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## **Literacy and Illiteracy: The Apartheid of American Education**

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**Literacy and Illiteracy:  
The Apartheid of American Education**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master in Education  
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Literacy and Illiteracy: The Apartheid of American Education**

**Marielana Kamienski**

For the general public, education is the portal to the American Dream. At face value, education is not seen as a complex matter: teachers teach and students learn. In reality however, education is a closely regulated, political institution where literacy is dispensed to select populations who are part of the dominant society.

Although it is the responsibility of educational institutions to foster literacy, they are just as likely to produce illiteracy. As a reflection of the dominant culture, literacy functions as a mechanism by which individuals are educated and absorbed into mainstream society. Those who fail to be thus processed are labeled as illiterate.

Contrary to popular opinion, illiteracy does not signal a weakness in American education, but a successful means by which undesirables are prevented from competing with the mainstream. This paper examines the components of education that serve to maintain the status quo and to exclude peoples who do not fit the mold. Included in this study is a consideration of: literacy characteristics; attitudes which serve to limit equal access to literacy and to maintain the myth of "lower class" illiteracy; attitudes capable of challenging the status quo of education.

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## INTRODUCTION

Literacy is a current banner, energetically waved to and fro, until its meaning has become obscured and absorbed by the very forces who profess to support its attainment. With the inadequacies of education once more in the spotlight, literacy has been brought to the fore as the latest miracle cure. Merely inject sufficient quantities into the mainstream on a daily basis, and educational malaise will be eradicated. Having thus spoken and fulfilled their leadership roles, pundits are freed to move on to other areas in need of pontification. Changing hats, such professionals may then turn their efforts to other similarly pressing issues, such as poverty, drugs and world peace, with comparable success.

The word is a powerful tool in America. Once spoken, words become truths, taking their substance, not from reality, but from the particular aura which surrounds the speaker. St. John's reflection "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" has been resurrected and reforged as a propaganda device par excellence of the Twentieth Century. As the "Word" in the biblical sense was in fact God, i.e. the Ultimate Reality, so too, the word, spoken today by the media, politicians or religious leaders, has become reality without the requirement of a rigorous investigation. Simply state that something Is, use enough conviction, energy, persuasion and charisma, and there you are, Instant Reality, no questions asked.

Thus, we have "literacy", a word least defined by those who utter it most. What does literacy mean? From whence does it arise?

What are the possibilities of literacy, and, for goodness sakes, just how can we get some for our children? These roads are left untrodden by the modern prophets who seek instantaneous, painless, lockstep recipes.

Time is slipping away. With it goes our children who move towards a future less and less able to become its promise. Before we rush headlong after visionaries who lure us with instant, undefined solutions (such as "literacy") it is imperative that we first pause, reflect and undertake some discriminating inquiries.

No one familiar with the vast scope which literacy encompasses would be surprised at the confusion which exists over its boundaries. There are many tributaries which feed into and flow away from literacy. Mapping this shifting seascape is no simple task. In my search for a focal point, I've chosen Janet Emig's passage "Literacy is not worth teaching if it does not promote access, sponsor learning, unleash literal power and activate the greatest power of all, imagination" (1983, p.47).

As we examine literacy in greater detail, striving to distinguish essential characteristics, Janet Emig's words may provide a compass point by which to maintain our bearings.

## PSYCHOMETRIC VS INTERACTIVE LITERACY

### A. Introduction

My investigations of literacy have led me to conclude that literacy may be viewed within the parameters of two broad categories. The first is the more traditional view of literacy, generally referred to as the "psychometric". Proponents of this behaviorist approach favor the quantifiable. That which may be measured, labeled and sequenced may also be more readily understood and manipulated. Information and enlightenment gleaned from this source is thus able to be packaged and delivered to the classroom teacher for implementation. Following the carefully studied, laid out directives, purportedly results in a more literate student body whose growth may, of course, be measured by relatives of the very psychometric devices which spawned the program in the first instance. ( circular reasoning or self-fulfilling prophecy?? )

The second literacy category may be introduced under the aegis of the "interactive". Without the clearcut quantities of the psychometric to guide us, the peripheries of this land are less easily defined. However, the vistas which here present themselves are certainly more breath-taking, promising and ultimately liberating than that held out by psychometry. Interactive literacy is people, processes and contexts rather than numbers, skills and norms. Cultural, political and economics based, such a literacy is a multiconnected, in-action phenomenon.

For the purposes of leading into my discussions, I have chosen

to simplify a most complex field of study by presenting literacy within the bands of the two broad spectra of "psychometric" and "interactive". If one is to conduct an examination of a topic, then that topic must be subject to the strictures of definition in order that we may speak and be understood from some common ground. Yet, as reasonable as this may seem, there is the danger of becoming mired within the intricacies of semantics. Aware that "too general" is as useless as "too narrow", the challenge becomes formidable to choose referents which join sufficient flexibility to purposeful structure.

My purpose in this treatment of literacy isn't to provide an exhaustive catalogue of literacy definitions. Rather, I intend to suggest a framework for considering the various features of literacy which will serve as a point of departure into the realms of the social/cultural and political/economical. It is here that literacy may be understood as a functional tool-for-life.

## B Psychometric Literacy

The psychometric approach has become practically synonymous with the current back-to-basics movement whose roots are traced to the late 19th Century. Heath (1980) maintains that the United States teaching rationale of this period "...supported an emphasis on oral reading style and correct responses to standardized performance...less readily assessable abilities of reading for comprehension and transference of ability to the outside world were discounted in the general society" (p.17).

These latter skills, however, were taken into account during



World War 2 when "functionally literate" (de Castell, 1986) was coined by the United States Army to mean "...capability to understand written instruction necessary for conducting basic military functions and tasks" (p. 3). A fifth grade reading level was thereby decided upon. From this definition arose the terms "survival literacy" and "basic literacy".

These brands of literacy are limiting and place their greatest energy on bringing about a level of functioning which serves a narrow academic purpose. Individuals educated under such circumstances may be poorly prepared for the challenges of full citizenship.

The "technocratic" approach as de Castell (1986) has renamed the psychometric, holds sway over the present educational scene. The era of progressive education, open classrooms, electives, etc. has been increasingly supplanted by the technocratic approach over the last decade. Progressive education has become a whipping post for the rapidly emerging changes and problems in our society. The inability of our country to understand and solve these conundrums has focused blame on the glaring deficiencies of our educational systems. However, the most outstanding failure of all goes unacknowledged - and that is the indecisiveness and superficiality of a society which doesn't know its own mind.

Every 15 years or so, a new educational plan comes along to supersede the current systems. In terms of the life span of educational institutions and the length of time required to develop new curricula, materials and staff training programs, 10-15 years is a short duration - and certainly not long enough to demonstrate

a significant positive impact across all grade levels. It is rare for any student to complete 12 years of education under the continuity of any one given educational rationale. No sooner does a specific educational practice begin to take root than it is criticized as a failure, attacked and discarded. If inconsistency and erratic behavior on the part of parents can have a negative impact on their offspring, how much more negative is this behavior on the part of large educational institutions?

Run on the factory model, schools are expected to produce an educated individual within 12 years. If such aren't forthcoming according to certain specified criteria, let's toss out the whole ball of wax and chase after something new. The factory model of production sits in place of a solid educational philosophy. Lacking a sound, well defined basis from which to decide educational policy, this nation's leaders rush to and fro after any promising glimmer. New ideas are given limited time to prove themselves, then abandoned in the impatience for predictability, immediacy and dollar for dollar return - the hallmarks of the once mighty American factory system.

It's no coincidence that our systems of production (i.e. goods, services and education) are concurrently faltering as they fail to meet the needs of society. With increasing failure comes frantic grasping at the technocratic road which harkens back to a supposed golden age of education. And so, the technocratic approach has become a dominant factor on today's education scene. The "literacy crisis" is thus to be addressed by "...researched and documented guidelines for reading instruction and evaluation..."

linking criteria for attainment of educational literacy in public school to performance demands of standardized evaluation instruments...and concerned with manageable transmission of readily measurable skills" (de Castell, 1986, p.3).

Along these lines of reasoning, literacy is reduced to sets and subsets of targeted skills to be acquired within the confines of school. (Controversies have arisen from attempts to affix just which skills are to be developed, in what order and to what extent.) Hence, school success also becomes a definition of literacy. Miller's (1985) study of adult literacy students "...demonstrates how deeply internalized school labeling can be" (Smith, 1987, p.60). Adult's attitudes towards themselves as learners had been affected by their school experiences and whether or not they had been failures.

I have observed the reality of Miller's statement in my "learning disabled" students who have a deeply ingrained "I can't" attitude. They have been labeled as "special" (translation: failure) and ejected from "regular ed". For these students the message is that they just didn't "get it". IT (literacy) is perceived as coming from outside themselves. These students don't appreciate themselves as activators, motivators or creators of literacy who have all types of experiences from which they may draw.

My greatest challenge is in getting my students to realize that they in fact have a lot of knowledge which can be used in and connected to school. I am required, in a sense, to prove this to them by constantly requesting that they dig deep, search and struggle to rediscover and reclaim the knowledge which they

have - but don't recognize as valid - because it comes from them and not from me! If my students find that time and again they are faced by the incontrovertible reality of success, then they begin to believe in themselves. Their learning accelerates as they move from passivity to become activated participants, taking responsibility for their own literacy.

In concluding this segment of my discussion, I would like to return to a statement I made earlier regarding the "concurrent faltering of our systems of production". From United States industrial concern with the Japanese challenge to our economy has come a growing interest in their systems of production. Given the United States connection between factory and school, the unavoidable next step is to investigate the Japanese educational system.

The implication is "they must be doing something that works, what is it?" The pitfall here, arising from the acceptance of literacy as a system of definable skills, is the tendency to believe that literacy "systems" may be transplanted from one society to another. A statement by Tuinman (1978) can enlighten the debate:

"Literacy is situational means that operational definitions of functional literacy and criteria for its assessment are always culturally and historically specific. We cannot then, merely adopt and apply concepts and criteria of functional literacy developed elsewhere and expect to advance national education policy and practice" (p.14).

From this line of reasoning, it follows that perceived elements of Japanese education may not be transportable to the United States. The adage "loses something in the translation" takes on a striking interpretation. If we're going to develop

literacy, we can learn from other cultures, but we'll have to look within our own American context for the dimensions of our literacy.

As an educator involved in the day to day struggle with the quicksilver concept of literacy, it is my belief that restrictive definitions of literacy are a disservice to the growing numbers of students coming into our public school systems from multi-cultural, multilingual life experiences. Our students' living situations are not reflected by the out-moded Dick and Jane premise formerly served by the middle-class-oriented-educational systems of the United States. Increasing numbers of dropouts, illiterate graduates, and special education programs bursting at the seams indicate that public school education is dramatically out of step with the needs of the students it pretends to serve. Part of this deficiency may come from a definition of literacy which "...fails to consider or provide for social and economic mobility...is inconsistent with, and inadequate for, the promotion of the particular egalitarian political, social and economic ideals of...any society" (Tuinman, 1978, p.15).

It is no exaggeration to say that the minimum competency movement might produce just that - minimum competency - and the very illiteracy it seeks to combat, unless a broader interpretation of literacy is accepted.

### C. Interactive Literacy

"Reading the word and learning how to write the word so one can later read it are preceded by learning how to write the

world, that is, having the experience of changing the world and touching the world" (Freire, 1987, p.49). Thereby, an infant, in reaching out and moving an object, has taken an early step toward literacy. Each act of this neophyte human provides him/her with an ever widening experience of the world through which a partnership is forged. Eventually, that partnership will flower into a literacy whose range extends beyond that of psychometric literacy. The act of reading and writing will be only the most obvious products of a literacy which is a "...social and cultural phenomenon...exists between people and (is) something that connects individuals to a range of experiences and to different points in time" (Schieffelin, 1984, p.4).

As noted earlier, interactive literacy doesn't lend itself to easy definition. Therefore, in my discussion, I prefer to use the term "features" rather than "definitions". The former connotes a more fluid quality than the set tone of "definition", enabling one to construct many vantage points from which to examine a construct as complex as interactive literacy. With this in mind, let us begin by giving thought to three related theories of literacy.

Wagner (1985) notes that "Some people view literacy as a global "cosmology" of skills, beliefs, knowledge and functions that includes any aspect of symbolic communication" (Paris, 1987,p.37). Such a venue is attractive on a philosophical plain. More practically speaking, however, this definition is too broad to allow focused consideration.

Chall (1975) added a more practical dimension when he wrote that "...literacy covers a wide spectrum of capabilities, all the way from being able to decipher a want ad...to being able to enjoy a novel by Thomas Mann or read a scientific treatise with understanding" (Hutson, 1987, p.225). In keeping with the information explosion, Robinson (1987) points out "...terms such as 'computer literacy', 'scientific literacy', 'media literacy' ...in which literacy seems to mean either being knowledgeable about or adept in some domain...being able to think critically about issues in that domain" (p.330).

From among the three theorists we construct a literacy which: (a) includes any aspect of symbolic communication (b) in which one is a knowledgeable, critical thinker (c) who is comfortable with basic, concrete and practical pursuits (want ads) as well as the abstract. Such features begin to address the need for some boundaries around the domain of interactive literacy. From here, I'd like to consider some additional features of literacy.

The idea to search for features of literacy came from reading Don Holdaway's Foundations of Literacy. He discusses features of the inquiry into literacy within the initial pages of his work. I have taken some liberty with his presentation of features, re-organizing and using them as scaffolding from which to introduce elements that will be expanded upon in latter sections of this paper.

"Literacy has many human dimensions" states Holdaway (p.13). He is one of many who adhere to the multidimensional aspects of literacy in an effort to draw attention to the complexity

of literacy - challenging those who focus on the psychometric. Under the umbrella of human dimensions one finds the following features of literacy.

a. "Literacy is a matter of language" (p.12). Holdaway points out that grammar and phonology have received disproportionate attention since they are more readily studied than semantics. Knowledge thus derived is utilized by teaching methods that treat the child as a conscious manipulator of responses, a process which places the child in an untenable position. Rather, Holdaway insists, children should be taught in a manner which enables responses to operate as a concert of "automatic systems". He thus recognizes the existence of skills claimed by the realm of the behaviorists. Simultaneously, Holdaway expands beyond the behaviorists to view these systems as "vital feedback systems" rather than skills and subskills to be dissected and drilled.

b. "Literacy is learned" (p.15). Instruction, as opposed to learning, has been the primary focus of literacy over the past five decades. From this position, Holdaway argues for educational environments which embody certain principles borrowed from the behaviorists.

1. Fear and punishment impede learning;
2. Reward, significance and meaning are essential to learning.

Yetta Goodman's words embody these principles when she speaks of children as active participants in a literate society, where they are inventors and discoverers of literacy (1984). The artificial, inflexible environment called "school" induces a passivity on the part of students and negates the knowledge children bring with



them. In these instances, schools may be seen as fostering illiteracy.

Part of the function of the school environment should be to provide a reflection of the world - held up for the child's consideration and experimentation. The child's life experiences would then be enriched, providing a broader base from which to approach the more formalized aspects of literacy, i.e. reading and writing. "Reading is not a reactive process, but an interactive one in which a reader brings at least as much to the text as the text offers" (Robinson, 1987, p.328). If the child must leave the world at the schoolhouse door, then s/he spends a significant portion of the day unable to "read the world", and becomes outdistanced by the written word, falling farther behind with each passing year.

Before moving on to the next feature of literacy, I would inject one thought which will be discussed at another point in this work. In the past (and present) literacy has meant acquiring a certain level of education. The "educated class" was synonymous with affluence and power. In the United States there has been an effort to provide education for all, up to the 12 grade, at public expense. It was recognized early on in our history that an educated population was essential as a protection against tyranny, although at that time, education was white, male and moneyed. As rights were filtered down to greater segments of the population, so too education in order to provide a work force to support the economy.

The truly educated person was one who had attained certain

elevated levels of knowledge available only to the affluent. Accessibility and content were controlled by the same affluence. Though greater numbers of the population completed more years of schooling as the decades passed, the "social class basis of academic literacy has continued to hold a commanding position" (Bizzell, 1988, p.142). That premise maintains a strong grip on this country's educational system, thus curtailing literacy levels for significant portions of our society.

c. "Literacy is a cultural matter" (p.17). Holdaway proposes that school is a sub-culture "embodying attitudes and values, and even a special type of language, to be found nowhere in the open society beyond" (p.17). The subculture of school is incompatible with the cultures of many students entering the system. Confronted by a foreign situation, children are intimidated by a spoken language form different from their own. Faced with this de-contextualized (i.e. other-cultured) language on the printed page, students are unable to "identify...with the dialect of books and lay personal claim to it" (Holdaway, p.17).

As Jerome Bruner (1984) has stated "...all forms of spoken language have to be placed in the context in which people use them" (p.193). The process of learning to read is further complicated by "Teaching methods and materials in the last generation (which) have tended increasingly to exclude true literature from the literacy undertaking in the interests of controlled vocabulary or phonetic sequences. If the human richness and joy of a fine literature could be moved across into the centre of literacy teaching, many of the problems of cultural dissonance

might be minimized" (Holdaway, p.17).

Accustomed as we are to contemplating literacy within the context of the educational setting, another perspective is to be gained by looking outside of this synthetic model. "Literacy is never a simple matter of knowing how to read and write. What literacy is and how it is learned and used depend on many cultural factors" (Smith, 1984, p.147).

Ethnographers have enlightened the study of literacy by field work observations of literacy-in-action. The information obtained thereby has also added new convolutions to an already complex issue. Paris put the matter straight when he noted that "Experts cannot agree on a single definition of literacy because the attributes and standards are relative to the context in which literacy is observed" (p.37). Supporting this contention is the work of Scribner and Cole (1981). Undertaken among the Vai of North West Liberia, their work suggests that "...literacy is a culturally organized system of skills and values learned in specific settings" (Heath, 1986, p.18).

In cultures throughout the world, skills and values predated formalized symbol systems. As communities grew through time, record keeping, the desire to communicate, religious observations, art, etc. gave birth to a variety of formal symbol systems. In turn, these symbols became capable of influencing the development of thought. According to Bizzell "...no symbol system in and of itself induces cognitive changes. A cultural context is necessary to invest the features of the system with meaning, to give them the significance that then induces changes in thinking." (p.144).

This brings us back to the children entering our public schools. Students who are confronted by the cultural dissonance of school-based language face overwhelming obstacles in their struggle to attain literacy. While these students are placed at the greatest disadvantage, this is not to say that they are the only ones to be penalized. Our schools' failures are to be found in all economic strata. Students' disaffection with school (and family, or society, and/or themselves) is expressed by a range of acting-out behaviors, i.e. dropping out, running away, drug abuse, pregnancy, boredom, etc. The failure of literacy is the failure of society, and it is within the context of society that we must search for our understanding of literacy.

#### **GATEKEEPERS OF LITERACY**

"It is ironic that in the United States, a country that prides itself on being the first and most advanced within the so-called 'first world', over 60 million people are illiterate or functionally illiterate" (Macedo, 1987, p.120).

Illiteracy is a not-so-subtle strand which runs through the fabric of American society. With chameleon-like ability, illiteracy is camouflaged within the rhythms of daily living, apparent or no, depending upon the temper of the times. But with or without our awareness, illiteracy has been a constant whose presence often goes undetected, precisely because it has become inseparable from the "American way of life". In this section of my study, I will consider several factors which serve to curtail access to

literacy in the United States: social class, the goal of education, the attitude of educators, and student resistance.

A. Social Class

The class system is a fact of life in the United States. "Working class", "middle class", and "upper class" are words heard, read and spoken daily. Perhaps tolerance for the class system arises from the belief that the gulf separating one class from another is not insurmountable. Study hard, work and have the right attitude and the American Dream can be yours. Anyone who falls short has only him/herself to blame. "Hispanic students and their parents had failed the schools and society because they have not been motivated and dedicated enough to make the system work for them" (Dunn, 1986, p.78).

A class-based society is not a democratic entity. The rules of the game are set by those at the top of the pyramid whose interests lie in maintaining their sacrosanct position. The norms of the upper classes become the yardstick by which to measure the acceptability of individuals and groups not sharing membership with the elite. Freire (1987) addresses this issue in a most direct fashion:

"The dominant segments of any society talk about their particular interests, their tastes, their styles of living, which they regard as concrete expressions of nationality...subordinate groups...cannot talk about their tastes and styles [or, their literacies] as national expressions. They lack the political and economic power to do so" (p.52).

From this position of superiority, it follows that certain attitudes are engendered towards the subordinated groups. The

greater the perceived differences between dominant-subordinate groups, the greater the inferiority quotient which is projected upon "lower classes". Such negative attitudes ultimately effect access to literacy in so far as intellect is called into question. "The intellectual activity of those without power is always characterized as nonintellectual" (Freire, 1987, p.122). Freire maintains that education in the United States is perceived as neutral or apolitical. Such a facade is necessary in order to "...give the superficial appearance that education serves everyone, thus assuring that it continues to function in the interest of the dominant class" (1987, p.122).

Wilkins (1976) found that the different expectations which are held for middle and upper class students, as opposed to lower or working class students "...are actually unconscious manifestations of a general societal philosophy which states that citizens are personally responsible for their position in society....lower class people possess intellectual and character flaws which account for their lack of previous success and inhibit their prospects for the future" (p.178).

Nowhere have I found it more clearly stated that lower class students are basically unmotivated and/or lacking intellect than by Dunn (1986). His monograph on bilingual Hispanic children is liberally peppered with bias. In support of this statement I offer the following samples:

- (1) "...Hispanics' inability to succeed in the job market... incompetence in English, a low level of formal schooling ...lack of native ability and poor work habits..." (p.9).
- (2) "...many Hispanics on the United States mainland lack sufficient general intelligence, or specific linguistic

attitudes to become proficient in either Spanish or English" (p.29).

- (3) "...while many people are willing to blame the low scores of Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans on their poor environmental conditions, few are prepared to face the probability that inherited generic material is a contributing factor" (p.63).
- (4) "...Puerto Rican and Chicano children who, as a group are slow learners..." (p.74).

When trained, experienced educators make statements such as the above, what will be the effect on those in the population who are not so knowledgeable? Particularly vulnerable will be those who are already predisposed to bias. Negative attitudes are thus reinforced and spread to new generations. In a tight economy, with ever-growing needs and always-shrinking budgets, where will the justification be found for educating the nondominant members of society? If certain groups are viewed as less intelligent and less motivated, then why expend precious resources on the? The equation is clear and direct:

less resources = less educational opportunities =  
 lower scores on normed tests + increased dropouts =  
 justification for cutbacks = less resources...

At another point in this paper, educators' attitudes will be more thoroughly considered. However, at this juncture, it is germane to mention the impact of educators' social class bias upon the instructions of students by citing two of many studies done in this area.

Rist's study (1970) found that, in the absence of test data, black students were assigned to reading groups according to the teacher's perception of which students fit an "ideal type". Fast learners were characterized as those who "...appear clean and

interested, sought interactions, spoke with less dialect, were at ease with adults, displayed leadership within the class and came from homes which displayed various status criteria valued in the middle class" (p.444). Once assigned, students remained in the "fast" or "slow" learners group throughout first and second grade.

A study by Cooper (1979) suggests that teacher expectations are directly dependent upon the social class membership of their students. Lower class students are expected to have diminished academic and social success.

Intelligence and motivation are not the sole foci of bias within the American class system. The language(s) and culture(s) of subordinate groups also receive a significant amount of unflattering attention. "...the dominant class has the power...to pronounce that the speech habits of the subordinate groups are a corruption, a bastardization of dominant discourse" (Freire, 1987, p.53).

According to Sledd (1988) the United States is basically fearful of non-English speaking groups. These fears are voiced whenever a new wave of immigrants comes ashore, either literally, or when they begin to penetrate the barriers of former white - only domains. "...current anxiety signals the arrival of Afro-Americans on campus, Toyotas on our highways, and Russian missiles off Bar Harbor. To get so many miscreants back in their places poses a difficult problem" (p.496).

Lingua-phobia goes beyond the surface features of sound and syntax. On a superficial level, members of dominant groups may be aware of reacting to aural differences which are clearly "inferior".



The more closely dominant-English is approximated, the less threatening non-dominant individuals are perceived, and, the more easily one ignores the message which lies encoded deeply within the language. To the extent that these language and culture bound expressions are unrecognized or ignored, subordinate groups may remain unvalued and invisible. In the following quote, though Macedo (1987) specifically addresses Black English, he may be generalized to all languages:

"...educators must understand the ways in which different dialects encode different world views... The first important issue is that Black Americans' linguistic code not only reflect their reality, but also their lived experience in a given historical moment...Their language is a powerful tool demystifying the distorted reality prepackaged for them by the dominant curriculum...language should never be understood as a mere tool of communication. Language is packed with ideology..." (p.127).

Thus, in reality, it is not Standard English or Standard Literacy which the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education is promoting, but rather, Standard Ideology. The vehicle for this Standard Ideology is the curriculum which is promulgated by publishers, local and state boards of education, national commissions of one type or another, etc. With the powerful forces of the dominant classes brought to bear upon the lives of nondominant students, what opportunity have they to survive, much less thrive, within the negatively charged fields of educational institutions?

"When curriculum designers ignore important variables such as social-class differences, when they ignore the incorporation of the subordinate cultures' values in the curriculum, and when they refuse to accept and legitimize the students' languages, their actions point to the inflexibility, insensitivity and rigidity of a curriculum that was designed to benefit those who wrote it" (Macedo, 1987, p.124).

I would extend Macedo's observation by noting that the more students appear to deviate from upper class behavioral and academic norms, the more likely public policy engineers are apt to demand a return to a uniform, standardized, American-way-of-like education. As we will consider in the next section, the purpose of American style education is to provide workers who will support and fuel the fires of the capitalist economy. For all too many of the subordinate classes, this will translate into lives spent "...dragging computerized Cheerios boxes across computerized check-out counters, while others get no job at all. On the margins of the high-tech society, unemployment, hunger, ignorance and disease will ravage the poor, at home and abroad" (Sledd, 1988, p.499).

#### B. Reproducing Society: The All-American Education

"The large numbers of people who do not read or write and who were expelled from school do not represent a failure of the schooling class; their expulsion reveals the triumph of the schooling class. In fact, this misreading of responsibility reflects the schools' hidden curriculum".  
(Freire, 1987, p.121)

American-style education is confronting a crisis. By all public accounts, this impending doom involves the declining literacy of United States citizens. Considered at face value, literacy is complex, just the act of "defining" literacy demonstrates that! Looking beyond the obvious elements reflected by the media, one discovers that education, and its handmaiden literacy, are in close partnership with America's economic life-blood.

The literacy crisis is a two sided coin-of-the-realm. Most often noticed is the side bearing Caesar's image. Should this

surface become tarnished, a crisis is generated. Hence, the literacy crisis of today. The reverse side of the coin harbors a well kept secret - the empowering aspects of literacy: the depth, motivation and creativity to see through the veil of distortion maintained by Caesar, and, once having seen, the fortitude to dissolve those images and realities which serve to limit human potential. It is this empowering component of literacy that has been endangered on a continual basis since Europeans first set foot on North American shores. Had there been any way for Native Americans to foresee the impact of those invading Europeans, they would have been more than justified in saying: "Watch out for those immigrants, they're a threat to our literacy!"

Looking back through history provides a measure of insight, though care must be taken given the double-speak and information gaps found in those pages. Apparently, the "literacy crisis" has always been with us, or at least since the time of the Sumerians. Sledd (1988) reports that one of their ancient tablets recorded the laments of a teacher concerned about a recent decline in students' writings. Much later in time, Harvard's president (George Eliot, 1871) reported that "...bad spelling, incorrectness, as well as inelegance of expression in writing, ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation, and almost entire want of familiarity with English literature, are far from rare among young men of eighteen otherwise well prepared for college" (Sledd, 1988, p.496). Standards of literacy shift through time. As up-coming generations fail to attain the mark, an emergency is perceived whose severity is proportionate to the magnitude of the short fall.

One way or another throughout time, education has always been at the service of society. Whether the education of the nut-and-berry-foragers, of the sheep herders, or of the pyramid and cathedral builders, education walked hand-in-hand with daily living. Education was a process which took place within the family, clan, and village, drawing the individual towards a responsible membership within society.

As larger social units developed into states, countries and empires, the locus of education began a gradual drift towards formal institutions who supported the goals of society writ large. Graff (1986) writes of literacy as the servant of the "trinity" of state/administration, theology/faith, and trade/commerce. It is this trinity which maintained (and maintains) its primacy by controlling access to the skills of reading and writing.

"The first great literacy campaign" is Graff's characterization of the Reformation. Instruction became compulsory and public institutions were provided to carry out the "...indoctrination of the young for explicitly social ends" (Graff, p.79). More than a religious upheaval, the Protestant Reformation "...spawned the realization that...carefully controlled formal institutions created expressly for the purposes of education and supervised closely, could be a powerful and useful force" (Graff, 1986, p.79). Utilizing the format and control of public education institutions, the regulators of state, church and industry assured themselves of a steady supply of bureaucrats, believers and workers.

For some, education is one essential to securing positions of power. "...major steps forward in trade, commerce and industry

took place in some periods and places with remarkably low levels of literacy....More important have been the education levels and power relations of key persons rather than those of the many" (Graff, 1986, p.76). Those who were not to partake in the elite structures were rendered useful through the inculcation of proper habits and attitudes. In the United States "...the presence of a literate and formally schooled population may have contributed to a rapid, but smooth, less violent and conflict-ridden, transition to the factory; the sequence of earlier school development serving to prepare the future work force for the conduct, habits, behavior, rhythms and discipline required by the factory" (Graff, 1986,p.77).

There is an apartheid of literacy inherent in this system. For those who will eventually control, literacy is indispensable. Those who are not allowed to aspire thus are schooled for subordination. Perhaps we have reached a plateau of sorts here in the United States. We may be undergoing a paradigm shift which requires alternative skills for those who will be the managers. The many who are to remain in the service sector still require proper indoctrination. Apparently, efforts towards this goal are failing, as plummeting skills and soaring drugs, dropouts and special education programs indicate. Increasing numbers of students are saying NO - to schooling! They will not fit the mold and thereby constitute a threat. These individuals tarnish the image of Caesar, producing our current "literacy crisis" which might better be termed a "control crisis".

The campus rebellions of the '60's recognized the inequality of educational access, and spurred "open enrollment". More diverse

players were now to be allowed on the team. However, the rules of the game were (are) such that few remained on that team long enough to become successful players in the game of higher education. Physical access is easily supplied thereby allowing the people a hollow victory. Access to literacy remains tightly blocked - a final blow dealt as proof that the "lower" classes lack sufficient intellect after all. Freire (1987) recognized this strategy when he stated that:

"Only those who have power can define what is correct or incorrect. Only those who have power can decide what constitutes intellectualism. Once the intellectual parameters are set, those who want to be considered intellectuals must meet the requirements of the profile dictated by the elite class. To be intellectual one must do exactly what those with the power to define intellectualism do" (p.122).

This power to define is brought to bear on students at an early age. As strategies go, the imposition of standards is a potent ingredient of control. "...so strong is the schools' vested interest in controlling acquisition of literacy skills that much of the naturally acquired skill in encoding and decoding that children bring with them to school is systematically overlooked" (Smith, 1987, p.59).

This reminds me of a statement I'd heard before in a favorite film, but only HEARD for the first time just recently. I was viewing "To Kill A Mocking Bird" with my students. Scout, the young daughter of Atticus (the lawyer), is speaking with her father, much distressed with her initial day in first grade. Among Scout's upsets is a remark made by the teacher that You're (Atticus) teaching me to read all wrong." Scout then concludes: "If I keep going

to school, I can't ever read any more!"

The unspoken, unrecognized function of education is to produce "...well adjusted citizens, vulnerable to state propaganda, anxious to be consumed in the corporate economy, divorced from their own deepest thoughts and emotions, indifferent to the fate of their fellows" (Sledd, 1988, p.498). Contrary to popular myth, education is not about comprehension, analysis, synthesis, independent functioning, or building a better society for all. Rather, a better society is to be retained as the province of some at a considerable cost to the many.

I would surmise that there is a literacy crisis. For the powerful, there is a fear that not enough students will comply with the molding process of the factories of education. For the powerless, the crisis comes from a realization that, after all, education will not hold out the hope of relief from grinding poverty, so what's the point? Why bother?

There is an increasing gulf between the small numbers of people required for techno-specific functions, who create and maintain the systems which take the place of a semi-skilled work force - and the large numbers of unskilled people required by the minimal-pay, service economy. The gulf between the two is supported and widened by highly educated leaders who set the agenda, allocate the moneys and pull the strings to keep all the pieces in place, generating profits. Education serves as the wedge used by these forces to drive the two groups apart. The over-all results are proudly termed "Society".

### C. Educator Attitudes

While the educated elite serves to provide the directive forces which hinder access to literacy, it is the educators who provide (or resist) the front-line execution. Educator attitude infuses pedagogy with expectations, goals and energy, or lack thereof. This sub-rosa curriculum conveys messages to students which may be received with greater or lesser awareness. Upon reception, student responses develop, signaling either the acceptance of a partnership with the educator, or the assumption of a defensive, adversarial position.

Educator attitude cannot be overlooked as a potential literacy hindrance given the already known effects of attitude upon student participation. Although multifaceted, I have chosen to confine my attention to three aspects of educator attitude: literacy outlook, the empty-vessel theory and management of printed language.

#### 1. Literacy Attitudes

As discussed earlier in this study, there are numerous "definitions" of literacy. Educators with the psychometric view take students along a path quite different from that traveled by students whose instructor espouses an interactive approach. Rigidly defined and paced skill hierarchies, curricula and testing instruments have been generated by the field of psychometric literacy. Ostensibly, the purpose of such tools is to provide a clearly delineated, fool-proof (i.e. teacher-proof) course of study which results in literate students.



It is beyond the scope of my study for me to state categorically that no one, few, or only some students can become literate through this particular academic venue. I, for one, underwent such a trial by fire, and did emerge with sufficient literacy to compose this study. However, it has always been my contention that my literacy emerged in spite of my early years of education.

The interactive approach appears to be a closer approximation to the first, natural state of childrens' learning within the family and community. However, the less easily defined and always evolving nature of interactive literacy provided less (apparent) guidance and security than does the psychometric. Given the pressures exerted by current literacy issues, educators may be more likely to reach for the security of "tried and true" methods which have a "scientific" basis.

It's not surprising that some confusion exists over methodology. As explained by the MasGinities (1982), opposing points of view can be fostered by statistics. To prove that students' reading abilities have increased, one cites studies on younger children which address the mechanics of reading and simple comprehension skills. Just the opposite can be demonstrated by considering the scores of secondary school students who do poorly in the over-all area of comprehension, especially with regard to inferential comprehension in content area materials.

Skills based practitioners have begun to accept the necessity for the higher level concepts required in order to analyze difficult materials. However, it has been my experience that comprehension

is looked upon as one more, albeit complicated, skill which can be subdivided into programmed, sequential subskills. The result is a methodological schizophrenia where no one is ever on quite dependable ground, students least of all. Calfee and Pointkowski (1981) summarize the situation thus:

"Students learn what the curriculum emphasizes. When there is a heavy emphasis on reading in the primary grades and instruction and materials emphasize mechanics of reading, children will learn the mechanics of reading. When the curriculum in the secondary school deemphasizes writing practice and the reading of literature and content-rich material, the students will do less well at logical interpretation of difficult written material".  
(p.359)

## 2. Empty Vessels

Armed with literacy attitudes, educators then move on to deal with the ever present "empty vessel" syndrome. According to this ideology, children embark upon their student careers devoid of knowledge. Educators have the awesome responsibility of filling that emptiness with apolitical curriculum. Within this scenario, the student and educator are enmeshed in an ontological relationship. Sledd (1988) captures something of this essence:

"Students bring nothing to contribute to their own education, just as the instructor has no attitudes or habits to inculcate, by instruction or example, so he or she need not permit dialogue, discussion or cooperative work, all essentials for citizens in a democracy, whom we are supposed to educate. For this teacher is teaching the passivity, deference and competitive individualism becoming to our society's underlings" (p.504).

Freire (1970) visualized the empty vessel syndrome differently, terming it the "banking concept...which anesthetizes and inhibits creative power" (p.54). Within this context, the student is expected to internalize available classroom knowledge which, as

we have discussed, usually means the objectives of society's dominant groups. In the banking concept, the educator is a depositor while the student is a depository. The implication of this interdependence is best communicated in Freire's (1970) own words:

- (a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- (c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- (d) the teacher talks and the students listen - meekly;
- (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and students comply;
- (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
- (h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
- (i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
- (j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects. (p.59)

### 3. Managing Printed Language

The transition from spoken to written language is quite possibly the most challenging, formal academic task facing a young child. Unless learning to read had been a personal problem, educators who have been exercising this literacy skill for decades may easily have lost touch with the enormity of the task. In retrospect, one "simply" became a reader. The memory of the anxiety, effort, energy and powers of thought that were required can become misplaced with the passage of time.

Merged with this loss may be the sense that reading is a natural outcome of the human situation. In this respect, Graff (1986, p.71) quotes the following in an attempt to set straight the record:

"Homo sapiens is a species which uses oral speech...to communicate....He is not, by definition, a writer or reader. His use of speech was...acquired by processes of natural selection operating over a million years...reading man... is not biologically determined. He wears the appearance of a recent historical accident".  
(Havelock, 1976, p.12)

Educators have much to learn from the research and theory generated by those who study the mental and social processes of language. While no one has assembled a definitive, A-to-Z explanation of the genesis and development of language, there is much available to help inform educators. Along these lines, I have chosen to present several references.

Vygotsky ([1934] 1962) has called attention to the complexity of the language maturation of children. As children grow and learn within the context of meaningful, daily, family experiences, they begin to develop what Vygotsky has termed "telegraphic inner language". This is a type of condensed language where a few choice words carry the weight of more elaborate meanings - much as in a telegram. This inner language grows into the foundation of oral communications. Telegraphic speech is enriched further by that which Vygotsky has designated as "semantic shortcuts": "a single word is so saturated with sense that many words would be required to explain it in external speech" (p.148).

Throughout their language advancement, children receive contextual support for language from such elements as the immediacy of concrete actions, the body language and voice qualities of speakers, shared group experiences and in-house references, etc. - all occurring in relation to the child's ego-centric point of view.

These elements are absent from symbols of printed materials.

Schools too often insist that these alien, inert symbols must first be mastered by children before they can be invested with life. For too many students, sound mastery is held out as the key to printed language.

Material related to child development (e.g. Don Holdaway) constantly refers to "preliteracy skills" which arise out of the child's daily interactions with meaningful experiences. These then come to be closely associated with specific printed symbols. The movement from context bound, experience-charged objects and events to the abstraction of printed symbols is propelled by the child's needs, interests and enthusiasms.

The reverse process would seem to be the order of the day once students have left nursery and kindergarten for the "serious" environs of first grade with its mandated curricula. Printed language is to be unlocked in order to discover the thoughts and events encoded therein. Should the language and experiences of the printed page correlate with that of the student's, then s/he will advance in the process of reading. A mismatch can have detrimental effects. Failure to understand the impact of the above processes sets the educators in opposition to the child.

Having been launched into reading, student composing is expected to unfold. Taking this step requires "...the transformation...of inner speech into syntactically and semantically elaborated forms" (Elsasser, 1987, p.49). The child is expected to conceive and manipulate abstractions while "...shifting attention from an immediate audience that shares the learner's experiences and frame of reference to a larger, abstract, and unfamiliar

audience" (Elsasser, 1987, p.48).

The reading/writing partnership is complex. Possibilities for derailment are numerous. Educators require a masterful understanding of the processes driving the growth of oral and written speech in order to promote rather than hinder literacy access. Having made the successful transition from spoken to printed material, the educator's understanding is then challenged by the major hurdle of comprehension.

Chomsky's language theory has brought a measure of enlightenment to the issue of comprehension. Particularly useful here is his idea of the surface and deep structure of language. The surface component of language involves the obvious elements of sound and symbols. Going beyond this is the deep structure - that which embraces context with all of its attendant emotions, understandings, experiences, etc. This model is not unlike the human organism in its requirement for flesh, blood, bones, sinews and the like in order to provide a form. However, the form is useless without the elusive human spirit to bring that form to life. Even with a "de-formity", a human being is still a human being.

Because of its accessibility, surface structure receives the bulk of attention when educators "teach" comprehension. This mechanical aspect of language is too often chosen as the focus of literacy "skills". Should an individual's speech contain syntactical structures different from that of dominant English, s/he may be seen as illiterate. Written materials containing variant, or incomplete, language forms also label their authors as illiterates.

Overlooked in both instances is the deep structure of language. Herein resides the meaning that is struggling for the liberation which can be mediated by the surface forms of language. Perceived deficiencies in the surface structure must not be used to label individuals as illiterate. Meaning and context exist before, and are the prime generators of, symbols. In the thrust for literacy, the function of symbols may be ignored. Symbols exist as the servants of, and the vehicles for meaning. Given the emphasis placed on the surface structure of language, one would think the opposite to be true.

Just as deficits in the surface structure should not be seen as the main component of illiteracy, so too, mastery of surface structure cannot be regarded as full-blown literacy. And yet, where is the emphasis too often placed in teacher training institutions? The mechanics of skills occupy center stage:

"It is easier for teachers to help children [and teachers-in-training] with those things for which rules and right answers are prescribed and with those things that are systematically organized into topics and exercises. It is easier to systematize the mechanics of reading and incorporate that systematization into instructional materials than it is to systematize reading comprehension" (MacGinitis, 1986, p.257).

"Students learn what the curriculum emphasizes" (p.29, this study) is true not only on the elementary through high school levels, but also at the undergraduate/graduate levels!

In the classroom educators use a variety of techniques for conveying new information, "...relating new information to background knowledge of students, using gestures to clarify spatial and sequential relationships, repeated use and definition of new

terms...use of summaries and various verbal and nonverbal signals" (MacGinitie, 1986, p.261).

Texts, however, lack these contexts of spoken language. The language is of a more complex, syntactic form. In order to understand what is being said, the student needs to learn the patterns of written speech which provide clues to the relationship of the words within sentences, the sentences within paragraphs, and the paragraphs within the whole. For young children there is the further complication of having to stand in someone else's place. (Taking another's point of view is difficult for a young child according to Piaget.)

Without useful training in the area of comprehension, educators must rely on intuition and teachers' manuals. MacGinitie (1986) maintains (and experience supports) that "Reading instruction materials consist mainly of simplistic and nonfunctional taxonomies for teachers, and a flood of comprehension questions for the students...but do not suggest ways of helping students to understand" (p.258).

Reading comprehension is too often addressed within the time limits of formal reading instruction. Content area materials are seen as programmable facts which the students are to retain and reproduce. The concept of comprehending written material within the content areas of science, social studies, etc. is not actually confronted square-on. Salient facts are extracted from texts by educators, and presented during lessons. Assignments and exams are often multiple choice, or one/two sentence answers. "...many students do very little reading in content areas. Students



who encounter difficulty with new and characteristic language forms...get no help in understanding those forms...soon learn that the same content will be covered later by the teacher. Many students who could read and understand learn not to bother" (MacGinitie, 1986, p.264). Thus, students are effectively taught not to read.

With experience, educators come to understand which types of content materials provide the most reading comprehension problems for students. Unless able to evolve one's own methods for aiding student comprehension, educators are likely to avoid the assignment of such materials.

Those concerned with declining S.A.T. scores must realize that the verbal section "...contains a measure of reading comprehension and depends on a knowledge of vocabulary that is typically attained through extensive reading" (MacGinitie, 1986, p.257). If the problem of student comprehension of difficult reading material is to be solved, then students must have the opportunity to read extensively in ways that are significant and meaningful. They must not see reading (in any areas) reduced to a series of monotonous practice skills. Neither must student experience of challenging reading matter be regarded as something to be avoided.

Over all, teacher-training institutions are falling short in their responsibility to design pedagogy in the important field of comprehension. In the model of Freire, this lack in pedagogy would be viewed as part of a deliberate strategy to limit access to literacy for both children and adults.

#### D. Student Resistance

More and more, public school educators are confronted by students who somehow don't fit into the daily public school mold. I call this phenomenon "student resistance". The resistance of the young isn't new. At each level of development, the child struggles in certain-to-be-expected ways. These struggles against the constraints of the adult world are a part of the natural process of growing, separating and becoming an independent, self-sufficient human being. It is my belief that today's student resistance reflects more than the maturation process.

A look at the ecological systems of our planet may supply some understanding of the implications of student resistance. Ecology has taught us that those species at the lower levels of the life chain are the most fragile. Theirs is our own ultimate fate. Life is a carefully orchestrated balancing act, with each link in the chain dependent upon the integrity of those links to either side. The most potent life form is no more powerful than the least. When the chain becomes stressed, the fragile elements react quickly. These responses are no less than a distress signal. An insightful reading of them is crucial to the survival of all species.

Student resistance represents a loud and clear signal. The young of any species are a delicate blend of strength and fragility. Within their neophyte existence, they are close to the pulse of the earth. In this newness of life, the young possess an instinctive sensitivity and openness which I (and others, e.g. Joseph Chilton Pearce) believe is too often lost in the "growth" towards

adulthood. This sensitivity creates fragility because it is an uncalloused, expectant, outward-reaching thrust towards life which leaves the defenseless young in a position to be overwhelmed. Yet, that self-same openness is a source of boundless energy, strength, and will-to-live-in-spite-of-all. How many times has the media reported on an abandoned new born found still alive, despite amazing odds?

So it is that we must both listen and learn to read the message of student resistance. It is an expression of pain, disappointment, helplessness, anomie and anger arising from the tearing of today's social fabric. The classroom is not the sole locale for this expression. It may be heard on the streets and in the shelters; from the young who live with families and from those who have fled; from students in school and the ones who drop out; from the pregnant children, as well as all who use alcohol and drugs.

The prisons are filled with this message. It is reflected in the eyes of those who steal and cheat and kill without remorse. Everywhere we look, the message may be seen, written large --- something is awry, someone has failed...has let us down...is engulfing us. Take care of yourself, fight back, get what you can however you can...but survive.

History, no doubt, is filled with such messages. In our times history is what happened yesterday. The future knocks before the sun has set. By the time we react to a situation, a new one has risen to take its place. The pace is compressed, the way uncertain, the demands relentless. In the midst of this are the

children, faced with a pace faster than they can, or should have to, master, pressured beyond tolerance, and looking to adults who are themselves uncertain.

We all lack the luxury of time, yet time is part of learning and helps to provide experience, reflections and, sometimes, answers. Many elements contribute to the present wave of youthful distress and rage. Schools are but one stage where it may be acted out. As educators, our greatest influence comes to the fore in the classroom. The students arrive each day at our station with a conglomerate of baggage. Realistically speaking, educators can't sort it all out, but there are some pieces which we should consider.

#### 1. Teacher Attitude

I addressed myself earlier in this paper to educator attitudes. For me, the term educator has a wide ranging connection. An educator exists within the context of society. To be an educator denotes a certain philosophy. A teacher, on the other hand, has a student based connection. The teacher is the one facing the day to day functioning and reality of students. In the world, one is an educator, for the student, one is a teacher.

Teachers' have stereotypes of the so called "good" and "bad" students. The content of these stereotypes shapes the form of a teacher's instruction and acceptance or rejection of students. I have discussed Rist's characterization of the "ideal type" of student (p.19) and the results of such labeling. To this I would add Freire's (1985) view of the good student who "...is not one who is restless or intractable, or who reveals one's doubts or wants

to know the reason behind facts, or who breaks with preestablished models, or one who denounces a mediocre bureaucracy, or one who refuses to be an object" (p.117).

Student resistance is most obvious in those who would be labeled the "bad student". This arises from the (teacher's/school's) notion that what is being offered to the student is "good", therefore, anyone found rejecting such is designated as "bad". It will be no easy job to convince teachers that students hold different opinions about what constitutes "good" and that some of these opinions are indeed valid.

While students may not consciously regard the teacher and school as models of a rejectable status quo (which maintains that certain groups are basically outcasts and inferior), instinctively "outcast" students know this only too well. Whether it comes from the increasing economic burdens weighing heaviest on those on the bottom rungs of the ladder, or the greater outspokenness of today's youth, student resistance appears to be increasing. It consumes larger and larger amounts of time during the teaching day.

Through resistance, a student makes certain choices which effect not only self, but family, classmates, school and teachers. All become caught up in a struggle that carries the possibilities of positive or negative outcomes with far-reaching results. Sledd (1988) has pointed out that the "Failure to teach and failure to learn become weapons in a complex cultural struggle" (p.496).

In order to better understand students' reactions to school, teachers must divest themselves of many long held myths. To those I've already highlighted throughout my study, I would add Olson's

(1975-76) thinking on the value of literacy:

"We may have a distorted view of both the child and of social realities if we expect that the values and pleasures of literacy are so great that everyone, whether it is easy or difficult for him, or whether it leads to wealth or power... or not, is willing to invest the energy and time required to reach a high level of literacy" (p.149).

A student buys into the system or not, depending upon the perceived utility of literacy in his/her own life, both here and now, and with regard to the future. I would add that should the price of literacy require the loss of one's language, ethnicity, or integrity then, most likely, many students will pause to think twice about buying in.

People express rebelliousness in varied ways. Freire (1987) underscores the importance of understanding the causes of subordinate peoples' rebelliousness - and its "articulation through cultural expression". As educators we hold theories about the value of a multicultural society. As teachers, do we recognize that one possible value of cultures is their use in resisting dominant forces? Do we appreciate the message given to us by students in the most obvious forms they bring to the classroom daily, i.e. language, dress and attitude? "Understanding forms of resistance leads you to a better appreciation of language....language gives you a glimpse of how people survive" (Freire, 1987, p.137).

Student resistance within the classroom is increasing. Speak with teachers. They will tell you of the growing numbers of "bad" students, "at-risk" students, "disturbed", "bored", or, "whatever-appellation-you-choose" students, who are showing up in classrooms. The reasons for resistance stretch far beyond the limits of this

paper. Whether due to the pressures of living in today's society, the demoralizing burden of poverty, the change of the family structure, or the slowness, uncertainty or unwillingness of society to meet its responsibilities - teachers face the results daily in the classroom.

Although I have chosen to focus on subordinate groups, the distress of the young is everywhere, in all economic classes, taking many forms of expression. How and why students resist schooling must be appreciated by teachers if we are to avoid becoming overwhelmed, cynical, hopeless, frustrated, angry individuals. For through such responses we will only serve to further alienate students. Teachers have a choice, and Freire (1987) is clear about this:

"The reactionary educator is interested in knowing the levels of resistance and the form it takes so that she or he can smother this resistance. A radical educator has to know the forms and ways in which people resist, not to hide the reasons for resistance, but to explicate at the theoretical level the nature of this resistance" (p.138).

By doing so, the teacher becomes an ally of the student, seeking methods of facilitating a literacy which is valued by, and of value to, the students.

## 2. Antagonistic Relationships

For those students in the subordinate groups, schools and teachers are part of a system to be rebuffed. I'm not prepared to postulate definitively about where this realization begins or how it grows. Possibly, the youngest students experience a sense of being in an unfamiliar place with people who are different from family. As a child grows older, this discomfort may be transformed

by society and school based events and curriculum. These conspire to impress the child with his/her inferior position.

Part of the transformative process involves the socialization function of schools where students are groomed either for future positions of responsibility, or for continued subordination (Hamilton, 1983). With time the maturing student can become angry because s/he believes, or refuses to believe, in this inferiority. Macedo (1987) reminds teachers of the need "...to understand the antagonistic relationships between subordinate cultures and the dominant values of the curriculum" (p.125).

Basic to a teacher's ability to reach out to students who come from subordinate classes is the realization that education is political and does reflect the values of society. Given American society's history of race and class-based prejudices, the values of school cannot help but embody these attitudes. Recognizing the existence of that relationship is crucial to any attempt at meaningful change.

Part of the American Dream is the stipulation that anyone may succeed in this society. Education, supposedly available to all, is held forth as crucial to that endeavor. However, the frequently heard assertion that literacy leads to an improvement in one's economic status has been challenged by numbers of studies.

Heath (1986) explains that "Literacy may decline if it becomes nonfunctional in a society, or if the goals it has been thought to accomplish are not achieved" (p.17). Ogbu (1978) states that studies have shown that "Minority lower class children do not expect schools to improve their social and economic lot in life



and often do not invest much energy into school matters" (Shannon, 1985, p.608).

This phenomenon is not limited to the United States as Shirley Brice Heath (1986) has shown when she referred to a study by Meggitt (1968). The latter studied populations in New Guinea and Melanesia and learned that "...populations, recognizing that they remained poor despite their sons learning to read and write, withdrew from literacy and maintained it only for select purposes in religious ceremonies" (Heath, 1986, p.18).

Students who are in an underclass position don't need studies to explain the handwriting which looms across the walls of their neighborhoods. For these children, it is only too obvious that the future holds out growing unemployment, or at best, underemployment. There are those who "make it", but their success is absorbed by the realities of poverty which are seen daily as children travel to and from school.

Children of the subordinate classes tune into the message that they can expect little by way of future employment. Further, such employment as may be had must be purchased by a literacy whose values, curriculum and teacher attitudes enforce a system of domination. Should students become angered by their dilemma they are, one way or another, barred from literacy and, often, driven from the schools.

Elasser's (1989) understanding of Freire's analysis is that "it is very difficult to sustain dialogues with people who are not members of one's own social and economic community. True communication demands equality between speakers, and this often requires

an alteration in current social relationships" (p.47). Even those teachers whose origins lie within that of subordinate groups may be viewed as part of the "system" and hence, part of the problem. But, impossible as it might appear, all teachers must find ways to bridge the gulf between themselves and their students.

### 3. Subordinate Displays

Just as teacher attitude effects students, the reverse is also possible as suggested earlier in this paper by Rist (p.19) and Freire (p.40). Given the diverse, stress-filled backgrounds brought to school by many urban students, classrooms daily become scenes of tension and conflict. Highly charged teacher-student confrontations have the power to effect learning in adverse ways. Displays of student attitude are interpreted by teachers who then assign positive or negative social and intellectual traits to students. A study by Gilmore (1987) concluded that "...attitude rather than reading ability or intelligence was the means for assigning stable, stratified social ranks among students" (p.100).

The population of students observed by Gilmore could be admitted to the school's "Academics Plus" program depending upon teacher understanding and interpretation of student attitude. This program was viewed by parents as an opportunity whereby students could maximize their chances for success by joining an elite group. The key factor of "good attitude" included such attributes as: regularly completed homework, punctuality, good work habits and involved parents. The opposite was termed a "bad attitude", and included displays which seemed to signal an alliance with the Black community as opposed to the White, middle class community. Thus,

Gilmore concluded that appropriate attitudes were the currency to be used to purchase access to literacy.

Attitude may be expressed as much by what is not spoken as by any straight forward verbal exchange. Freire (1973) maintains that "In many oppressive societies, poor people respond to their feeling of powerlessness through silent forms of resistance" (p.46). Cobb (1965) wrote about silence as a parent sponsored device for promoting safety. Given the teacher's perceived alliance with the "state", parents teach their children to be silent. If they must speak, children are to say only what the white man wants to hear.

A subset of this silent resistance is "emotion work". Gilmore (1987, p.103) cites Hochschild's (1979) definition of emotion work as "...the act of evoking or shaping as well as suppressing feeling in oneself" (p.552). Within this premise, Hochschild suggested that certain "feeling rules" were learned and applied in social interchanges. To these constructs, Gilmore has added "emotional masquerading" which involves knowing how to disguise inappropriate feelings (p.104).

Subordinate students may resist white man's learning through the safety of a measured silence. Governing this silence is an intricate network of rules and disguises which determines what is spoken, under which circumstances, and in precisely what manner. Here, attitude is very important. The attitude displayed by the "submissive subordinate" (Gilmore) brand of silence may result in "Frustrated, impatient educators...concluding that poor people do not care about education" (Elsasser, 1987, p.47).

Conversely, nonsubmissive subordinate displays of silence result in a "stylized sulking". Gilmore (1987) explains stylized sulking as a "...nonverbal, highly choreographed performance which seems to convey rebellion, anger, and a stance of uncooperativeness" (p.101). Stylized sulking is used by students as a face-saving device, especially in the presence of peers, and is a "characteristic response in face-to-face clashes of will between student and teacher" (p.105).

Prominent in the fourth through sixth grades, sulking provides a "...readily readable expression of an individual's situation" (p.105). Through the use of this ritual display, an individual refuses to be aligned with the authority figure at hand. Gilmore contends that the stylized sulking characteristic of black communicative repertoire seems to be interpreted as a "...statement of alignment with the student's own ethnicity and socioeconomic class" (p.110).

Within the logical construct of the dominant society, stylized sulking brands a student as having a "bad" attitude. Practiced on a consistent basis, this nonsubmissive subordinate display pushes the student farther and farther outside those (teacher) desirable and controlled school groupings where literacy is acquired.

#### 4. Refusal To Be Literate

Teachers' negative perceptions are capable of excluding students from literacy. Juxtaposed with teacher attitude is the powerful student attitude of rejection which achieves the same result. That students respond to the system's message with their own rejection of literacy is hardly surprising.

"The refusal to be literate may constitute less an act of ignorance on the part of subordinate groups than an act of resistance...members of the working class and other oppressed groups may consciously or unconsciously refuse to learn the specific cultural codes and competencies authorized by the dominant culture's view of literacy" (Giroux, 1987, p.13).

The student phenomenon of sulking is an end product of sorts. While face to face conflict with a teacher may call forth this response, it cannot be separated from the wider context of the school milieu. The focus of the school is curriculum and order, not, as some would insist, the student. Curriculum absorbs the entire context of the school day, both within and without the individual classroom. Administrators and teachers offer all homage to the god of curriculum, and expect students to follow suit. In this light, students' failure to worship false gods is a positive act.

"Curriculum...involves not only...programmatic contents of the school system, but also scheduling, discipline, and day-to-day tasks...In this ...is a quality that is hidden and that gradually incites rebelliousness on the part of children and adolescents. Their defiance corresponds to the aggressive elements in the curriculum that work against the students and their interests".  
(Freire, 1987, p.121)

From the subordinate student's position there are, apparently, two choices to be made: sell out or resist. Increasing numbers of students opt for the latter as they cut class, are truant, drop out or remain in class to disrupt proceedings. Freire (1987) suggests an alternative to the either-or conundrum. In order to navigate the dangerous rapids of the dominant culture, subordinate students need to attain those skills which comprise the dominant literacy. Prior to attempting this mastery, however, students must first come to understand the realities and implications

of their own, immediate world. Through this insight and a positive self-image, students may then wrestle with dominant literacy.

Macedo (1987) speaks of this process as an "emancipatory literacy" (p.47) encompassing two dimensions. First, students become "literate about the histories, experiences and culture of their immediate environment". Then, students must "also appropriate those codes and cultures of dominant spheres so they can transcend their own environment" (p.47).

Macedo and Freire envision student rebellion as a starting point for teachers. Understanding the nature of this resistance, teachers may use it as a springboard to providing the opportunity for learning processes in which students are active participants in their own education.

"Knowledge...requires their (subjects) transforming action on reality. It demands a constant searching. It implies invention and reinvention ....In the learning process the only person who really learns is s/he who appropriates what is learned, who apprehends and thereby reinvents that learning,...the person who is filled by another with 'content' whose meaning s/he is not aware of, which contradicts his or her own way of being in the world, cannot learn because s/he is not challenged" (Freire, 1973, p.101).

Through such education partnerships with students are forged whereby traditional antagonistic relationships begin to be challenged. Thus, teachers become part of a social transformation rather than preserving the status quo.

Freire does not attempt to provide a step-by-step teachers' guide for emancipatory literacy. His discussions and theories are meant to provoke questions and to light the way for teachers to develop their own models for action. Freire's words are as

valid for adults as they are for youth.

### LOWER CLASS ILLITERACY: THE MYTH

"The old gray mare was never what she used to be. Very few people read books....a source of delusion is that many of us who think a lot about these things grew up in book-oriented homes...tend to project childhood experiences back in recollection.... true of...what we perceive as a dramatic new problem of...illiteracy. We forget that this...illiteracy was there all along...invisible on the plantations or in Puerto Rico and its become very visible when you moved it up to a large city and into occupations where reading became a necessary function".

(Lacy, 1978 in Graff, 1986, p.81)

Lacy's observation is realistic in all respects save one - the illiteracies "hidden all along" are questionable. The act of designating an individual or group as literate or illiterate doesn't make it so. Conferring a label doesn't confirm a reality. As we have hopefully come to see through this study, literacy wears many masks. Thus, it stands to reason that illiteracy is also multifaceted. Constructs of illiteracy will determine the manner by which it may be addressed (or ignored) - as well as those who will be viewed as illiterate.

Certain groups in the United States are automatically placed within the illiterate caste. As previously discussed, those groups who least resemble the acceptable white middle class occupy the lowest rungs of society. The position of these subordinate classes is maintained by a complex socio-political web which is supported by an equally intricate system of myths.

## A. Maintaining the Myth

Numerous forces influence the mythic structure of lower class illiteracy. A reasonable consideration of these factors would exceed the limits of my present study. However, a brief discussion of several interactive elements should suffice to illuminate the issue.

### 1. Intelligence Quotient

Studies of human intelligence can be marshalled to support any premise. Scores on normed tests provide much of the corroborative data for subordinate class inferiority. No amount of logic, analysis or discourse appears to have any significant impact on the longevity of this myth. Rather than playing the dozens with claims and counterclaims, I'll simply refer to one study by Flynn (1987).

In his article, Berliner (1988) reports on Flynn's accumulation of data from 14 countries which shows that today's generation often scores 20 IQ points above the previous generation on the same tests. Berliner surmises that "These data lead to the interesting conclusion that today's minorities in the industrialized countries, who are scoring one standard deviation below the majority culture on IQ tests, are actually scoring at precisely the point that the older (majority culture) generation scored 20-30 years ago" (p.277).

From the above, it may be concluded that IQ is not a fixed component, but is subject to modification. Hence, the subordinate groups are no more inferior than the majority. The latter has merely been playing the game of IQ measurement for a longer period. As outsiders to the mainstream, subordinate groups have not been



allowed equal access to the same training camps as the majority culture.

Berliner (1988) deduces that "Intelligence and achievement are not characteristic of a people, but of a people in a place" (p.283). May it not also be hypothesized that particular types of literacies are characteristic of a people in a place? Thus, school literacy may be seen as a special brand of literacy to be acquired in schools. Given that schools reflect the majority culture, it stands to reason that "minorities" are placed in an untenable position. Quality of schooling effects scores on IQ and achievement tests. These, in turn, help to label students as literate or illiterate. When minorities consistently score low, the myth of illiteracy is inflated.

## 2. Language

"Myth: Proficiency is control over the surface structures of language" (Cummins, 1981).

### a. Bilingual Students

The myth of subordinate class illiteracy is also maintained by the interpretation place on the written and spoken language forms used by these classes. Perpetrators of this myth ignore the findings of those involved in bilingual studies. It requires about one to two years for social language to develop in a second language. Academic language is more complex and demands five to seven years of practice and instruction.

Too many bilingual programs exit children as soon as they reach the first stage of language control. Having a superficial command of the second language, students are then faced with the

selective jargon of academic language. This language form is difficult to master even for a child who speaks English as a first language.

Using Chomsky's theory of surface and deep structure, I would question whether IQ tests are addressing proficiency in understanding and using surface, or deep structure. Given the many limitations of all normed tests, I would suggest that these tests focus primarily on surface structure. Therefore, is one justified in assigning low intelligence on the basis of the most superficial aspects of language? Is it fair to impute low intelligence to bilingual students when the students' deep structure is inaccessible to the evaluator because of the language limitations imposed by the testing instruments/evaluator? Because you excavate for an hour and don't strike oil, doesn't mean there isn't any to be found at that location.

Surface structure is also at work fueling the bias of those who react to how language sounds. The more closely an individual's speech approximates that of the dominant group, the more acceptable such a person becomes. As others have postulated, it is the dominant group who sets the norms for what is to be considered desirable in all areas. Language and education receive particular attention as these are important vehicles for transmitting and enforcing the dominant culture.

b. Black English

"Human languages meet the needs of the cultural experience of the social group that uses them".  
(Roy, 1987, p.234)

In many respects, speakers of Black English are victims of the

same dilemmas as bilingual, Hispanic students. One significant difference is highlighted by Roy (1987) when he traces the development of Black English. Brought to this country from diverse tribes on the West Coast of Africa, slaves spoke different languages. Out of their mutual condition of slavery, and their need to communicate with one another, there emerged an "emergency language system". This language combined elements of West African language structure with English words to create a "Plantation English Creole" from which Black English has evolved.

Roy argues that "...language varieties known as Black English are not dialects in the ordinary sense, in that unlike regional dialects, they have not diverged from a common language form, but rather are converging on English from the structurally different language system of English Creole" (p.235). Because of this convergence, Roy points out the difficulty entailed for language-developing children who are acquiring Black English. They are unable to distinguish between forms of language which are assigned high social value (by the dominant culture) and those which are not.

Arriving at school with a structurally different language system, children who speak Black English are judged by the surface features of oral production. As Roy (1987) stipulates, Black and (so-called) Standard English "...can generate identical surface forms and these surface forms have different meanings depending on the grammatical system that interprets them" (p.236). Those who lack this understanding of Black English merely view these differences as trivial and subject to correction through

grammatical tutelage.

Encumbered with the role of supporting the cause of the dominant English culture, teachers value Black English as a dialect. "The language variety that has the higher social value is called a 'Language' and the language variety with the lower social value is in popular parlance called a 'dialect'....It has been said... that a Language is a dialect with an army" (Roy, 1987,p.234).

### 3. School-Based Literacy

"Myth: Poor academic performance reflects poor cognitive abilities" (Cummins, 1981).

The culture-specific literacy propagated by educational systems marks all those who fail to achieve as illiterate. Children who enter public school factories from a background congruent with that of the institutions are more easily processed. They emerge as successful, standardized models of the dominant culture, ear-marked for the upper strata. Children approaching schools from cultures that diverge from the dominant meet with teachers and a system who stand ready, through attitude and action, to do the "best we can under the circumstances" for children too often believed to be inferior.

Generally, the off-spring of the subordinate classes have spent their formative years in circumstances which challenge the human spirit. Life in a class-oriented, racist society is far from nurturing. However, this is not to say that subordinate children arrive at the school house door tabula rasa. As ethnographers have demonstrated, children from subordinate classes grow up with

a literacy that is concrete and contextualized by the home and neighborhood. They are confronted by a school based literacy that is abstract and de-contextualized.

In a clash with the stilted, formatted pursuits of school, lower class children are the losers, as they face systematized, mechanics-oriented instructional programs. Enter testing, a major strategy employed by schools to separate the literate from the illiterate. In the opinion of Sledd (1988):

"...one weapon in the corporate campaign for educational reform will infallibly be batteries of standardized...placement tests...trained on upwardly-aspirant members of the downward orders. To keep the humble at their stations, those exams, especially in English, will regularly include sufficient discriminatory devices to guarantee advantage to those who have it" (p.503).

Scores resulting from testing are used as a vindication of the myth that lower class children are inferior or, at least, very difficult to educate. A look at the percentage of general education students reading at or above grade level (Board of Education, NYC, 1988-89 school year) demonstrates that boroughs with the least percentage of low income students have the highest reading scores. Poverty does correlate with low achievement scores on normed tests. Rather than claim these statistics as proof of lower class inferiority, I would suggest that statistics attest that middle-upper class children are virtually guaranteed higher scores than lower class peers. This is accomplished through curricula that are designed to meet the needs and expectations of the dominant culture.

School curricula are language-based, reflecting the forms of the dominant classes. Language differences of lower class students are treated within the context of the deficit model. Remediation

is the order of the day - and is destined to be a failure. The inability of schools to work with language differences automatically results in reading failure coupled with incompetence in the use of "Standard English". The latter must be mastered by subordinate students in order to breach the wall of inaccessibility which the dominant culture has erected around the domain of success.

Lest schools take themselves too seriously in their self-appointed role of primary educators, it would be sobering to remember the example of Sweden. "Mass literacy was achieved in Sweden, without formal schooling or instruction in writing. Under the reformation, the rationale of the literacy campaign...was conservative: piety, civility, orderliness and military preparedness" (Graff, 1986, p.79).

Literacy was not demanded by economic or cultural considerations, but rather by marriage and reading God's word. Literacy was monitored locally, by parish priests. Women and mothers were especially targeted, thereby resulting in women having as high or higher literacy rates than males.

Literacy is not the sole property of educational institutions, or professional educators. It existed before these organizations were established, before children enter school, and continues to exist in spite of schooling. The only difference between flowers and weeds, after all, is that flowers are a valued species, grown under controlled circumstances, while weeds flourish where they may. Though not valued, weeds are none-the-less flowering, and serve important functions in the ecosystem.

#### 4. The Home-School Disconnection

Parent participation in their childrens' school affairs is considered a positive factor in school achievement. Presidents' councils, national education groups, the UFT - all insist that parent involvement is crucial to the proper education of students.

At best, "parent involvement" has remained a vague concept, not considered in the same realm with curriculum and classroom management, and certainly not so well defined. Parents are seen as an essential factor in the development of students' positive academic attitudes. Yet, just how or when are parents to be involved with school? How is "involved" to be defined in concrete, useful terms?

Fraatz (1987) surveyed a decade of research in order to compile information regarding home-school interactions. In reading through Fraatz's summary, one may conclude that the parent relationship with school is seen as positive when it supports the classroom reading program in an unquestioning and uncritical fashion. On the negative side, parents are judged by teachers and administrators without the necessity of any substantiating evidence or contact.

School is the bedrock which upholds the dominant culture, insuring its transmission to younger generations. In this process, parents are expected to be cooperative, surrogate teachers. Whether parents are or aren't involved with schools, teacher attitude is affected.

Fraatz's work serves to shed some understanding on home-school interactions as they are perceived by teachers. The outcome is consistent with the biased attitudes already discussed in my study.

a. Research Issues

Four main issues were extracted by Fraatz from the research literature.

1. "Parent involvement matters for any kind of school program success and for any individual child's school achievement, especially in reading" (p.127).

2. "Teachers hold strong and usually negative views about the attitudes of low-income parents toward schooling and the school" (p.127). Fraatz quotes Lightfoot (1978) who argues: "Without actually knowing parents, without actually hearing their point of view, teachers and principals have developed strong negative images of them" (p.35).

3. "Contacts between teachers and parents do not help teachers learn about parents' real attitudes towards schooling, even though they believe parent involvement is so important" (p.128). School orchestrated parent contacts generally center on activities (e.g. assemblies, report card, open-house) that often allow only superficial, limited contact. These opportunities are few, are generally initiated by the school and take place within the teachers' rather than the parents' province. Under these circumstances, parent-teacher contact is restrained and peripheral.

4. "The teacher's desire for parent involvement in school programs is at best ambiguous" (p.129).

Fraatz (1987) surmised that teachers appreciate parent support when it is accepting of the classroom reading program. Control and order are benchmarks of a successful program from teachers' and principals' reference point. Questions, doubts or suggestions



from parents increase the teachers own professional uncertainty and threaten the sense of order and control that teachers hold pivotal in large-group functioning. Information provided to parents was designed to forestall problems and elicit parent support.

b. Teacher Perspective On Parents

Fraatz's (1987) investigation of research literature found that teachers believed low-income and minority parents to be "apathetic, uncaring and uninterested in educational matters" (p.130).

Fraatz's own interviews determined that educator perspectives could not be thus summarily described. During the 1981-82 school year, Fraatz conducted 103 open-ended interviews in four school districts in a NorthEast state. Respondents included 49 classroom teachers, 15 reading specialists, 12 building principals and 25 district administrators.

In the process, five main educator attitudes were uncovered by Fraatz:

- (a) "Parents don't care" (p.130);
- (b) "Parents care, but they can't get very involved" (p.131);
- (c) "Parents care, but their expectations are inappropriate" (p.132);
- (d) "Parents care and they show it" (p.134);
- (e) "Parents differ" (p.135).

Parents were seen as uncaring by just a few respondents. Parents who could not get involved were prevented from doing so by lack of time and specific information on how to help. Overall, teachers wanted parent expectations for children to coincide with their own.

Parent differences were judged according to how cooperative or uncooperative they were in replicating teacher expectations.

Fraatz determined that above all, teachers expected parents to be adaptable: parent expectations for children should match teacher expectations; home learning should accommodate classroom programs; parents should work with children in order to insure better functioning students. Teachers did not indicate any expectation for themselves with regard to adapting the classroom to the home situation. They believed that "What parents do at home is not likely to be transferable to the school setting" (p.152).

Particularly notable was the differential gaze which teachers cast upon the homelife of "advantaged" versus the "disadvantaged". In advantaged households, the negative was over-looked. Teachers commented on how positive aspects were helpful in supporting classroom endeavors. The reverse was true for disadvantaged families. Positive factors were overlooked in favor of noting how negative circumstances hurt classroom performance. Once more, and not for the last time, class prejudice holds court.

#### B. Expressions of Literacy: Ethnographic Studies

The myth of lower-class illiteracy can be effectively challenged by ethnographers. Long term observations of literacy-in-action provide valuable data about the form and functions of literacy within the natural context of family and community. The work of Shirley Brice Heath, among others, demonstrates that literacy is inseparable from the context of living in a print oriented society.

During 1969-78, Shirley Brice Heath studied the daily life of an all-Black, working class community in SouthEastern United

States. She was able to delineate seven distinct uses of literacy within this community: instrumental (practical problems of daily life); social interactional; news related; memory-supportive; substitutions for oral messages; provision of permanent record and confirmation (of attitudes, ideas already held).

During her study, Heath also observed certain adult-child attitudes towards literacy:

1. Adults were not seen reading to children, nor did they consciously participate in modeling or demonstrating reading and writing.

2. Children chose their own reading and writing tasks according to interest. Adults provided instructions when needed.

3. Children learned to read information which they deemed useful or necessary in their own lives.

4. Comprehension was the context for, not the result of, learning to read.

5. Adults used reading as a social, shared activity, rather than as an individual, isolated one.

It is noteworthy that the attitudes, forms and uses of literacy that were observed and recorded by Heath did not encompass those usually associated with school-based literacy. The Black community studied by Heath made use of literacy in all the ways one would expect of any literate community of adults, leading Heath to conclude:

"All normal individuals can learn to read and write, provided they have a setting or context where there is a need to be literate, are exposed to literacy and get some help from those who are already literate. There need not be formal instruction, graded tasks, isolated skill

hierarchies or a tight linear order of instruction in sets and subsets of skills" (1986, p.23).

Heath's findings were substantiated by an ethnographic study undertaken by Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines. In 1982 they began to visit inner-city families in a major metropolitan area in the NorthEast. Many similarities exist between the types and uses of literacy classified by the Taylor-Gaines field study and those of Shirley Brice Heath. The following is a brief summary of the Taylor-Gaines findings.

a. Types and Uses of Reading

1. Instrumental (e.g. to gain information for needs of daily life)
2. Social-Interactional (e.g. to gain information pertinent to building/maintaining social relationships)
3. News-Related (e.g. to gain information about third party or distant events)
4. Recreational (e.g. during leisure time or planning recreation)
5. Critical/Educational (e.g. to increase ability to consider or discuss political, social, aesthetic, religious knowledge)
6. Sociohistorical (e.g. to explore personal identity, reading cherished records of family history)
7. Financial (e.g. to consider economic circumstances of every day life)

b. Types and Uses of Writing

1. Expository (e.g. tasks brought home from work or educational institutions)

2. Public Records (e.g. to announce order of church services)
3. Financial (e.g. to record numerals, amounts, purposes of expenditures)
4. Memory Aids (e.g. to serve as a memory aid for writer or others)
5. Social/Interactional (e.g. give information pertinent to relationships or parental responsibilities)
6. Reinforcement or Substitute for Oral Message (e.g. used direct oral communication not possible)

The forms and uses of literacy recorded by Taylor-Dorsey indicates that lower/working class families employ a variety of literacy skills. Supposedly, one purpose of school is to provide students with the capacity for engaging in functional life activities. Doesn't it seem counter-productive for school curricula to ignore the literacies that are available in students' home life and to focus instead on a literacy which is methodically reduced to a set of disembodied skills?

If there is a "lower class illiteracy", then it is a condition fostered not by any inferiority or family disinterest, but by the process we call education. Berliner (1988) provides a related example:

"It appears that Mexican Americans and Puerto Rican children score the same as do Anglos on intelligence until they begin schooling....Schooling, apparently, can be dangerous to your intellect" (p.295).

## CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO: EMPOWERMENT AND PARTNERSHIP

"As one begins to be conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself....When you begin to develop a conscience, you must find yourself at war with your society....It is your responsibility to change a society if you think of yourself as an educated person" (Baldwin, 1963, p.4; p.11).

### A. Agents of Change

Throughout the pages of this study one premise has remained consistent: the educational structure and those who maintain it form an alliance to reproduce and reinforce the dominant culture. As an agent of the status quo, educational institutions have vital roles to play in its preservation. When schools are perceived as incompetent in the execution of this primary function, concern and criticism reverberate throughout society.

Graff (1986) emphasized the importance of schooling within the context of "factory capitalism" when he wrote that "Schooling becomes an increasingly vital aspect of the maintenance of social stability, particularly during periods of massive, but often poorly understood, social and economic change" (p.80). Graff contends that literacy is the mechanism used to promote "...the values, attitudes and habits considered essential to the maintenance of social order and the persistence of integration and cohesion" (p.81).

Within this light, one may better understand that governmental bodies and leaders are indeed concerned with the weakening structures of our educational institutions. However, apprehension issues forth not from often espoused egalitarianism, but rather

from the narrow, self-serving desire to insure the health of the dominant American culture with all its expressions. It matters not who is helped or hurt by the process. The fallen in action are a necessary sacrifice - a small price to pay for the "good of the system".

Educational institutions are currently in the public eye for one unabashed reason: are they maintaining social stability during today's period of "massive, but poorly understood, social and economic change"? Into the fray of these dynamics comes one of the chief agents of social stability, the public school educator.

Generally speaking, educators are motivated by an enthusiasm for working with young minds. Society isn't necessarily seen as perfect, and educators hope in the young and in the future they may transform. As part of the landscape of the dominant culture, however, educators (as well as others) may not perceive the intricate patterns of cultural dominance - and the inter-related roles played by those who comprise the dominant and subordinate cultures. At the same time that one is part of a society and its values, one must also cultivate those attitudes that enable an out-of-body experience of sorts.

Standing outside the body of the dominant culture, educators need engage in a critical introspection of the complex social/economic dynamics at work in the United States. One of these dynamics is illiteracy which Giroux (1987) believes "Educators fail to understand...as a form of cultural hegemony" (p.13). Giroux goes further to say "A radical theory of literacy takes seriously

the task of uncovering how particular forms of social and moral regulation produce a culture of ignorance and categorical stupidity crucial to the silencing of all potentially critical voices" (p.13).

Consider the position of the public school educator as quoted by Giroux (1987, p.25-26):

"...schools are entrusted to prepare children for adulthood....teachers are treated as if incapable of mature judgement; schools...to encourage a sense of autonomy and trust in students....teachers constantly monitored...by administrative surveillance; schools...to create capable citizens... teachers exist within...work relations rigidly hierarchical and sexist...restricted to teaching practices that emphasize the rote, mechanical and technical aspects of learning and evaluation."  
(Freedman, et al. 1983)

If society is to evolve beyond its current, limited forms, then a radical change must occur. Literacy programs must "...challenge the myths of our society, perceive more clearly its realities and find alternatives and, ultimately, new directions for action" (Holt, 1965, p.103).

#### 1. Educator Empowerment

Educators are exceedingly aware of the hostile criticisms leveled at them for their perceived failures. Subject to examination by many within and without the school system, educators spend their professional lives much like targets at a skeet shoot. Expected to be "professional", yet often endowed with all the responsibility and respect accorded a large child, educators find themselves handcuffed and leashed. Educational successes are attributed to good programs, supervision, teachers' manuals, equipment and financial support. Educational failures are placed squarely at the door of educators.



"They (educators) labor under conditions replete with organizational constraints and ideological conditions that leave...little room...(they are) prevented from exercising their own knowledge with respect to selection, organization and distribution of teaching materials....working conditions are both demeaning and oppressive" (Giroux, 1987, p.25).

Within the restrictions imposed by public schools, educators must create the space for a radical reconceptualization of schools and educators as agents for social change. The challenge is none-too-small, but the choices are clear: play the role of Nero, or form a partnership with students to revitalize American education. The primary weapon in this empowerment is the two-edged sword of literacy which must be reforged and fashioned into a single-edged purpose. "Basic literacy, however, is not sufficient to achieve these far reaching ends. People must reach a level of mastery of language skills from which they can critically examine and theoretically elaborate their political and cultural experiences" (Elsasser, 1987, p.56).

As a vehicle par excellence for social reconstruction, literacy must be envisioned in its fullest, most creative and dynamic potentials. Obviously, psychometric literacy is insufficient to meet these demands. This is not to say that psychometric literacy is useless, but that its limitations need to be well recognized. Literacy must be such that an individual's capacity for maximum participation in societal and intellectual occupations is constantly stimulated and developed.

Educators must come to understand literacy as a life long process that begins to grow before students ever enter the classroom. And, if we have functioned well as educators, then literacy

will continue to expand while students are with us as well as throughout their lives. White (1983) alludes to this when he describes literacy: "It is not passive but active; not imitative but creative, for participation in the speaking and writing of language is participation in the activities it makes possible. Indeed, it involves a perpetual remaking of both language and of practice" (in Robinson, 1987, p.348).

There is no clearly defined plan for achieving such literacy with students. Educators can examine and challenge the various systemic components of literacy, education, and class-based society, along with the myths thus engendered; educators can compel themselves to see how the latter affects students, causing them to react in both functional and dysfunctional ways; educators can become partners with students in literacies that enable them to master and exceed the literacy forms of the dominant culture, and, educators can retool a literacy which will generate and serve an egalitarian society.

This invention must begin with a respect and legitimation of students' literacies - and the expectation that students must be fully active in helping to create their own education. This invention must spring from the realization that only a small part of our students' literacies will be shaped in our classroom, but that quality small parts are indispensable in turning a large wheel.

In a society overly fond of "how-to" texts, there are none for this crucial undertaking. We write and rewrite the texts each day. With students we need be explorers and inventors of new possibilities. It is the conviction of these premises that will

help ground educators in an attitude of empowerment. For empowerment is not a quality which some agent bestows, but an active inner capacity that is searched out and constantly nourished. Once an individual becomes empowered, it can never be taken away by an outside force. Throughout the world, there are many empowered people in prisons, for example, who, though physically restrained, are none-the-less still empowered.

## 2. Student Empowerment

"What would happen if the whole world became literate? Answer: Not so very much, for the world is by and large structured in such a way that it is capable of absorbing the impact. But if the world consisted of literate, autonomous, critical, constructive people, capable of translating ideas into action, individually or collectively - the world would change" (Galtung, 1976, p.93).

Having become conscious individuals, educators must then join in partnership with students. The realities of the subordinate students' cultures is the point from which this partnership may begin. Students possess varying degrees of conscious and unconscious awareness of their social/cultural universe. The relationship between the students' own realities and the dominant culture may be recognized by students to a greater or lesser extent, or perhaps, not at all. As cited earlier in this work (p.50) students must become "literate about the histories, experiences and cultures of their immediate environment" (Macedo, 1987). Here the radical educator has a role to play.

Subordinate students are caught within their dilemma of powerlessness before the dominant culture. Such power as may be had often arises from exercising resistance to that dominant culture.

Within school, resistance can take the form of a refusal to be literate when students are met by the "...attempt by the dominant culture to delegitimize and disorganize the knowledge and traditions used to define themselves and their view of the world" (Giroux, 1987, p.13).

Educators are unable to use literacy to transform social and economic realities without confronting these realities, first in themselves, then in their classrooms. Within classrooms, the dominant social environment can be altered as educators examine it jointly with students - thus challenging the antagonistic teacher-student relationship. "Although in many instances educational institutions have failed to meet the legitimate aspirations of oppressed groups, parents and students alike recognize that formal education offers skills that they need to transform themselves and their relationship with the dominant society" (Elsasser, 1987, p.52).

When confronted by a teacher who has stepped outside the dominant cultural mold to engage students in a critical examination of that culture, students can begin to articulate and systematize their perceptions, and to develop an active understanding of the sociohistorical underpinnings of class-based society in the United States. From this frame of reference, students can begin to acquire "The selected knowledge of the dominant curriculum...in the process of self and group empowerment....The dominant curriculum must gradually become dominated by the dependent students so as to help in their struggle for social equity and justice" (Freire, 1987, p.128).

Ultimately, the success of educational programs depends upon a mutual respect and understanding between students and educators. This should flow from a curriculum which includes the cultural realities, literacies, strengths and active participation of students. "When people are convinced that they can shape their social reality and that they are no longer isolated and powerless, they begin to participate in dialogue with the larger world" (Elsasser, 1987, p.51).

This dialogue has long been denied, but it has begun in the classrooms of educators I have met. A small start, but a beginning none-the-less. Today, educators and students face a critical juncture together, surely only one of many in a world arrived at the crossroads of self-destruction. The response must not be slow in coming for we risk losing the opportunity for a radical shift - a new paradigm of society where "dominant" and "subordinate" will cease to be applicable to people or cultures.

James Baldwin spoke the following words to a group of teachers in 1963. The reality of Mr. Baldwin's words calls out a warning that has become an inescapable part of life 30 years later:

"Find a way to use the tremendous potential and tremendous energy which this child represents. If this country does not find a way to use that energy, it will be destroyed by that energy" (p.12).

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