's Translation from Spanish)**

The arguments presented at the session with the same title at The Eleventh International Literacy and Education Research Network Conference on Learning in Havana, Cuba are not new, but they continue to be ignored and dismissed by the traditional educational establishment and those who finance it. A scale of embracing or rejecting of ideas by the status quo serves as an indication of the potential for change the ideas represent. When ideas are embraced, it is because they pose no threat for change. When ideas are ignored, rejected, demonized, or dismissed as unscientific according to definitions of science established by the status quo, it is often because these ideas represent potential for change. Calls for educators to explore pedagogy (understanding education in its historical, political, social and economic contexts) have been consistently rejected. This paper represents one more call, not to arms, but to minds. Teachers must understand that corrupt politicians, lawyers, doctors, stockbrokers, CEOs, and members of all other professions once attended school. The problem has not only been what is included in curricula, but also what has been omitted. Perhaps it is because it is difficult to measure integrity, honesty and compassion using standardized tests. When teachers care, they accept the responsibility to do the scholarship necessary to teach for social justice and critical consciousness. When those in the status quo see education moving in this direction, they create policies to limit the possibilities of a humanistic pedagogy. Schooling becomes a substitute for education and technicism represses teachers who are intellectuals.

One of the participants in the session was from England. He reported that there are now surveillance teams visiting teacher preparation programs to curtail any form of curricular deviation away from the mandated curriculum steeped in technicism. Colleges of education that receive negative reports are issued a warning and a fine, and are limited in the amount of students who can enroll in the program, until the problems are corrected. A second violation results in closure of the college. This evidence may be anecdotal, however recent trends in school reform (Aronowitz & Giroux 1985; Chomsky 1998; Chávez Chávez & O' Donnell 1998; Schmidt 2000; Aronowitz 2000) would suggest that it is not so far-fetched. How much longer will educators tolerate such tyranny and intrusion upon the profession by non-educators? How has traditional teacher preparation and professional

development set us up to conform to increasingly antipedagogical requirements? Schooling must be deconstructed so we can get back to education.

Schooling has become more and more institutionalised as a form of control in the United States (Kohn, 2002; Aronowitz, 2000; Gabbard, 2000; Schmidt, 2000; Purpel, 1999). Despite a plethora of research demonstrating the ineffectiveness of behaviorist approaches to reading (See Freire, 1970; Allington 2002; Coles 2000 for critical overviews), non-educators continue to ignore the obvious, insisting upon more stringent applications of reading programs that misrepresent reading. At best, these programs produce a form of "literacy" (Bahruth 2000a) whereby learners are able to answer trivial, pre-packaged questions with official "right" answers. Emphasis on the literal produces an under-appreciation for literacy, an indifference to reading, a trivialization of literature, and a paralysis before metaphor since opportunities to discuss the deeper meanings of words and stories are not part of the program. The resulting literacy represents the essence of control since those who have been schooled using literal reading schemes often look to and are dependent upon some expert to decipher meanings. A good example of this is "spin," and the rise of spin-doctors in the modern political process. A literal person is easily spun. Counter-evidence of strong "word-world" (Freire 1983) literacy also shows fairly consistently the ability to make meaning --to read the world critically and to write upon the world, rather than to be written upon-- among people with less schooling (Freire 1970; Bennett 1991; Macedo 1994).

Education is "under siege" (Aronowitz & Giroux 1985) in the United States precisely because it is a site where social reproduction can either be reified or challenged. To continue dividing children into winners and losers along a bell curve, thereby reproducing the status quo, teachers need to believe that failure and success are located within the learner, the families, the social class, or ethnic group. Teacher educators and mainstream educational researchers are fluent in a language of deficit (at-risk, drop out, discipline problem, culturally disadvantaged, learning disabled, ADHD, etc.) promoting a discourse that normalizes such perceptions while releasing educators from any responsibility to critically examine anti-pedagogical practices in schools. According to Stuckey (1991), "The ways in which literacy is thought about in this country are reductive and dangerous. In their application they narrow the range of pedagogy and suppress the possibilities of research. This is the real literacy crisis." Current educational reform movements (Gabbard, 2000), which insist upon the euphemistic "scientifically-based" research can only be ideologically driven when what counts as research are recycled notions long since proven

fundamentally flawed, biased, ineffective and “unscientific” (Coles 2000).

The capitalist system that funds education requires a range of opportunities for future generations from unemployment and subsequent welfare or minimum wage workers at one extreme, to the obscenely wealthy leisure class at the other. Literacy is a critical tool for maintaining social divisions, and reading programs are designed to withhold literacy from all learners as they promote literacy among the privileged classes. Approaches to reading that ignore the full spectrum of human conditions in a society produce ignorance. How can we accept that a person is educated if that person graduates from schools harbouring racism, sexism and classism?

Numerous publications of trade books that problematize society from multiple perspectives in an attempt to enrich literacy have been defused through the continued literal mindset of publishing companies and acritical teachers through a process of basalization. Now, instead of posing trivial questions to trivial texts, trivial questions are applied to multicultural children’s literature. Such one-size fits-all questioning schemes severely narrow the definition of comprehension as they deskill learners and teachers. The end result produces citizens who rely upon others for understanding their world. Those who control the corporate media find it easier to direct the attention and understanding of their passive, acritical audiences (Chomsky, 1998). As Kohl (1991) states:

I know of no finer gifts we adults, teachers or not, can give to children than nonnegotiable love, support and all of the resources we can muster as they learn what they must do and resist doing what is foreign and alien to their internal imperatives. A decent world can only be made by people whose growth has not been stunted by the imperatives of others. 1991:88.

While one could dwell upon numerous examples readily available from popular culture and school mandates, it would be more useful to dedicate most of the effort here to a response. In other words, what must teachers do to promote literacy rather than literacy? It would be a good beginning to stop using text-centered, trivial questions and to begin using questioning strategies dedicated to asking learners questions that require each learner to use his or her knowledge of the world in order to make meaning and to offer an answer that is different for each learner yet makes sense. Freire and Macedo (1998) implore teachers to “reject a technicist vision of education.”

### **Expanding Definitions of Literacy: Multicultural Texts of the Everyday**

Every place I’ve visited has offered new dimensions to my literacy of the world. A moment’s reflection on stories I tell my friends about those places and

the people who taught me to read their worlds reminds me of the lessons I’ve learned from leaving the better known paths of being of my everyday. Each new layer I unravel from my daily experience reveals new dimensions of meaning and being as well. Opportunities to expand my reading of the world abound, no matter whether I am in the everyday, or immersed in the rich, yet to be known culture of the other. These are the higher dimensions of literacy that only those who have not been heavily schooled or those who have recuperated from the damage of schooling truly get to experience.

When I travel, the fluent readers of the daily reality of the places I visit become my teachers. Since they are literate in their surroundings, they teach me to notice what I would otherwise have only looked at in passing, but not have seen. Most often, these teachers have also traveled extensively and have had similar experiences in other places, so they have become observant teachers of their own localities.

On a recent trip to Las Cruces, New Mexico, Rudolfo Chávez Chávez pointed to stone walls as we drove around the area. He instructed me to look at several walls representing a stark juxtaposition between art, where form and function were in harmony and aesthetically pleasing to the eye—a well made wall, done by “un maestro” – and walls that were little more than piles of stone and cement, slapped together hastily, with little care. He didn’t tell me how to read them. He just pointed to the different texts and allowed me to come to my own conclusions. He helped me to become a reader of the local craft of building walls. Our discussion led to his dismay and anger at the sloppy walls, and of course the metaphor was extended to teachers who are maestros versus teacher impersonators who put little care into their daily grind to make it through the day. I had been to Las Cruces many times before, but all of the walls looked the same to me until Rudy shared with me a personal criticism of his everyday. I have since become a reader of walls wherever I go, often applying a new dimension of literacy shared by a friend.

Both Rudy and I are readers of Freire—and his notions of literacy as a dialectical process-- and Anzaldúa—who made the familiar of the borderlands unfamiliar and problematic-- and this gives us a shared intellectual foundation to negotiate the everyday together. I appreciated his juxtapositions, enhanced by the context of the work of two scholars we both admired and studied. On an earlier trip, we drove through the borderlands between Texas, New Mexico and Mexico and he taught me to read the signs that indicated how porous the political borders really are; places where culture refused to stay on one side of the border. While crossing the border to the north meant economic prosperity relative to the impoverished conditions south of the border, the people came with their culture in tow. Even though the Yankee would

have the Yaqui/Taraumara assimilate, the atoles (corn drinks), empanadas de camote (sweet potato dumplings), and much more of their culture and language is non-negotiable no matter how powerful the bribes and incentives. It takes generations to colonize a people.

The elders wisely resist, but the Yankee works on their children instead in a place called school. Schools build the sloppy walls that attempt to divide people across generations and cultures. A teacher might use the rich organic text of the borderlands to problematize how those who have come north cling tenaciously to their roots, preserving their dignity quietly. Discussions with laboring class Latino children targeted for colonization through the study of white Anglo curricula in schools might work these texts to cultivate a source of pride and esteem for the elders, rather than dismissing them or leaving them invisible despite the signs. The children might be taught the aesthetics of a warm empanada de camote (sweet potato dumpling) and the long history that perfected it, with just a hint of anis. Juxtaposed to a hot apple pie at MacDonald's, loaded up with corn sweeteners, the advantages and disadvantages of handmade versus mass-production are open for exploration producing a mindset for criticism. A well made, nahuatl hot chocolate with canela (cinnamon) can be juxtaposed to the sugar laden hot chocolate made from powders and served north of the border en masse.

Teachers have the opportunities to point out a "well-made wall." The texts surround them, but they remain hidden by the everyday that puts them in front of our noses so we won't notice. A teacher who has learned not to notice cannot help students to become literate. Reading involves going beyond the signs to appreciate deeper levels of what they signify. Una panaderia (a bakery) in Anthony, Texas becomes a statement of identity oblivious to theoretical, geo-political lines drawn in the sand, regardless of the struggles involved both in crossing them and continuing on the other side. The richness of this multicultural text is lost to the literal, who only see the signs as indicators of Mexican bakeries, restaurants, and businesses. Anglicized pronunciations of place names smooth over and erase the rich history that is only hinted at by names like Anthony. (I recall there is another place in Texas that is still San Antonio).

Another person who shares a critical read of the everyday with me is a Guatemalan indigenous (Cakchiquel) man who takes me into the mountains surrounding his village to visit small farms, the forest, and other small villages where the residents speak the same language. My fluency in Spanish is useless to me on these trips except when speaking with Mario. He becomes my eyes, pointing out details for me to notice, my ears, especially when we listen for hours to the different birds that make their home in these mountains, my storyteller as he shares

local folklore, and my translator and diplomat as we meet people along the way. Most people we meet either know him, know of him, or know his family, so we are welcomed with friendly exchanges. I know the Spanish speaking Guatemala fairly well, but I refer to these trips with Mario as going to "el otro Guatemala" (the other Guatemala). Mario explains to me about food, culture and traditions we witness along the way. When we hear a bird call in the forest, he tells me the size, color, diet and habits of the bird, as well as its name in Cakchiquel. Sometimes we manage to get close enough so I can see the birds for myself.

A few years ago, I asked Mario if he would like to come to see my country. He said he would have to ask permission from the elders of the village (la cofradia), but if they said he could he would love to visit the United States. I thought it would happen quickly, but the elders weighed the decision carefully for several weeks. It is important to note that his village is famous for a national heritage of flying enormous kites (barriletes) on the day of the dead. They take months preparing the materials, making the special rope from a cactus plant, harvesting a local plant for the glue to hold small scraps of colored paper together in fancy designs. It takes six months to make a kite and it is a community effort and a source of great pride.

I mention this because, when the elders gave Mario their answer, it came with words of support and sage advice. They told Mario that the trip to "el norte" (the north) would involve many new experiences and he would see many things even stranger than what he had been experiencing among the Ladinos (Spanish speakers) beyond the village. Mario said they wanted him to go and to learn, but they cautioned him to be careful to make sure that his rope does not break. They reminded him of what happens to a kite once the rope breaks. The elders used the village tradition as a metaphor to remind Mario never to forget where he comes from and where he belongs! For years I have used metaphors to explain the importance of the mother tongue as a foundation for academic success in a second language. I now use this story to deepen my students' awareness of the folk wisdom of first peoples who read their world critically.

I have also had the privilege of working with educators in Israel on several occasions. My teacher there, who is a fluent critical reader of the everyday of her country, is Haggith Gor Ziv. Tel Aviv is a modern city, full of vitality and movement. As we drive around the city, Haggith points out the huge advertisements draping the sides of tall buildings. They promote products using male and female models in scanty clothing and provocative poses. After a few days she asks me what I noticed about the ads. We enter into a long discussion about the objectification of women. She inquires about the feelings of young women who do not look like these

models and still others who strive to look like them. We discuss how the traditional Jewish, as well as Islamic and Catholic Palestinian women must perceive these images as they are bombarded by them daily. We draw connections to pornography, prostitution and other ways in which women are exploited and oppressed. We discuss the underrepresentation of women in the arts and sciences, in decision-making positions, in government, etc.

To Haggith, what has been normalized and relatively invisible to most white men is problematic and oppressive. A product of received culture myself, I see how the objectification of women was fundamental to a predator mentality I now reject. She also demonstrates how she writes upon the world by protesting the occupation and dehumanization of Palestinians by the Israeli Defense Forces. She told me about how she participated in caravans of Israeli women who drive to Palestinian villages to distribute food and clothing at the risk of arrest. This influenced my own reinvigorated efforts to work more directly with the migrant farmworkers in my area.

She rewrites stories from the Old Testament to tell the tale from women's perspectives. Haggith and her friends provide the threat of a good example of what women can do to lead as subjects rather than to accept being treated as objects. My literacy in feminism is deepened by these deconstructions of the everyday by a local who is critically literate. I am beginning to see that brave women have spoken and acted against social injustice throughout history.

I have been fortunate to have many teachers along the way who were fluent in reading their local "everydays" critically. Under their wise and patient tutelage I have come to see what otherwise might have been missed though right before my eyes.

### **Literacy: Negotiating Nepantla While Putting Oneself Back Together**

"Nepantla: The Nahuatl word for an in-between state, that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race or gender position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity." Gloria Anzaldúa (1987)

"¿Para qué escribe uno, si no es para juntar sus pedazos? Desde que entramos en la escuela o la iglesia, la educación nos descuartiza; nos enseña a divorciar el alma del cuerpo y la razón del corazón.

Sabios doctores de Ética y Moral han de ser los pescadores de la costa colombiana, que inventaron la palabra *sentipensante* para definir al lenguaje que dice la verdad."

"Why does one write, if not to put one's pieces together? From the moment we enter school or church, education chops us into pieces; it teaches us to divorce soul from body and mind from heart. The fishermen of the Colombian coast must be learned doctors of ethics and

morality, for they invented the word *sentipensante*, feeling-thinking, to define language that speaks the truth."

Eduardo Galeano (1989)

We are all constantly in a state of Nepantla whether we choose to recognize it or not. From the time we are born we are Nepantla creations, a genetic and psychological mixture of our two parents. In addition, some may be biracial, bicultural, bilingual. When we marry, we enter a new dimension of negotiating Nepantla. To fail at this negotiation results in another Nepantla: divorce.

Perhaps the most precarious of terrains to be negotiated is the one between the world of the learner and the school. Children are often required to abandon their intuitions about language and culture in order to "succeed" in negotiating artificial, fragmented curricula (Hayes, Bahruth, & Kessler 1991, 1998; Valenzuela 1999). The official right answers of literacy stunt their development in literacy. Children of the "other" are often forced to abandon their mother tongues in order to survive in schools. The brutal tyranny of this anti-humane practice is often born out of ignorance by those who remain unaware of the varied terrains of Nepantla in their own lives or the lives of others.

The antidote for the poison of ignorance is education. Not an education that is nothing more than a continuation of the schooling, which caused the problem in the first place, but an education that challenges us to become aware of the many Nepantlas of our lives and the lives of others. Two powerful pedagogical moves need to occur if we are to educate for critical consciousness: to educate for the development of a healthy philosophy of life. First, a pedagogical space must be fostered that allows for us to become aware of the states of Nepantla each of us represents. Second, that space must invite the learners to express their emerging sense of being where they can find their voice. This would require us to challenge the artificial dichotomies that "divorce soul from body and mind from heart," since it is through fragmentation that we enter the ontological fog of the status quo. Literacy is a sophisticated human tool that allows us to attain ontological clarity. This is why true literacy always involves a reading of the "word-world" (Freire 1983) that eventually will lead to human agency through writing upon the world.

The preferred solution would be to avoid the stripping or obscuring of the ontological issues of Nepantla from the very start of our education. Fragmented curricula, stupidifying questions, negating or ignoring of issues or dimensions of humanity eventually produce literacy. This is a condition of exploitation where people become willing objects to be written upon, since no other versions of living and being have been part of their

schooling. Since they have been deskilled and are now unable to read the world, they cannot write upon it. Since their worlds were always discounted throughout their schooling, they no longer trust or ponder their own tacit knowledge. They become dependent upon “experts” who tell them what to think.

García Márquez (2002), in reflecting upon his earliest memories of education, recounts his experiences in a Montessori school where the seeds of his intellectual development were planted and nurtured. Montessori’s notion of using materials with multiple solutions were deliberately designed to promote flexibility of thought, a far cry from much of the mindless activities required of the inmates of schools centered on banking education.

Recently, a student learning Spanish with me asked, “¿Cómo se dice?, You changed my life!” I gave him an answer I learned from Eduardo Galeano when he talked about his crossroads with Nepantla: “Ahora soy otro.” (Now I am another). The student looked me in the eyes as his own flooded with tears and he repeated, “Roberto, ahora soy otro.”

How sad that many “teachers” in schools are nothing more than what Chávez Chávez (1997) called “tellers” who deposit small change in the

gradually dulling minds of their students. They count the change and balance the books in a bank-school where accounting is little more than cooking the books as well. They will never know the joys of teaching. They will write a hegemonic script upon the lives of others even as they are being written upon. They will produce another generation of well-behaved, domesticated servants in the same fashion that they were mass-produced.

The moral dilemma we need to confront as teachers is an intellectual challenge. It requires a delicate pedagogy of being “patiently-impatient” (Freire, 1996) as we guide our students across that “uncertain terrain” from technicism to intellectualism; from factory work to cultural work, from a routine, banal existence to living as socially and morally conscious beings. The basic skills are not about the conjugation of the verb “to be,” they are about what it means to be.

Joining the word with the world produces critical literacy. It helps students to find their voices. It uses literacy to put one’s pieces together. Then, as true teachers, they can work to avoid chopping language, literacy and their students into pieces. Teaching is a powerful way to write upon the world.

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