

Critical Literacy for Poor Learners: an Engagement with Power and Marginalization

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Abstract. The threat and challenge of illiteracy looms heavy on the public school system in postcolonial and developing contexts. Implicit in the low literacy achievements of poor and marginalized children is a discourse that blames learners for low achievement. The failure to problematise the material conditions of marginalised children's lives is a shortcoming of literacy policy that aims to address inequity. The focus of this paper is to reflect on theoretical constructs of marginalization and power and highlight the need for a critical literacy discourse. My premise is that inequality in the social system based on race and class is central to low literacy levels among disadvantaged learners. For key critical theorists like Freire, Giroux, McLaren and Apple, emancipatory education for the oppressed involved raising awareness of social class conditions while providing literacy instruction. Pedagogy is to be simultaneously grounded in an immediate social reality while also seeking to transcend and transform the confines surrounding the context (Ewing 2005,6).

Keywords: Critical Literacy, Poverty Marginalization, Power.

1. Introduction

The concept critical literacy is fundamentally emancipatory and evolving, dependent on emerging social contradictions in time and space. It therefore tends to be 'nebulous' (Kinchloe & McLaren 2000) but its basic orientation is transformative. 'Transformation' does not simply mean changing the positionalities of actors in particular sets of power relations. It means creating the conditions in which agency and voice can emerge (McDaniel 2006,22). Interrogating critical literacy for the marginalised would illuminate the emancipatory or restrictive effects of educational practices in policy, pedagogy and administration on disadvantaged learners. More importantly, the creation of a dialogical space for robust dialectical analysis and emancipatory theoretical constructs are far more valuable than just discursive analyses of the literacy audits.

2. Critical Literacy

2.1. Approaches to Critical Literacy Research

Critical literacy adherents recognise that literacies are a constellation of social practices framed by institutional contexts. As Luke and Freebody explain:

To say that literacy is socially constructed, then, is also to say that it is institutionally located. Our position is that institutional context is not benign or neutral, but rather must be seen as informed by social contracts and historical projects for molding, making, and disciplining human subjects, populaces, and communities and for shaping and distributing cultural and material resources. (1997,3)

Giroux (1992) writes that what is missing from 'traditional' views of literacy as cognitive activity that pupils learn through a transmission model is any notion of how teachers both produce and authorise particular forms of political, ethical, and social literacy. Also missing from this dominant position is any sense of how the ideologies that inform teacher authority, with its particular view of knowledge and curriculum on the one hand and pedagogy on the other, serves to legitimate and introduce students to particular ways of life, and their corresponding narratives and cultural values. In both cases, the emphasis on mastery and procedure functions to exclude the voices, histories, and experience of subordinate groups from the ideologies, practices, and normative orderings that constitute the symbolic hierarchies of the dominant literacy curriculum (Giroux 1992,304).

Little room is left in Giroux's comments for school literacy that would promote equity. If, as suggested by Giroux, all school literacy is essentially colonising, teachers and students are situated as reproducers of

unequal and dominant social structures. It is this arrangement that critical literacy seeks to work against. Rejecting the essentialising nature of Giroux's assessment of school literacy, other theorists have argued that it is possible to construct literacy education in ways that promote social justice. Edelsky (1996) differentiates literates-as-Subjects and literates-as-Objects. The distinction is important, Edelsky argues, because without such distinctions, it is impossible to push forward a new model of literacy that would challenge inequalities. Binary frames enable us to recognise proficient and struggling readers, categories that reify context-specific distinctions. When we speak of marginalised or struggling readers, we generalize about the learners when it is quite possible that the reading behavior is directly tied to the school context.

Street reviews approaches from the emergent 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS) tradition that is coalescing around notions of literacy as social practice, multiple literacies and contestations in relations of power (2003,77). These foci are congruent with immanent and dialectical inquiry techniques. NLS interest in the situatedness of literacy practices biases research towards qualitative insider perspectives, while dialectical analysis seems to be the natural modality for interrogating the impact of contested power relations on literacy practices (Street 2003,77).

2.2. Racial and Class Inequalities

Critical theorists explain marginalization as a process by which individuals are excluded from society based on various traits, the key being social class and race. Critical race theory explains marginalization as the process by which people of colour are excluded from society to maintain the dominant hegemonic power structure. Educational research should not ignore the everyday manifestations of racial inequalities and the notion of social class and their connection to broader structural systems. The aim of a critical paradigm should be exposure as the first step and then followed by commitment to a particular paradigm of empowerment that gives children traction in discourses of power beyond polemic so that they can take on the power brokers on equal terms. The concept of 'voice' and 'naming one's own reality' is central to Critical Race Theory in that it can serve as an emancipatory means for marginalised groups and individuals.

How do poor children name their reality? In Fine *et al's* (2008,230) study on working class schools, poor children spoke with strength and confidence of their skills, their knowledge of the street, the fact that they have different life experiences, they know about struggling and recall fondly teachers who support them. However, once they discursively wandered beyond the borders of the local, shame, stigma, and fear peppered their talk (Bronfenbrenner 1979). They described themselves as academically handicapped by opportunities denied, ill-equipped to attend a real or serious college, embarrassed by limited vocabulary, math skills, and exposure. They embodied the inferiority of their schooling: "If kids from a wealthy school came in here right now, I wouldn't talk because they would be more sophisticated or something, and understand words I don't know and I don't want to be embarrassed". Or they articulated their mis-education: "That is like putting all the bad kids in one school, that's just like putting, you know, just like putting them in jail. They going to be crazy..." (Fine *et al.* 2008,230). The quality of the contexts in which they are growing speaks to youth about how they are viewed and valued. If surrounded by decay, disrepair, and filth, and no adult intervenes to protect, a child may come to see herself as worthy of little or that adults see her as unworthy.

Social class, while perhaps a 'phantasmatic' category, organises the social, cultural and material world in exceptionally powerful ways. While class is clearly connected to income and occupation, and there is ample evidence that income inequalities are widening, class must also be understood as practices of living – the social and psychic practices through which ordinary people live, survive and cope. Examples of profoundly classed experiences include which schools children go to, school based interventions if children fail, the extent and type of extracurricular activities children engage in, where they live and the nature of their housing, which universities they attend and under what expectations for success and imagined and or taken for granted financing, the extent to which learners are prepared for university admission and benchmarked testing, nature of school based counseling and the health system.

While class certainly has its roots in economic realities, people live class in response to such realities and schools are important mediators in this regard. Recognition of the structuring effects of class has never been more pressing given the deepening social inequalities in developing countries. This is not to deny the ongoing effects of race in relation to the production of inequality. Despite much rhetoric and a few policies

directed against it, inequality in educational outcomes as related to social class background persists largely unabated. For example, in South Africa, deepening segregation, severe constriction in the educational pipeline, increased stratification in higher education through the emergence of a more highly segmented system of universities, as well as what counts as official knowledge are all tied to the production of unequal class outcomes. This is particularly apparent in the concentration of African and coloured students in high poverty schools.

Many schools lack science laboratories, or, if they have the space, do not supply up-to-date equipment so that students can perform even the most routine experiments in chemistry and biology (Hartley & Treagust 2006). Schools are chronically short of qualified science and math teachers, the results of which is that many courses cannot be offered to meet entrance requirements of universities. Environments for facilitating learning – books in the home and parents who help teach their children how to read are not the norm. The class system in schooling has taken a disturbing turn. Students know that getting credentials is simply an endurance test and most have no expectation of receiving a critical education. The problem is that in our profoundly anti-intellectual culture, it is hard to know where working class young people can find education (Aronowitz 2008,83). Unlike race, social class is not constitutionally protected: there is no guarantee of equal opportunity on the basis of poverty. We have witnessed almost no political mobilization on the part of the poor, in contrast to the mobilization activities of race pre-1994 in South Africa. Many social programmes have been directed at enhancing opportunities for black children and women, but educational programmes directed at those who are economically disadvantaged have been far fewer. Hence, the levels of inequality in literacy achievement and attainment, which is steadily declining, may persist if inequality is not addressed.

The great contradiction of education in the modern era is that it is both an avenue for upward mobility, as well as the main social institution in which social status is reproduced from one generation to another. The social reproduction theories of Bourdieu (1990), Bernstein (1996) and Giroux (1992) highlight extensively the role of schooling in maintaining and perpetuating marginalization and socialising students in ways that reproduce class structures. Bourdieu's (1990) notion of social and cultural capital are attributes used in schools to reward students who have high social capital (as defined by society) and punish those who have low (as in poor students). Habitus, which includes attitudes, beliefs, and experiences, promotes a belief in lower class learners that they will not achieve because they do not have the cultural capital that upper class learners possess – which is valued by education. It would be significant to ascertain the influence of literacy reform over the past three decades on the public schooling system.

2.3. Critical Literacy in in a Class based Society

South Africa is a world apart characterised by two parallel economies, the First and the Second. The metaphor is extended into South Africa's two education 'systems'. The second school system, enrolls the vast majority of poor and working-class children whose health, economic and community difficulties concomitant with equally deficit schools produce learners that read mostly at the functional level, write without fluency or confidence and use inappropriate concrete techniques with numeric operations (Fleisch 2008,2).

Given this notion of a world apart, it is intriguing that both the state and educational researchers have totally ignored the need for a bimodal distribution of achievement scores for literacy and settled for the rather misleading measure of central tendency. Hence, statistics on South African learners do not paint a valid picture. Measure of central tendency may be a deliberate attempt by the state to obscure the underlying pattern of unequal achievement based on race. For example, the 2011 Annual National Audit of Grade 3 literacy indicates that 30% of learners have achieved at that level. In 2001, the Grade 3 average score in the reading and writing domain was 39% (DoE 2003). It is evident that the country's literacy rates in primary schools have fallen by almost 9% in the past decade. In mathematics, the figures are more disconcerting where only one learner in ten was at the standard required by the National Curriculum Statement (Fleisch 2008,8). In the context of substantial inequality, it is vital that the true picture of under-achievement of the disadvantaged schools is portrayed. It is only when the average scores are disaggregated that we may be able to get the real story of unequal learning in South Africa. When the literacy achievement scores in Grade 6 were disaggregated in the Western Cape, four out of five children in the former white schools were reading

at Grade Six level while in black schools, only four children in a hundred were reading at grade level (WCED 2004).

Reflections on the impact of social factors like health are imperative in problematising low literacy achievement. Poor children on the margins of South African society suffer a myriad health problems and the link between poor health and learning failure is strong. The key health problem is malnutrition which is likely to result in irreversible damage to children's intellectual development. Others include the high rate of stunting (weight : height ratio); micronutrient deficiencies, hunger, parasite infections, hearing loss, asthma, foetal alcohol syndrome, HIV/Aids, lead poisoning, mental-health problems, domestic violence and vision.

The structural conditions of disadvantaged schools (the Minister of Basic Education announced recently that it would take 20 years to replace the mud schools in the Eastern Cape province), combined with the belief that wealthy youth received better, provoke a sense of anger voiced by many youth. It's a case of relative deprivation, a substantial discrepancy between what they believe they deserve and what they actually receive (Crosby, Muehrer & Loewenstein 1986). Relative deprivation, with associated anger and grievance, derives when individuals experience a discrepancy between what they have and what they want; what they have and what they believe they deserve; what they don't have and others do (Fine *et al.* 2008,229).

2.4. New Funds of Knowledge

The cultural capital of working class learners may ensure that literacy studies circumvent entirely the privileged transcendence of the aesthetic. As a regime of knowledge, popular culture exhibits a shift away from high culture traditions with work songs and pop music to television programmes and daily journalism. The objects of the discourse of the everyday should also be subject to a theoretical and academic critique by learners. Rap music, tabloid newspapers, DVDs, the media, advertisements, popular music, dance and art forms, mix-it, cell phone messaging - objects that constitute a part of the everyday life of people need to be extrapolated to become part of the classroom analysis. Popular cultural forms provide greater opportunities for a critical literacy and it should be incorporated into the curriculum to transform literacy studies:

Look at many popular cultural forms and the issue of femininity, the question of gender roles, ideas about masculinity, significant matters of identity, are often dynamically represented, often far more likely to engage the interest and critical attention of learners, frequently in forms that are more interesting and more challenging than their high cultural counterparts from the realms of literature (Peim 1993,185).

Texts that students prefer are typically not valued in schools. Moje (2000) writes extensively about the need to broaden our understanding of literacies to more accurately reflect students' knowledge, interests, and abilities, which extend far beyond school-sanctioned literacy practices. If current instructional practices offer only a cursory acknowledgement of indigenous youth literacy practices — as, for example, in poetry lessons that include song lyrics — we shortchange students' literacy knowledge and fail to capitalise on the possibility of bridging and blending school and non-school literacies. Drawing on the concept of 'funds of knowledge', Moje (2000) demonstrates how a student who struggles in the school context can have a fluent, active, and valued literacy life outside of school. Two principles of funds of knowledge are that they are activity based and they are acquired as a result of desire and purpose. Although educators recognise reading as an active process, for marginalised readers the activity in reading often is not readily apparent. In contrast, literacy experiences embedded in their funds of knowledge, which are largely employed outside the official school context, are easily identifiable as active and purposeful. For literacy educators, a key question becomes how to foster authentic school-based reading activities that recognise and extend the literacy values that marginalised readers bring into the classroom.

The mere representation of the 'everyday' cultural forms within the curriculum can become another pitfall of the pluralistic discourse. What is more significant is how this cultural richness and variety is critiqued, challenged and extended within the classroom. An appropriate intervention is to educate learners to respect and acknowledge the polyphonic nature of the diversity and variety of texts – and their right to exist alongside each other.

Muller's (1993) alternative response to counter the pluralistic discourse is teaching for understanding and he maintains that there is a need to democratise access to high-status knowledge and teaching. It is compatible with a pedagogy that produces a stance towards dominant knowledge that questions its

absoluteness, and develops an understanding of the heterogeneous and relational nature of knowledge. We have to be careful not to dilute the knowledge so that it becomes in the end another way by which learners from marginalised groups are denied access to dominant or canonical knowledge.

3. Conclusion

Inherent in the notions of marginalization and disadvantage is the process of 'epistemic violence' of imperialism that has resulted in the unequal balance of power between the middle class and working class and exploitation of the poor in the maintenance of economic advantage and wealth. This ideology produces the discourse of 'development'. Also within this framework, poverty is constructed as a lack of resources, services and markets, and of education, rather than a lack of control over the production of resources or enforced disempowerment.

The issue of educational inequality emanating from socio-economic disadvantage is a moral issue, rather than an economic issue. The continued inequality of disadvantaged schooling is the creation of a society that violates its most basic social and political precepts that underlie its democratic claims. It is also an economic issue for society because low levels of literacy among such a large portion of the populace leads to large social costs in the form of lower societal income and economic growth and higher costs of criminal justice and public assistance. Poor schools are not simply reproducing race and class inequities. Far worse, they educate poor and working class youth away from academic mastery and democracy, toward academic ignorance and civic alienation.

4. References

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