THE ORGANIZATION FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT: CONCEPTIONS OF LITERACY AND CORPORATE AGENDAS

by

Emery J. Hyslop-Margison

B.A. University of New Brunswick, Saint John N.B., 1995
M.A. Queen's University, Kingston Ont., 1997

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Supervisor: Prof. George Haley, B.A., M.A., M.Sc.Ed.

Examining Board: Dr. Alan Sears, B.Ed., M.Ed, PhD.
Dr. Andrew Hughes, B.A., M.A., B.Ed., M.Ed., PhD.
Dr. Roger Moore, B.A., M.A., PhD.
Dr. John Stewart, B.A., B.Ed. M.Ed., Ed.D

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Abstract

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is an international body representing twenty-nine countries from around the world. As part of its strategy to enhance economic performance indicators within these nations, the OECD has carried out a series of assessments on literacy levels within member countries. This thesis critically examines the definition of literacy and assessment protocols employed in the OECD's 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey within the expanded context of corporate influence on education policy. Although the OECD carried out a similar survey in 1997, its conception of literacy remained unchanged.

The International Adult Literacy Survey utilized a definition of literacy and assessment practices that reflect a functional conception of literacy instruction. Although anachronistic, functional literacy education provides individuals with certain practical social advantages. But it also can domesticate learners into a single world view. Within the context of traditional humanistic educational objectives and employing a neo-Marxist critique of functional literacy, I maintain that critical literacy education is able to respond to the ontological needs of learners in a fashion that functional literacy education cannot. I also argue that the type of literacy conceptualized by the OECD is a literacy for social control and individual inaction. It is a definition of literacy that fails to reflect the importance

of human creativity and imagination, or appreciate the human need to engage in reflective action; it is, in effect, a dehumanizing conception of literacy.

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Dedicated to the life and work of Paulo Freire
and all persons in the world struggling to have a voice

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Chapter One:
Introduction and Methods

> To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it.
> Once named, the world in turn reappears to the namers
> as a problem and requires of them a new naming.
> People are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in
> action-reflection.[1]
>
> Paulo Freire
> *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

1.1 Introduction

To understand the humanist moral basis of Paulo Freire's critical approach to literacy education, it is crucial to appreciate the social context in which it was developed. Freire was born in Recife on the Northeast coast of Brazil in 1921. Although he is reported to have had a happy childhood, he seemingly understood early in life the pain caused by economic hardship. The 1929 economic crisis that devastated many industrialized countries also affected the economy of Northeast Brazil, and Freire's family was forced to leave the comforts of their home in Recife in order to survive the depression. It was in his new home of Jaboatao, Brazil that Freire was first exposed to the social circumstances of the economically

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[1]Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Translated by Myrna Bergman Ramos from the original Portuguese manuscript, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p.76.

disadvantaged: ". . . living in Jaboatao, playing knockabout games of soccer, he had contact with children and teenagers from poor rural families and the children of workers who lived near the canals."[2] One can easily imagine that it was here that Freire first realized the connection between social class and knowledge, and how controlling access to the latter perpetuated class distinctions. Challenging the moral legitimacy of these social disparities through literacy education became Freire's lifelong mission.

Although his education was interrupted because of his family's economic difficulties, Freire eventually returned to school and later became a lawyer. He quickly abandoned this career, however, in favour of teaching literacy to Brazilian peasants, a vocation with fewer material rewards, but one he considered far more rewarding. It was during his work as an adult educator that he developed a revolutionary method for teaching literacy to economically disadvantaged learners. Freire was concerned that popular methods of literacy instruction, i.e., functional literacy, domesticated economically disadvantaged learners into passively accepting their subjugated social status. In order to achieve his objective of social equality, he developed a literacy pedagogy that provided Brazilian peasants with

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[2] Moacir Gadotti, *Reading Paulo Friere: His Life and Work*, Trans. John Milton, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p.3.

the means to access political and economic power. Indeed, Freire's innovative approach conceptualizes literacy education as a process moving individuals from simple self-awareness to social awareness, and ultimately to political liberation. Cliff Barnard explains:[3]

> To study Paulo Freire is to reflect on liberation. The themes which inform his writing - oppression, dialogue, cultural action - reveal a sharp sense of the conflicts in the human condition. Freire has spent his life helping people find a meaning in freedom by giving them the [literacy] tools to name the world.

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a seminal work in defining literacy as something more than mere competency in reading and writing skills. Rather than merely providing learners with the literacy skills to improve their economic circumstances, Freire's work argues that functional literacy education indoctrinates them into a social system that, by its very nature, limits their humanization. He contends that only critical literacy helps learners understand, engage and change the world in which they live.

Through critical literacy, economically disadvantaged individuals learn the systemic causes of their suffering, thereby enhancing their social consciousness.

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[3]Cliff Barnard, "Imperialism, Underdevelopment and Education", *Literacy and Revolution: The Pedagogy of Paulo Freire.* Ed. Robert Mackie, (New York: Continuum Publications Company, 1981), p.12.

Within the context of critical literacy, illiterate individuals no longer blame themselves or their illiteracy for their miserable social circumstances. Rather, they come to understand the various social forces causing their hardship. This improved social awareness enables learners to politically challenge the structures that limit their material well-being, as well as their opportunity for intellectual improvement and self-actualization.

As a key element in the politically liberating process, critical literacy helps individuals recognize that limits placed on their literacy levels, *ipso facto* their social opportunities, are socially constructed artifices reinforced by the dominant discourses within society. Freire's epistemology of literature is primarily motivated by a concern to correct this imbalance in social opportunities. The essential objective in critical literacy is to make economically disadvantaged individuals subjects in the act of knowing rather than objects of the education process. As participants in the creation of knowledge they become morally and politically empowered to legitimately transform their world. In Freire's view, then, literacy education is less about maintaining worker compliance and consumer conformity in the free-market paradigm, than it is about enabling individuals to fully participate in charting the direction of their world. The critical literacy

envisioned by Paulo Freire, however, stands in direct opposition to the definition of functional literacy recently advanced by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is an international body whose objective is to improve the economic conditions of both member and non-member nations. The organization is a legacy of the Marshall Plan, the U.S. led program designed to rebuild Europe economically at the end of World War II. The OECD's prevailing point of view remains economic; it is motivated by the corporate free market conviction that what is globally beneficial to transnational corporations is automatically good for all; a trickle down theory of economics that requires by definition a stratified class system. It is precisely this stratified view of society that Freire's critical literacy pedagogy opposes. By stressing the fundamental importance of social justice and equality, critical literacy challenges the social disparities that trickle down, free-market economics creates.

In 1994 the OECD conducted the initial International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), a study examining adult literacy levels among a number of member countries. The 1994 IALS was the first multi-country and multi-language

assessment of adult literacy. A later study was carried out in 1997, but the definition of literacy and assessment mechanisms employed in the survey remained unchanged. The 1994 study developed a scale of literacy performance to allow comparisons of literacy between people within a wide range of abilities, and across cultures and languages. The OECD's explanation for carrying out the IALS betrays its view that education is a means to a material end, and literacy's primary function is to satisfy the human resource requirements of the global corporate community:[4]

> The emerging global economy is characterized by greatly increased flows of information and financial capital. The best way to exploit the new economic environment is to strengthen the capacity of firms and labour markets to adjust to change, improve their productivity and capitalize on innovation. But this capacity depends first and foremost on the knowledge and skills of the population. IALS shows that the literacy skills of individual citizens are a powerful determinant of a country's innovative and adaptive capacity.

The organization's principal interest in literacy education is to increase transnational corporate access to the information processing skills that functional literacy provides, thereby strengthening economic performance indicators. A

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[4]*Background Information on the International Adult Literacy Survey*, (Paris: OECD, 1996), p.3.

standardized level of functional literacy among OECD countries ensures that a qualified global workforce is readily available to transnational corporations. The existence of a skilled global labour pool enables corporations to relocate around the world, exploiting cheap labour for increased profit within the new economic environment referred to by the OECD.

The connection between literacy and a country's economic performance indicators is well established. Indeed, the IALS was carried out in response to the high correlation between a nation's literacy levels and its economic performance. According to Willms and Sloat, "governments around the globe are concerned about the literacy abilities of their citizens in light of the strong correlation between literacy and economic performance."[5] As part of its investigation into literacy levels among member countries, the OECD developed a definition of literacy that, while meeting the objectives of its transnational corporate-driven agenda, fails to reflect many important elements in contemporary literacy education: "*A mode of adult behaviour, namely; using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's*

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[5]Elizabeth Sloat and Doug Willms, "Influences of the Development of Literacy in Young Adults: A Review of the Literature", (Unpublished, March 28, 1996), p.1.

knowledge and potential."[6] Although this definition appears somewhat ambiguous, in conjunction with the IALS assessment protocols the OECD's conception of literacy becomes abundantly clear.

The OECD's definition of literacy is divided into three distinct strands: prose; document; and quantitative. All three strands involve the simple utilization of printed information from various popular sources:[7]

> . . . prose literacy required participants to read, understand, and use information from written texts such as stories and editorials. Document literacy required readers to locate and use information from texts such as job applications, transportation schedules, and maps. Quantitative literacy required the ability to find, understand, and use mathematical operations embedded in texts - weather charts found in the newspaper, or calculating interest on a loan.

Within all three strands of literacy, the learner's function is to extract the information contained in text and apply it in a specific, predetermined manner. This functional conception of literacy is predicated on the notion that the learner is an empty vessel in which information is stored for retrieval and application. The IALS assessment protocols test the participants' ability to commit information to

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[6]*Literacy, Economy, & Society: Results of the First International Adult Literacy Survey.* Statistics Canada. Ottawa: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development & the Canadian Minister of Industry, 1995, p. 14.
[7]Sloat and Willms, p.3.

memory, accept the "authority" of that information, and apply it to arrive at predetermined answers. The OECD's conception of literacy contains an ideological agenda because it satisfies the information processing demands of transnational corporations in the information age. This functional conception of literacy is what the OECD, the Conference Board of Canada, and neo-conservatives both in Canada and elsewhere support as the primary aim of language arts instruction.

The OECD's conception of literacy fails to reflect a more complex understanding of reading, writing and speaking that goes beneath the surface meaning of text. In critical literacy, learners deconstruct and challenge texts to understand how they offer a selective world view. They are encouraged to creatively engage text, release their imaginative energies, and generate meaning from their particular point of view. These essential elements of language arts education are entirely absent from the OECD's conception of literacy.

There are two other important elements in literacy education that the OECD's definition of literacy and assessment protocols fail to reflect: 1) the recognition that literacy provides a vehicle for intellectual enhancement rather than material improvement; and 2) that literacy is a potential mechanism for political

empowerment and social reconstruction. In this thesis, I argue that the conception of literacy advanced by the OECD is a literacy for social inaction. It is a conception of literacy that fails to reflect the importance of human creativity and imagination, or appreciate the human political need to engage in reflective action; it is, in effect, a dehumanizing view of literacy. I argue that only critical literacy is capable of improving the long term social conditions of economically disadvantaged individuals by equipping them with the intellectual tools to actually transform their social relations. As a result of the increased social awareness furnished by critical literacy education, economically disadvantaged individuals are no longer just passive observers. They are provided with the literacy skills to become full participants in the democratic political process.

1.2 Competing Definitions of Literacy

Competing definitions of most educational concepts, including definitions of literacy, are the result of differing educational objectives. The objectives held by those forwarding a particular definition of literacy are seldom made explicit, but are usually embedded in the definition itself. Functional definitions of literacy, for example, carry an entire social perspective, a theory of economics and an outlook

on the relationship between employers and workers. If the role of literacy education is strictly preparatory as opposed to critical, then, within that pedagogical approach, there is an implicit validation of the existing socio-economic system. In the final analysis, there are competing definitions of literacy because there are competing world views.

As I hope to demonstrate in this thesis, the shaping of literacy practices by institutions like schools and churches, and more recently the OECD, is connected to controlling knowledge and power in society. Indeed, definitions of literacy and literary practices reflect the social objectives of those advancing the particular pedagogy in question. If a certain group wishes to fortify their social position or perspective, incorporating their world view into education practices is virtually essential. It is possible to direct society by controlling education and access to the kind of knowledge learners acquire. Thus, definitions of literacy, as fundamental educational elements, are circumscribed by the ideological dispositions of those who employ them, those who profit by them, and those who enforce them as social or, as in the OECD's case, as economic development prerequisites.

Understanding literacy education is not a matter of distinguishing the "right" definition of literacy from the "wrong" one. There is no simple empirical

test to decide what conception of literacy is the most appropriate within any given context. Different understandings of what literacy education should entail evolve from different ways of viewing the world. Ultimately, competing definitions of literacy are theoretical disagreements, or what William Connolly refers to as conceptual disputes: "Conceptual disputes involve the central concepts of a field of inquiry, they are surface manifestations of basic theoretical differences that reach to the core."[8] The dialectically opposed conceptions of functional and critical literacy reveal the educational objectives of two divergent social groups: those who seek to maintain the existing social order, and those wanting to reconstruct it. As a social reconstructionist who holds a socialist, egalitarian point of view, I position myself in this thesis as a critical literacy advocate.

Those individuals who support a more traditional preparatory role for literacy education may, for the most part, be considered structural functionalists. Structural functionalists essentially believe that it is the responsibility of the individual to conform to the existing social framework. The OECD's definition of literacy, for example, is derived from the functionalist perspective that views language arts education as a means to prepare students for productive occupational

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[8]William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, (Lexington: D.C. Heath & Company, 1974), p.21.

lives. As Knoblauch and Brannon explain:[9]

> . . . probably the most popular representation of literacy comes from the functionalist perspective, with its appealing pragmatic emphasis on readying people for the necessities of daily life - writing cheques and business letters; reading sets of instructions, street signs and warning labels - as well as for the professional tasks of a complex technological society.

Those advancing this form of literacy education privilege information processing skills over interpretative or analytical ones. They perceive literacy as a means to enhance the existing socio-economic relations, and to allow persons to function at a minimal level within them.

The OECD's conception of literacy is ostensibly appealing because it links literacy skills to explicit areas of use. It concerns pragmatic applications of literacy rather than humanistic considerations such as self-improvement, self-actualization or promoting social justice. There is an immediate tangible benefit from acquiring a level of literacy that allows for minimal social functioning. Functional literacy promises economic and social benefit to learners by improving their marketable skills within the market economy framework. But the functionalist argument has a hidden advantage as well, at least for those whose literacy is more than minimal. It

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[9]C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy*, (Portsmouth: Reed Publishing Ltd., 1993), p.17.

perpetuates, even promotes, the status-quo thereby protecting the interests of the prevailing economic hegemony.

According to critical literacy, language is a political arena in which ideological battles are continually waged. It views the dominant discourse as a cultural artifact that shapes the subject's world view, and strives to educate learners about this linguistic feature. The view that dominant discourses, including definitions of functional literacy, are derived from the power relations within society and constitute an important mechanism for social control is one shared by contemporary scholars within the field:[10]

> Educators have become increasingly aware that, far from being a sure means to attain an accurate and "deep" understanding of the world and one's place within it, the ability to read and write may expose individuals and entire social groups to forms of domination and control by which their interests are subverted.

Education in functional literacy, for example, may lead to the exploitation of illiterates by making them vulnerable to the human resource needs, i.e., corporate downsizing and relocation, of the free market system.

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[10]Peter L. McLaren and Colin Lankshear, "Critical Literacy and the Postmodern Turn", In *Critical Literacy, Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern*, Ed. Colin Lankshear and Peter L. McLaren, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p.386.

To be critically literate is not merely to develop reading and writing skills to gain employment in the burgeoning global economy, but to utilize reading, writing and speaking skills to enhance one's understanding and description of the world. Indeed, it is a misguided assumption to believe that language is simply a neutral medium to convey objective ideas with linguistic labels that comport with objective reality. Critical literacy encourages an ideological critique of the social circumstances in which those being educated find themselves, and from where definitions of literacy, texts, and discourses emanate. If there are economically disadvantaged and illiterate people within a given society, attention is paid to the social circumstances giving rise to these conditions. As part of literacy education, critical literacy examines how text, including definitions of what constitute literacy, operates to maintain social inequality by perpetuating existing social disparities.

Given our modern understanding of language, literacy practices cannot be viewed in isolation from the various social forces that lead to individual or group marginalization. In fact, discourse practices are a central means by which social inequality is maintained. Critical literacy education is a crucial mechanism in the deconstruction of prevailing social discourses, an indispensable tool to demystify,

and hopefully eliminate, wide scale social inequality. It enhances our understanding and description of the world, and it is through this conceptual transformation of social relations that society itself may be eventually improved.

1.3 Summary

The view of literacy advanced by the OECD perpetuates existing social relations by preparing disadvantaged persons to fill lower strata vocations within the current free market framework. It promotes the social status-quo by limiting the opportunity for economically disadvantaged learners to increase their understanding of the world through better understanding the contextual nature of language. The ostensibly noble objectives cited in the OECD documents on education, and its accompanying conception of literacy, mask an ideological agenda to maintain a socio-economic system that relegates many individuals to a life of economic hardship. The term, corporate agenda, as employed in this thesis refers to the educational objectives of transnational corporations and not small business interests.

Like other educational concepts, conceptions of literacy contain social theories or models of social order, social power and social change. They promote

theories of worker/employer and class relations, and indicate how workers should behave and think in the global economy. Educating learners in functional literacy promotes the social status-quo by ignoring alternative discourses that offer alternative world views. In critical literacy education, the existing social order is not presented as the inexorable consequence of history or human nature, but rather as an artifice constructed to protect dominant ideological interests. Pedagogical practices associated with critical literacy place the needs of the individual learner ahead of the corporate agenda, and encourage social reconstruction to achieve social justice.

In the context of current global economic reform, the prevailing market economy discourse is sustained by ideological forces that marginalize counter discourses while, at the same time, legitimize their own. Although there is indeed an emerging demand in economically disadvantaged countries for workers with information processing skills, this should not prevent workers from appreciating their importance within the existing social order, or from recognizing their right to transform that order if they so desire. Thus, the critical literacy I support that considers alternative methods of social action based on humanistic and egalitarian principles may be of economic, political and, most importantly, moral value to the

entire global community.

1.4 Chapter Preview

Chapter Two explores the OECD in detail, and examines the corporate agenda behind its education policies. It analyzes a number of OECD publications that expose the organization's plan to help transnational corporations meet their financial objectives by influencing global education policy. Chapter Two examines the ideological advantage gained by corporations through controlling literacy and related educational practices. Exploring the wider corporate context in which the OECD definition of literacy was formed reveals the organization's socio-economic and educational objectives. This chapter also explains the methodology of the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey.

Chapter Three discusses how different forms of literacy education impact on human consciousness, self-actualization and praxis. Praxis, or reflective action, a concept excluded from functional literacy education, is an essential ingredient in humanization. To be fully human is to be conscious of one's historical circumstances, to reflect, and to translate theory into political action. The limiting impact of functional literacy education on human imaginative and creative

sensibilities is also examined. Finally, this chapter reveals how the apparently good intentions connected to teaching functional literacy are an example of false generosity. It emphasizes the moral importance of offering assistance to others on humanistic rather than humanitarian grounds.

Chapter Four explores the concept of critical literacy. It argues that only critical literacy education exposes the ideological agenda behind corporate discourse practices, and adequately informs learners about socio-economic oppression. It emphasizes the important role that imagination and expressivism play in literacy education, and maintains that a proper conception of literacy recognizes these fundamental processes. This chapter also provides an example of how critical literacy can be introduced into classroom practice.

Finally, Chapter Five briefly summarizes the argument presented in this thesis and proposes a definition of critical literacy that enables individuals to achieve humanization, and become full political participants in the democratic shaping of their social lives.

1.5 Research Methods

This thesis relies on an analysis of the literature on functional and critical definitions of literacy; an examination of OECD publications on education and its policy statements on economic development; articles and texts relating to ideology and education; and neo-Marxist critiques of education. I consider education research to be an extension of the humanities tradition or, as R.N. Bellah suggests, social science as public philosophy:[11]

> It is precisely the boundary between the social sciences and the humanities that social science as public philosophy most wants to open up. Social science is not a disembodied cognitive enterprise. It is a tradition or set of traditions, deeply rooted in the philosophical traditions of the West. Social science makes assumptions about the nature of persons, the nature of society, and the relations between persons and society.

In this thesis, I also candidly admit the moral and theoretical presuppositions on which my argument favouring critical literacy rests to enable the reader, consistent with the goals of critical literacy, to contextualize the information and analysis I provide.

Social science research is an interactive, rather than strictly empirical,

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[11]R.N. Bellah et al., "Social Science as Public Philosophy", *Habits of the Heart*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), p.301.

process in which the conclusions reached often reflect the researcher's personal history, biography, gender, social class, race or ethnicity.[12] The reader of research deserves the chance to situate the information within the context of the researcher's potential bias, a bias that often determines the analytical approach chosen by the researcher. This requires researchers like myself to indicate their personal background, academic experience and theoretical perspective. A researcher's biography elucidates the selection of topic, the intellectual, analytical or methodological approach, and the ability to successfully complete the research project. Researcher biographies can help clarify why academics study and research the particular topics they do.[13]

Including information on a researcher's academic background may indicate her ability to successfully carry out the research project in question. Other life experiences can also impact on the particular research project undertaken. A researcher's personal background, for example, may reveal personal experiences or circumstances that impact on the theoretical approach chosen for the project, as well as on the conclusions reached. To promote academic honesty, it is necessary

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[12]*Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Ed. Norman Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc., 1994), p.2.
[13]Maurice Punch, *Politics and Ethics in Qualitative Research*, (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1986), p.86

to include a discussion of factors that may be influencing one's research design and outcomes. Thus, I intend to make manifest the assumptions and presuppositions on which my argument favouring critical literacy education rests.

My personal background is working class, and my sentiments are never far removed from promoting the interests of working class people. To a limited extent, both as a child and as a student, I have witnessed first hand the consequences of economic hardship and social marginalization that occur within our contemporary socio-economic framework. I believe that these personal experiences have enabled me to empathize with others in similar circumstances, and have prompted me to dedicate my current research to improving social opportunities for economically disadvantaged learners through enhanced literacy education.

During my academic career, I have maintained an active interest in the welfare of working class persons. In 1996, I co-authored an assisted autobiography with the late Dr. Peter McGahan of the University of New Brunswick in Saint John on the life of socialist and national labour leader, John Francis "Lofty" MacMillan. Mr. MacMillan began his labour career during the 1930s in the coal mines of Port Hood, Nova Scotia, and later became national

director of organizing for the Canadian Union of Public Employees. His recollections revealed the social injustices faced by Cape Breton miners and other Canadian workers when they tried to claim the rights they were so long denied. Mr. MacMillan's memories of labour's struggle in Canada to gain a measure of social justice reinforced my view that the present market economy system, dominated by transnational corporate and banking interests, is badly in need of revision.

All researchers are, at least to some degree, philosophers guided by what are essentially abstract principles derived from various discourses. These abstractions influence a researcher's ontological and epistemological views, and how the topic under discussion is addressed. Although the trend appears to be reversing, some education research continues to be carried out with the conviction that credible research is always empirical and value free. The difficulties contained in this view are numerous, but it is sufficient to say that empiricist research methods fail to meet their own verification criteria. As the logical positivists discovered much to their chagrin, no empirical verification is possible of the proposition that only sense experience is meaningful. Ironically, empiricism is a metaphysical theory. In *Ideology and Curriculum*, Michael Apple attacks the dichotomy in education

research between addressing questions of value and questions of "fact":[14]

> . . . the tendency in the western industrialized societies to separate strictly value from fact would make it difficult for there to be acceptance of a position which holds that most social and intellectual categories are themselves valuative in nature and may reflect ideological commitments, a fact . . . of exceptional import.

The language myths accompanying the positivist view are especially salient within literacy studies and remain entirely intact in definitions of functional literacy. They lend a distinctively delusionary objectivist slant to discussions about education generally, and literacy in particular. In the tradition of the long outdated direct reference theory of meaning, functional literacy implies that the world consists of labeled objects, and that one becomes literate simply by learning to read the labels on the world. Our modern understanding of language, however, demonstrates that it is a far more dynamic, complex process of communication than the positivists or direct reference theorists appreciated. In fact, language operates as much to shape social reality as it does simply to label it.

A major hurdle for the reconstructionist perspective on education is that much of the research in the field refuses to consider the relevant historical, social

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[14]Michael Apple, *Curriculum and Ideology*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.131.

or cultural context of the subject under investigation. Indeed, the view that only empirical research is credible invokes a certain measure of closure on educational debate by limiting discussion on important moral or social considerations lurking behind the research questions asked. A rigid, positivist research approach in education encourages academics to research matters in a microscopic fashion, in virtual isolation from social causal forces or consequences. This research pattern may insulate education policy from important foundational criticism. Richard Paul, for example, has attacked the academic tendency to research education issues apart from their social causes, rather than as one element in an interconnected network of competing ideas. He suggests that academic compartmentalization is itself contrary to the goals of education because it negatively impacts on our critical reasoning abilities:[15]

> To become a reasoner or critical thinker requires skills of concrete synthesis which are as yet not fully developed. We will get little help from the academic world as presently structured with its strict compartmentalization. We need new skills in the art of totalizing experience rationally, as well as in the dialectical questioning of primary categorizations.

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[15]Richard Paul, *Background Logic, Critical Thinking, and Irrational Language Games*, (unpublished paper at the Second International Symposium on Informal Logic at the University of Windsor, Windsor Ont, 1983), p.20.

Thus, Paul condemns the inclination to categorize problems into separate realms of inquiry, a method ignoring the broader social or economic causes behind many of the more serious problems existing within education.

In deciding on which critical approach to take in this thesis, I considered two contemporary methods: postmodernism and neo-Marxism. Although postmodernism provides a critical, insightful approach to understanding the dynamics of language, and emphasizes the importance of subjective experience, it is unable to turn criticism into political action. A postmodernist accepting the epistemic uncertainty of the theory lacks the moral foundation or credibility to advance any argument for social justice or economic equality. Viewed in this light, postmodern criticism engenders a certain political inertia rather than generating praxis and is, therefore, counter-productive to the objective of this thesis. Michael Apple, for example, explains the immobilizing impact of postmodern theory on education research and underlines the need for a more grounded critique of education:[16]

> Can we as educators honestly cope with the probability that certainty will not be forthcoming, that many of our answers and our actions will be situational and filled with ambiguity? With this in mind, how do we commit

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[16]Michael Apple, *Curriculum and Ideology*, p.166

> ourselves to action? . . . our very commitment to rationality in the widest sense of the term requires us to begin the dialectic of critical understanding that will be part of the political praxis.

This thesis approaches the subject of competing definitions of literacy from a neo-Marxist perspective. Given the economic basis for functional literacy, neo-Marxist analytical techniques seem especially appropriate. They are socially encompassing, politically emancipating, and thoroughly critical. Indeed, neo-Marxist criticism is capable of revealing the economic interests that pervade education practices in contemporary Western societies. As David Livingstone argues, Marx's view that social practices such as education have a material basis is one of enduring relevance:[17]

> . . . Marx's mature work has been of such enduring relevance because its analysis does not depend on speculative philosophical concepts but on real historical abstractions regarding the material production of society. He can thereby proceed to comprehend, and we can continue to build from his exposition of, fundamental aspects of actual relations in capitalist societies.

Indeed, the key to understanding the basis of contemporary education policy like

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[17]David W. Livingstone, *Class Ideologies & Educational Futures*, (New York: The Falmer Press, 1983), p.24.

the OECD's conception of literacy is appreciating the influence material forces, i.e., corporate economic interests, exact on current education practices.

Many of Paulo Freire's ideas are presented in this thesis because they "echo the concepts of many neo-Marxist analyzes of education. Freire's work in literacy accepts Marx's view that unequal relationships in society are mirrored in the world of education."[18] The education system in developed countries typically parades itself as autonomous, but it is clearly derivative of current material conditions. During an era when economic interests exert such tremendous pressure on education, neo-Marxist criticism strikes a countervailing blow against the domesticating market economy ideological forces. Michael Apple also views Marxist analytical techniques as especially appropriate for critiquing contemporary education: ". . . critical questions are generated out of a tradition of neo-Marxist argumentation, a tradition which seems to me to offer the most cogent framework for organizing one's thinking and action about education."[19]

Any argument advocating major social change, i.e., from widespread functional to critical literacy education for economically disadvantaged learners,

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[18]John Elias, *Paulo Freire: Pedagogue of Liberation*, Malabar Fla: Krieger Pub. Co., 1994, p.115-116.
[19]Michael Apple, *Curriculum and Ideology*, p.1.

should establish a moral foundation to justify the transformation. I have chosen neo-Marxist and Praxis Marxist analytical techniques because they provide a moral framework for an attack on functional literacy education that other modern critical approaches such as postmodernism lack:[20]

> If there is one central tenet of Praxis Marxism it is this: Marxism is pre-eminently a body of thought which is uncompromising in its rejection of all forms of human alienation, exploitation, oppression and injustice, regardless of the type of society - bourgeois or socialist - in which these phenomena occur.

Neo-Marxism and Praxis Marxism provide a critical approach that places humanism at the forefront of its analysis rather than focusing on the dialectical materialism of orthodox Marxism. Although Marx doggedly maintained that his philosophy was amoral, ironically, it is the moral aspect of Marxism that is its real legacy to the world. Indeed, ". . . future Marxisms are likely to range even further from Marx's own specific concerns while still sharing his commitment to identifying, explaining, and criticizing hierarchies of dominance and subordination . . ."[21]

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[20]David A. Crocker, *Praxis and Democratic Socialism: The Critical Social Theory of Paulo Freire*. Ed. Markovic and Stojanovic. (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1983), p.1.

[21]*Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Ed. Robert Audi, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.467.

Another central element in Marxist criticism is the fundamental importance of transforming consciousness among disadvantaged individuals to provide them with the incentive to improve their lives. The transformation of consciousness or, as Paulo Freire terms it, *conscientization*, is the initial intellectual shift that critical literacy seeks to inspire. It is only after this change in individual consciousness occurs through increased social awareness that liberation through praxis, or reflective action, can take place. Similar to Freire's view, Marx considered consciousness as both an expression of the material world and, when altered, a mechanism for social transformation. As Madan Sarup observes, "The transformation of consciousness is vital in Marxism and is an inseparable part of structural change."[22] The initial objective in critical literacy education, like that in neo-Marxism, is to transform consciousness through an increased awareness of how language influences individual thoughts and experience.

Much of Marx's work is devoted to examining the consequences of denying humans the self-actualizing rewards of intellectual and esoteric pursuits. Indeed, the view that human alienation necessarily follows capitalist oppression in industry and education is a central idea in neo-Marxist criticism. By reducing

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[22]Madan Sarup, *Marxism and Education*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p.192.

learners to the level of resource, functional literacy alienates learners from their human character by limiting the expression of their rationality, creativity, and their existential engagement with the world.:[23]

> Alienation can occur when man is separated from his activity, his own products, from his fellow-men and his species. In so many aspects of education the potential inherent in individuals is neglected and the person thought of as a commodity on the market. That is to say, 'potential' is regarded only in terms of usefulness to social needs; instead of being developed, it is exploited.

Conceptions of functional literacy like the OECD's that fail to recognize humankind's rational requirements, i.e., the need for reflective action, in favour of occupational preparation deny humanization. Although this type of training prepares learners for occupational roles, in isolation from aesthetic and humanistic educational values, it alienates them from their species character.

There is one other element in neo-Marxist criticism that is central to the argument in this thesis. Indeed, the most important dimension in neo-Marxist criticism is its analysis of the interactive processes between the economic base or substructure, and the superstructure. The foundation for the social world, or the world of ideas, is material; that is, it is derived from the dominant economic forces

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[23]Ibid, p.135.

of the base. The superstructure is comprised of ideas, but these ideas, such as conceptions of literacy, are a function of material forces. If one accepts this analysis of the causal relationship between material and social forces, education practices, such as conceptions of literacy, are derived from economic forces, and operate within the ideological parameters of the material base to maintain the status-quo.

According to Marx, the dominant ideas of society - this includes definitions of what constitutes literacy - never cease to be ideology, a system of unconscious propaganda supporting the interests of those controlling, and benefiting from, the economic base:[24]

> The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the material dominant force in society is at the same time its dominant intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that in consequence the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are, in general, subject to it.

Viewed in a neo-Marxist fashion, then, functional literacy operates as ideology by promoting the prevailing socio-economic structure, and by ensuring the existence

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[24]Raymond Williams, "Culture", *Marx: The First Hundred Years*. Ed. David MacLellan, (Oxford: The University Press, 1983), p.50.

of a minimally literate class to maintain class divisions. Educational institutions are especially vulnerable to ideology because they are viewed by the hegemony as the primary means for social indoctrination. Critical literacy education stands in dialectical opposition to this trend by challenging the moral and political legitimacy of the economic base, the very material foundation from which definitions of functional literacy and education systems are derived.

Chapter Two:
The OECD, Education, Ideology, and Corporate Agendas

> Perhaps the worst part of all the current emphasis is that it crowds out all the traditional and valuable functions of education in a democratic society. It pushes to the side the social and cultural and ethical goals. It makes central a view of students sitting in our classes as human capital to be prepared for globalization.[25]
>
> Larry Kuehn
> "Globalization, Trade Agreements and Education"

2.1 The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development is a multilateral organization comprised of twenty-nine of the world's leading national economies (Appendix A). Each of the twenty-nine member countries maintains a permanent office and delegation in Paris, the international headquarters for the OECD. Through policy analysis and development, and led by the Secretariat in Paris, OECD countries cooperate with each other and business to improve domestic and global economic performance. To achieve this objective, the

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[25]Larry Kuehn, "Globalization, Trade Agreements and Education", *High Tech: Globalization and the Future of Canadian Education*, Ed. Marita Moll, (Fernwood Publishing, 1997), p.71.

organization encourages market-driven flows of international trade, investment and capital, all practices mirroring those favoured by transnational corporations.

The OECD was established in 1960 as the successor to the Marshall Plan, the U.S. led effort to reconstruct war-torn Europe after World War II. It has since adopted a broader mandate that includes formulating global economic, health care and education policy, defining international trade rules and promoting global free market interests. Bringing the focus to education, the OECD analyzes the various education practices that affect each member nation's economic output, and recommends policy changes to improve economic performance. In *Education at a Glance: Analysis*, the organization suggests that, "A well-educated and literate workforce yields national comparative [competitive] advantage and harnesses forces to counteract polarization and social seclusion. Today, adults need a high level of literacy to function well."[26] The kind of "functioning" referred to by the OECD relates entirely to employability and economic productivity. Social inclusion and political stability, for example, are viewed by the OECD as prerequisite conditions for corporate re-location rather than necessary characteristics of an egalitarian society. A stable political climate in which

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[26]*Education at a Glance: Analysis*, CERI, (Paris: OECD, 1996), p.31.

individuals believe they are participating allows corporations to exploit cheap sources of labour without the threat of social upheaval. Typical of the organization's interest in education, literacy is primarily, if indeed not entirely, considered a vehicle to strengthen economic performance indicators.

Research on education within the OECD is carried out by the Centre of Educational Research and Innovation (CERI). For over thirty years CERI has actively promoted education research and has developed numerous projects in various OECD countries. CERI explores the various links between research, policy, innovation and practice in education, and explains how these areas impact on economic performance. The work performed by CERI is carried out by a small but influential staff in Paris including educators, innovators, researchers and decision-makers. Following CERI's advice to the OECD, the parent organization suggests policy changes to member countries in order to strengthen their economic performance through "improved" educational practices. In 1998, CERI is directing its work toward achieving six major goals that highlight the organization's economic objectives:[27]

1) Develop and analyze education statistics and indicators.
2) Identify key features of schooling for tomorrow.

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[27]"What is CERI", www.oecd.org, February 15, 1998, p.2.

3) Understand the role of R&D in education, learning economies and knowledge societies.
4) Evaluate significant innovations of what works.
5) Analyze educational and other innovative strategies for social inclusion.
6) Develop new dissemination strategies.

The last of these six objectives best reveals the OECD's perspective on both literacy and knowledge, and the learning philosophy behind functional literacy education. Within this context, the OECD's "knowledge" is presented as objective and absolute, and derived from the world view of those controlling its dissemination. If superior "dissemination strategies" are discovered, then education is improved. Unfortunately, the individual aspirations or existential needs of learners are simply not considered relevant within the free market context.

The functional philosophy behind CERI's objectives reflects the vocational needs of the global market; the concept of "learning economies" reveals itself as more than mere metaphor. A central point in this thesis is that allowing the market place to determine educational objectives has far reaching, negative consequences for education practices. The global market maintains that market practices rather than government departments provide the most effective means to allocate goods and services, i.e., education, in society. The prevailing corporate discourse

maintains that the public economic interest is best served through the free interplay of individuals competing in the marketplace, a view extended to the field of education. Within this framework, education responds to the demands of the market place in a fashion similar to other free-market services. If a given ability or skill is not demanded by the market place, then its value is reduced accordingly.

The free market approach to learning threatens the quality of education in a variety of ways. In the new educational market place, yield, output, quantity and turnover overshadow more traditional educational objectives. Indeed, aesthetic and humanistic educational ideas such as art, beauty, harmony and self-actualization are simply unable to compete. Within the free market context, education is not viewed as a means for self-expression, personal fulfillment or political expression. Neither is it considered an important instrument to develop social understanding and moral responsibility, or to heighten aesthetic, critical and creative sensibilities. In the free market system, quality education is redefined in strict accordance with market economy values. Its purpose is starkly utilitarian and its "quality" is defined and assessed accordingly.

At a 1990 Conference Board of Canada gathering, "Reaching for Success: Business and Education Working Together", the corporate view on education in

Canada was explained:[28]

> Business leaders attending the conference made it clear they recognize that helping to improve the education system is the key to national prosperity and corporate success in the future . . . Every level of Canada's education system must be enhanced to meet our national needs. [quoted from James Nininger, President of the Conference Board of Canada]
>
> Companies like IBM view education as crucial and see an urgent need to create a science culture that attracts more students to technical disciplines because skilled graduates are vital to staying competitive in the global economy. Business can contribute by raising the visibility of [the link between education and the economy], helping to form national education goals, and building partnerships with education. [quoted from Anita Ross, VP Personnel, IBM Canada Ltd.]

This quotes reveal the corporate view that education should be primarily directed toward occupational preparation. Such narrow views on education are deeply destructive of education philosophies that are humanistically, socially, culturally and morally constituted. Nevertheless, they represent the prevailing corporate outlook on education, and currently steer OECD policy formation.

The OECD's advisory council, comprised of ambassadors from member

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[28]Alison Taylor, "Visioning Information in the Information Economy", *Globalization and the Future of Canadian Education*, Ed. Marita Moll, (Fernwood Publishing, 1997), p.24-25.

countries, directs the organization's work through various committees. These committees are established in subject areas such as education, environment, trade and investment, and are operated by subject specialists selected from member countries. The subject specialists contribute research that shapes the future direction of policy in that particular area. Although committee discussions are often confidential, the corporate influence on committee work is readily admitted by the OECD: "Committees regularly seek outside contributions from business . . ."[29]

The Secretary-General provides the key link between business, the member countries and the analytical and advisory work performed by the OECD. Secretary-General Donald J. Johnston, one-time Canadian liberal cabinet minister, currently acts as the liaison between business interests, the member countries and the OECD. He chairs the OECD Council and oversees the work of the Secretariat. In a November 14, 1997 address in Florence, Italy, Johnston delivered a manifesto for the OECD's plan to globalize the world's economy by supporting unrestricted multi-national investment and trade through the Multilateral Agreement on Investment and Trade (MAI).

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[29] *About the OECD*, www.oecd.org, June 3, 1996.

Not surprisingly, those offering a counter discourse to the prevailing corporate one are marginalized by Johnston as social malcontents. According to the Secretary-General, persons like myself who "foolishly" resist the "inevitable" trend toward a globalized market economy are "opportunists" seeking to destabilize global economic development. Rather than Johnston's *ad hominem* attack on opposition forces, however, it is the concrete connection he draws between business interests and the OECD that exposes the private corporate power behind this publicly funded organization:[30]

> . . . the OECD will bring business and governments together at a conference in Turku to discuss the issue of dismantling barriers to global economic commerce. This will be followed up by an OECD conference at the Ministerial level of the "Borderless World" . . .

Thus, the OECD, responding to transnational corporate demands - labour representation is noticeably absent - seeks to dismantle nation states by removing the few remaining trade barriers that protect fragile domestic economies from the impact of globalized capitalism.

The majority of the OECD's policy statements emphasize the creation of an

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[30]"The Global Market and the Growth of the World Economy", Florence Workshop on Free Trade and Global Market: European Strategies, November 14, 1997, p.8.

international environment ideal for corporations, rather than improving the economic circumstances of individual countries. Indeed, many of its publications, as well as its central involvement in MAI, demand the removal of international trade barriers originally constructed to protect vulnerable domestic economies. The MAI, as MacLean's Peter Newman suggests, effectively destroys the concept of the nation state by eliminating virtually all domestic control over economic policy formation. Under MAI, nation states will be replaced by the global corporate state:[31]

> The heart of the MAI is that there ought to be no difference between domestic and foreign investors in any of the twenty-nine countries that make up the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Everything would be wide open in such a Darwinian world, up for grabs to the highest bidder. The MAI . . . goes even further than granting national treatment to foreign corporations. In effect it endows privately owned corporations with the power - but not the accountability - of nation states.

The OECD's concern with the economic objectives of transnational corporations, then, is revealed in its preoccupation with reducing the control individual nation states exercise over domestic policy formation: "The purpose of the OECD is to

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[31]Peter C. Newman, "MAI: a time bomb with a very short fuse", MacLean's, March 2, 1998, p.51.

boost prosperity by helping knit a web of compatible policies and practices across countries that are part of an ever more globalized world."[32] OECD economic policy reflects the prevailing corporate view that if international barriers to the movement of capital are removed, global prosperity, at least for corporations, will follow. Because education is primarily viewed as a vehicle to enhance corporate wealth, the OECD's education policies reflect the same corporate agenda.

The OECD is funded by member countries. The Advisory Council determines the size of the annual budget, and the programmes of work and research to be undertaken. National contributions to the annual budget are based on a formula relating to the size of each country and its economic output. Countries may also make separate voluntary contributions for particular programs or projects they consider important. In effect, this allows more economically powerful nations like the United States to chart the organization's direction. Thus, the richer countries, or at least wealthier American-based transnational corporations, are best positioned to influence OECD policy in education and elsewhere by providing additional funding to those projects promoting their own interests.

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[32]*How The OECD Works*, www.oecd.org, February 15, 1998.

2.2 OECD Trends in Education: Literacy and Ideology

Controlling literacy education as a means to control society is not a new phenomenon in industrialized countries. As early as the 1820s, working class leaders resisted definitions of functional literacy similar to the one currently advocated by the OECD. In "Critical Literacy Subverted: Early Public Schools, Individualism, and the Ideal of Reading", Phyllis Ryder points out that the New York Working Man's Party believed "all children [were] entitled to an equal education; all adults, to equal property; all mankind, to equal privileges."[33] To promote these values the party actively campaigned against domesticating models of literacy education.

During this period of increased worker militancy, aristocratic forces began to lose their grip on political power and required a public institution to instill the hegemonic values in all classes. According to Ryder, "The early school system reinforced values of punctuality . . . , and encouraged workers to accept their lot, if not happily, at least submissively."[34] Control over education remains an

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[33]Phyllis Mentzell Ryder, "Critical Literacy Subverted: Early Public Schools, Individualism, and the Ideal of Reading", (Paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication), 46th Washington D.C., March 23-25, 1995, p.3.

[34]Ibid, 9.

indispensable tool for controlling social attitudes, a fact that the OECD and transnational corporations apparently understand very well.

As part of the social superstructure, OECD education policy is becoming an increasingly important ideological tool that operates to protect the corporate forces controlling the economic base. According to the organization's publications, education systems in OECD countries must adapt to meet the challenges of the new global economy. If transnational corporations are to access global "human resource capital", then workers in all countries must possess the level of literacy required to perform job tasks in the information age. In fact, this worker competency based literacy level forms the basis for both the organization's definition of literacy, and the 1994 IALS assessment protocols.

According to the OECD, the initial challenge confronting contemporary educators is ". . . to bring advanced learning to the whole population rather than the elite."[35] Although this objective appears a noble aim, the organization's view of "advanced learning" appears to be extremely limited in scope. The OECD, corporations and market economy governments increasingly view advanced learning as education that prepares individuals to fill the occupational roles of the

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[35]*Introduction to Education at a Glance*. OECD: Paris, 1994, p.7.

information age. Alison Taylor explains:[36]

> Government sponsored reports in the 1990s reveal the alliance between government and business leaders and the economic vision shared by both. Recommendations in the area of education and training focused on increasing practical knowledge . . . to meet the labour force demand for skilled workers.

Unfortunately, it is precisely this dangerously narrow view of higher education and advanced learning that is reflected in many OECD publications.

In *Alternatives to Universities*, the OECD questions whether traditional institutions of higher education, i.e., universities, are the most suitable means to promote advanced learning. Turning Gramsci's concept of hegemony on its head, the organization celebrates the demise of aesthetic academic values: "The hegemony of the traditional university sector has been substituted by a diversified, multi-functional institutional framework of higher education in all countries."[37]

According to the OECD, and in keeping with its supply and demand philosophy of education, universities wishing to survive in the information age must respond to transnational corporate human resource requirements: "In the majority of countries universities have begun to rethink their relationship with the

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[36]Alison Taylor, p.18.
[37]*Alternatives to Universities*, (Paris: OECD, 1991), p.27.

economy and their attitudes toward practical and occupational aspects of training".[38] In current practical terms, this means forcing university administrators to transform traditional academic programs into those supplying the technical skills required by corporations:[39]

> The essential issue is to ensure that the higher education system as a whole fulfills the multiple functions which modern society requires: providing general and vocational programs, initial and continuing education, short and long courses. It is less important whether these different provisions are offered in the university or non-university sector, so long as they are catered for . . .

In many OECD countries governments are indeed forcing universities into what the organization describes as a "market-oriented approach". The attack on humanistic models of higher education in favour of the free-market view is continued in *Industry and University: New Forms of Cooperation and Communication*. The OECD explains that, "In the last decade, industry-university relations have undergone major shifts and changes. Traditional approaches have turned out to be insufficient in the face of rising expectations stimulated by intense

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[38]Ibid, p.46.
[39]Ibid, p.81.

international competition."[40] Once again, the onus is placed on the university sector to respond to transnational corporate human resource demands, and academic institutions in OECD countries are under intense government pressure to comply. In Canada, for example, Ontario Premier Mike Harris has challenged universities in that province to cut programs which are not job-oriented: "I would like to see a fast-tracking of decisions that will provide for more programs of relevance."[41]

The OECD, as an instrument of the economic hegemony, predictably utilizes education as a ideological vehicle to impart the values and world view of the corporate discourse it supports. Although the OECD puts an ominous, social Darwinian spin on the intrinsic connection between social forces and education practices, it clearly understands that education does not operate in a social vacuum:[42]

> Education is not a sphere apart, but is subject to social and cultural osmosis. Many of the more specialized themes in educational debates such as the nature of the

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[40] *Industry and University: New Forms of Cooperation and Communication.* (Paris, OECD, 1984), p.27.
[41] Jennifer Lewington, "Be more relevant, universities urged", *The Globe and Mail,* November 20, 1997, A10.
[42] *Curriculum Reform: An Overview of Trends,* (Paris: OECD, 1990), p.8.

> intellectual culture, the forms of moral and mental development in children, or the art and science of teaching, are deeply coloured by the consciousness that education and natural survival are intertwined.

The link between education and society is interpreted by the OECD in entirely practical or economic terms, denying the learner's need for non-material, intellectual satisfaction. Perhaps even more dangerous to academic aesthetic considerations and the long term interest of learners is that this perspective rationalizes the organization's plan to use education to advance global economic interests under the guise of improving society.

In *Ideology and the State*, Louis Althusser argues that within contemporary society, education, filling the role previously played by the church, is now the primary state apparatus for promoting ideology:[43]

> It [the education system] takes children from every class at infant school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most vulnerable, squeezed between the family state apparatus and the educational apparatus, it drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of "know how" wrapped in ruling ideology.

If corporate interests shape education practices through OECD policies, then they

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[43]Louis Althusser, "Ideology and the State", *Essays on Ideology*, (The Thetford Press Ltd., 1973), p.29.

not only direct society, but also protect their institutions from academic attack. By promoting free-market ideology within schools and universities, corporations insulate themselves from social criticism because they are validated by the institutions responsible for advanced learning and social critique.

The connection between global policy trends in education and ideology is increasingly evident as corporate forces gain a stranglehold on the higher education systems within OECD countries. Some of the practices favouring the free-market view within contemporary education, however, are not as evident as the shift in the academics of advanced education toward vocational preparation. In his critical introduction to Roger Dale's *The State and Education Policy*, Michael Apple reveals some of the other ways that present public education practices support the corporate agenda:[44]

> The movement by governments to raise standards and mandate curricular goals and knowledge, thereby centralizing further at a government level the control of teaching and curricula . . . the growing pressure to make the needs of business and industry into the primary goals of the education system.

In a similar critique of contemporary education practices, Michael Ellis exposes

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[44]Michael Apple, "Introduction", In Roger Dale's *The State and Education Policy*, (Toronto: OISE Press, 1989), p.5.

the current emphasis on outcome based curricula as a means of protecting corporate interests from social criticism. Ellis argues that a "fill in the blanks" approach to learning results in the acquisition of virtually useless facts and figures while, at the same time, advancing the hidden corporate agenda. He suggests that an outcome-based curriculum leads to academic fragmentation, a divide and conquer mechanism to prevent collusion against the dominant social forces.[45]

On a domestic level, market forces and the philosophy behind them currently dictate government policy on everything from health care to education. At this year's spring convocation at the University of New Brunswick in Saint John, Rev. Phillip J. Lee, a Presbyterian minister and recipient of an honorary doctorate degree from the University of New Brunswick, warned graduates about the pervasiveness of corporate ideology and its negative impact on social justice. Borrowing a phrase from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, he told graduates that the "time is out of joint":[46]

> . . . you and I, we are told, we have no freedom.
> Because we are told day after day by a relentless
> barrage of information, outside of those strictures of

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[45]Michael Ellis, "Revisionism in U.S. Education", www.1hup.edu/intl_studies/review/section4.htm, January 15, 1998.
[46]Glen Allen, "The time is out of joint", *New Brunswick Telegraph Journal*, May 23, 1998, A1.

> the global market place, there are no longer any choices to be made. So, for example, we would like to have the best public school system possible but we are told we can't afford it. We would like to have a public health care program second to none but we are told the global market will not allow it. When will a teacher or prophet in our day have the courage to say, 'But wait, human beings were not made to serve the economic system. An economic system was made to serve human beings.'?"

Unfortunately, the alternative discourse offered by Rev. Lee that favours social justice over market economy politics is granted little credibility in the mainstream media, nor is it a view widely reflected in public education policy.

2.3 The International Adult Literacy Survey

It was within this milieu of global corporate influence that the OECD's International Adult Literacy Surveys were carried out. The 1994 survey was administered in seven OECD countries by Statistics Canada in cooperation with the OECD. In Canada, the initial IALS was sponsored almost entirely by the National Literacy Secretariat and the Applied Research Branch, both bodies of Human Resources Development Canada. A second survey was performed in twelve OECD countries with the results released in 1997, but the definition of literacy and testing protocols remained unchanged from the original study.

The conception of literacy revealed in both studies treats knowledge as though it is always objective and external to the subject. It encourages students to view themselves as consumers rather than producers of knowledge. Indeed, the IALS's definition of literacy and assessment protocols relegate readers to the role of passive information processors, a key ideological strategy in epistemologically disempowering students, perpetuating existing socio-economic relationships and reducing workers to the status of resource:[47]

> If economies require increasing numbers of highly skilled workers to expand, then growth will be affected by existing practices of employers, individuals and governments. IALS has shown that instead of enlarging the pool of highly skilled workers, the tendency is to increase the skills of the already skilled. The reserve employment pool, made up of the unemployed and those currently working in declining industrial sectors, is low skilled. Policies directed towards providing more educational opportunities and increasing skills in that pool must be a necessary part of any industrial growth strategy.

Thus, the fundamental OECD educational objective as part of its "industrial growth strategy" is to expand the "reserve employment pool" that acts as the connecting interest between corporate relocation, human exploitation and literacy education.

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[47] *Background information on the International Adult Literacy Survey*, p.6.

The 1994 IALS was divided into three testing strands: prose; document and quantitative with five levels of literacy measurement within each strand (Appendix B). Level one in prose literacy, for example, required the ability to locate one item of information in the text identical to the information provided in the instructions. In level three, the reader must identify several pieces of information located in several different paragraphs. Level one quantitative literacy asks simple arithmetic questions that do not require borrowing. In level three, the operations are more complex as multiplication and divisional skills are needed to complete some tasks.

Although the complexity of skills required to perform the various tasks increases from one level to the next, the epistemic message remains the same. Indeed, regardless of the level, the three IALS strands reveal a narrow view of both literacy and knowledge. An examination of even the highest literacy requirements in the three IALS strands reveals what modern educators would likely consider a regressive understanding of literacy. In prose literacy, for example, attaining level five requires the following skills: "Some tasks at this level require the reader to search for information in dense text that contains a number of plausible distracters. Some tasks require readers to make high level inferences or use specialized

knowledge."[48] Even in the case of "high-level" inferences or "specialized knowledge", the assessment procedures privilege provided information over textual interpretation or reader analysis. According to this view, knowledge is embedded in text, and it is the responsibility of the reader to discover and assimilate the "facts".

In prose literacy, where readers should be encouraged to analyze the text from a personal perspective, even level five provides no such opportunity. The testing protocols require the reader to search for and locate information, rather than analyzing, or even reflecting on, textual content. The other two testing strands, document and quantitative, clearly measure the kinds of skills required in low level occupations. Such skills as entering personal information on an application form, and searching through various information on a business document are basic functional literacy skills. By implicitly validating market economy practices, these examples also carry ideological messages that systematically indoctrinate individuals with a market economy world view.

The IALS's objectives are revealed in the OECD's own admission of the

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[48]Irwin S. Kirsch, "Literacy performance on three scales: definitions and results", In *Literacy, Economy and Society*, (Ottawa: OECD and the Canadian Minister of Industry, 1995), p.27

kinds of skills the study was designed to measure:[49]

> The literacy levels not only provide a means for exploring the progression of information-processing demands across each of the scales, but they also can be used to help explain how the proficiencies individuals demonstrate reflect the likelihood they will respond correctly to the broad range of tasks used in this assessment as well as similar tasks that were not included.

The survey's interest is in measuring the "information processing" skills of the participants, precisely the kind of skills required by corporations in the information age. Throughout the testing process, responding "correctly" to the questions asked is the principal task of the participant. The IALS emphasis on measuring the information-processing skills of the survey's participants reflects the shift from the human resource requirements of the industrial age to those of the information age. Current OECD education policy rhetoric, such as its definition of literacy, is framed within this context to facilitate that transition.

Public education, controlled for the most part by governments favouring the corporate agenda, supports the corporate view on education by often failing to entertain alternative social visions. As Maude Barlow and Heather-Jane Robertson suggest, the belief that education is about debating competing world views has

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[49]Ibid, p.49

been all but totally abandoned: "The premise that education is about creating alternative futures has been discarded; instead, we are to teach students to cope with a future of known, frightening characteristics."[50] Ideology prevents challenges to the status-quo by making the free market system's appropriateness, or at least inevitability, appear self-evident. We are led to believe that alternatives to a global free market system are not just unlikely or undesirable, but rather they are simply impossible.

The OECD's agenda and the IALS's literacy assessment practices need not reflect a conscious or malicious intent to manipulate economically disadvantaged learners or cultures. Ideology is typically an unconscious process operating to rationalize the existing social structure to both the oppressor and the oppressed. Indeed, the organization's stated motives include improving the economic welfare of disadvantaged citizens within the expanding global community. Its purported objective is to provide all workers with the chance to participate, albeit at a subservient level, in the new global "reality" or, as the OECD suggests, to prepare for an "uncertain future".[51]

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[50]Maude Barlow and Heather-Jane Robertson, *Class Warfare*, (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1994), p.122.
[51]*Education At A Glance: An Analysis*, (Paris:OECD, 1996), p.9.

> Education systems cannot be developed in isolation from other policies to help citizens of OECD member countries adapt to a changing world. The OECD Job Study in 1994 put learning at the centre of a strategy to increase employment. To be well-equipped for a new kind of labour market, people need a high-quality initial education, a well-managed transition from school to work and the capacity to continue updating their skills. Now, young people need to be prepared for the uncertain years ahead.

Although improving employment prospects for young adults in an uncertain world appears a noble educational aim, ironically, it is the corporate agenda supported by OECD policy that creates the economic uncertainty referred to by the organization.

2.4 OECD Policy and Lifelong Literacy Learning

Contemporary corporate interests are also served by the OECD's perspective on lifelong literacy learning. As the OECD suggests, if one is to remain gainfully employed in the information age there is an indisputable need to constantly adapt, change and learn new skills as new technologies develop. Many of the OECD documents dealing with education emphasize the need for workers to become self-learners, and develop the ability to problem solve in the absence of formal instruction: "The transition from education to employment can be seen as

the linchpin of lifelong learning."[52] Self-directed literacy learning within the corporate curriculum, however, refers to an on-the-job training design in which workers are able to understand and utilize pre-determined information without the aid of an instructor. The ability to quickly employ new computer software is one such example. In these occupational circumstances, the "learner" acquires the skills deemed important by external interests, and applies them to increase economic productivity. Similar to other OECD policy trends in literacy education, there is no consideration given in this model of life-long learning to the self-actualizing needs of the learner. To find a view of life-long learning that emphasizes the importance of individual expression and intellectual growth, we must look outside the corporate agenda and toward critical literacy. Self-directed learning in critical literacy, for example, considers the contingent aspects of social reality, explores alternative social perspectives, and focuses on the ontological needs of the learner.

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[52]Ibid, p.9.

2.5 Summary

The OECD, an organization founded on market economy principles, advocates a definition of functional literacy as part of the IALS that is a literacy for social control. Transnational corporations favour this model of literacy because it perpetuates the existing socio-economic structure, and maintains a global surplus pool of skilled labour. By endorsing functional literacy education, the OECD, intentionally or otherwise, supports an economic system that excludes many individuals, i.e., the requisite under and unemployed, from full participation.

The OECD is an active, influential organization that exerts tremendous influence on international economic and global education policy. Indeed, the trend toward standardized performance-based outcomes among OECD countries implies a globally-unified approach to literacy education. The OECD's conception of literacy and its narrow educational objectives reveal the organization's primary interest. As part of its plan to improve the global environment for business, it promotes transnational corporate interests by formulating policies to increase the number of countries possessing functionally literate workforces. In the information age, a certain level of functional literacy is a prerequisite for corporate relocation, and sustaining a nation's human resource competitiveness.

It was with this limited view of literacy in mind that the OECD embarked on the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey. This survey measured adult literacy levels in seven member countries through testing protocols that failed to include reader experience or critical analysis. The survey tested for precisely the kind of literacy required by corporations; a literacy that privileges textual information over the reader, prepares individuals for information processing jobs, and protects the current socio-economic framework from critique.

Ideology plays a central role in protecting the corporate educational agenda from widespread criticism. Forcing institutions of higher learning into adopting a supply and demand approach to academic programs, establishing outcome based curricula, and employing assessment practices that support market economy practices all contribute to the political domestication of learners. Alternative views of society are largely excluded from current academic debate, while responding to corporate interests is typically presented as an inevitable, even desirable, trend.

Contrary to the OECD's view, literacy is more than extracting information, hidden or otherwise, from text, reading maps, or filling out applications for credit. Literacy is the celebration of human individuality, spirituality, creativity and imagination. It provides an indispensable vehicle for enhancing social awareness,

moral responsibility, democratic citizenship, and initiating social change. A literacy survey failing to measure a learner's understanding of these fundamental aspects of literacy, also fails to measure what it means to be literate.

Chapter Three:
Functional Literacy Education - A Dehumanizing Model

> Within history, in concrete, objective contexts, both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for man as an uncompleted being conscious of his incompletion.[53]
>
> Paulo Freire
> *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

3.1 Functional Literacy Defined

Although there are many different ways of describing what functional literacy entails, it can be most simply defined as the ability to read, write and comprehend texts, understand signs, labels, instructions, and directions. Knoblach and Brannon provide a somewhat more contestable definition of functional literacy: ". . . the possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing."[54] Of the various skills cited in this particular

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[53]Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p.27.
[54]Knoblauch and Brannon, p.77.

definition, the view that functional literacy allows learners a measure of "self-determination" is the most vulnerable to attack. To achieve self-determination requires an understanding of the social processes that influence individual consciousness, a concept absent in functional literacy education. At the very least, however, it can be readily admitted that functional literacy provides those possessing it some opportunity to participate, at least at a cursory level, within the existing social framework.

There is no question that the ability to read, write and comprehend text is socially beneficial. Indeed, all people require what are typically described as functional literacy skills to satisfy their basic social needs, such as earning a living, reading newspapers or magazines, purchasing goods and services, and traveling from place to place. Within this context and possessing these skills, functionally literate people are better able to cope with the world in which they live by being able to fill out employment applications, read bus and train timetables, and follow instructions. On the face of it, then, functional literacy appears a practical, beneficial, and generally benign concept. Implicit in functional literacy is the view that the task setters, those who control the provided information, have presented that information in an objective and literate way. The long term benefits to those

possessing functional literacy, however, are not quite as self-evident as they initially appear. To reveal the full consequences of functional literacy education, one must look beyond the visible practical advantages of learning to read and write and toward the impact these skills may have on individual consciousness and experience.

This orientation to literacy assumes that good teaching practices are simply a matter of developing superior techniques to disseminate a particular form of knowledge. It emphasizes competency based education where learning is primarily a matter of skill mastery. These skills are, of course, defined in advance by education "experts", such as those employed by the OECD, and are presented as being independent of context. There is only one culture typically considered; the transnational corporate one where the free market discourse overrules all possible cultural distinctions.

A conception of literacy that has as its primary objective the preparation of individuals for existing social roles offers a means to an end approach in literacy education. It emphasizes competency based education, models of information management and generic standardized assessment practices. The focus is on encoding specific information deemed as knowledge without considering the

contextual nature of that information. Unfortunately, in this type of literacy instruction no consideration is given to the existential possibilities or aspirations of the individual learner. As Colin Lankshear explains, learners are objectified in functional literacy education as a means to an end:[55]

> Functional literacy reduces persons to the status of mere objects and means, rather than confirming and exalting them as ends in themselves. It aims to equip illiterate adults with just those skills and knowledge - no more - which ensure competence to function at the lowest levels of mechanical performance, as workers and citizens in a print dominated society.

Given adequate literacy training, most functionally literate people are able to meet the minimum occupational requirements of the information age. Without additional literacy education, however, they may lack the intellectual skills to appreciate the ancillary effects of the literacy training they possess. If learners are unable to question the epistemological basis of the "knowledge" or information they acquire through literacy training, they may become domesticated into the world view of the educators. In functional literacy education, the issue of what counts as knowledge is left unexamined because it undermines the objectivity of

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[55]Colin Lankshear, "Functional Literacy From a Freirean Point of View", *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter*, Ed. Peter McLaren & Peter Leonard, (London: Routledge, 1993), p.91.

provided information. Indeed, the collateral impact of functional literacy education is more than simply providing learners with a level of literacy that allows for social functioning. It systematically incorporates marginally literate adults into established market economy practices, and promotes existing social values by presenting learners with a single world view.

3.2 Functional Literacy and Employment Prospects

In keeping with its economic objectives, the OECD supports functional literacy education based on the theory that the ability to read, write and comprehend text dramatically improves a person's employment prospects. The promotion of functional literacy education as an employment strategy, however, relies on the contestable view that there are an unlimited number of jobs available in the free market global economy. In fact, within the current economic milieu of corporate downsizing and relocation, job creation and the reduction of unemployment levels are not social or political priorities. As a result, the best that functionally literate workers can achieve within this environment is the displacement of other vulnerable workers from lower strata vocations. As Paulo Freire explains, "Merely teaching men to read and write does not work miracles; if

there are not enough jobs for men able to work, teaching more men to read and write will not create them."[56]

If improving the levels of functional literacy in member countries will not improve actual employment levels, then the OECD's reason for supporting functional literacy education may have some other basis. Indeed, it appears that the actual basis for the OECD's interest in establishing international standards of functional literacy is in keeping with the corporate agenda it supports. In an era of corporate relocation and capital mobility, a stable, qualified, global surplus labour pool has the net impact of keeping wages low and unemployment high, a global economic environment ideal for transnational corporations. The key qualification that members of this pool must possess, of course, is a level of literacy that allows for occupational competency within the information age. There may be another, more hidden advantage for corporations in emphasizing educational shortcomings as the cause of current economic problems. Blaming high rates of unemployment and economic disparity on low literacy levels among some workers removes the focus from the real corporate causes of unemployment in free-market economies,

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[56] Paulo Freire, "Literacy as Action for Freedom", *Perspectives on Literacy*, Ed. Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, Mike Rose, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), p.401.

and places it on the doorstep of education.

Although technology has affected in fairly dramatic fashion the kind of skills lower scale workers require in contemporary society, the corporate need for these workers remains. In the information age, the traditional trades are now obsolete and workers must possess minimalist literary skills to satisfy current human resource demands. Whereas workers with limited skills were once trained for roles on the assembly line, now, equipped with minimalist literacy skills, they fill lower strata occupations, i.e., working at call centres, within the modern socio-economic paradigm. There is, according to Knoblauch and Brannon, an aggressive ideology actively operating to protect this class-stratifying tradition in our market economy society:[57]

> Functionalist arguments frequently mounted by leaders of business and industry, and therefore also by congressional panels and government commissions, leaven a rhetoric of technological progressivism with a mixture of fear and patriotism in order to defend a social program that maintains managerial classes - whose members are far more than just functionally literate - in their customary place at the top of the social pyramid, while outfitting workers with the reading and writing skills that have lately supplanted the tool-press, hammer-and-nail, smelting, and welding skills of a now outmoded age.

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[57]Knoblauch and Brannon, p.19

Although the technological skills and practices have been altered, the relationship between those owning the means of production and the forces of production, i.e., workers, remains the same. As neo-Marxist criticism would predict, workers, in part through functional literacy education, are being streamed into their traditional role of social and economic subservience to hegemonic corporate interests.

Training as many workers as possible in functional literacy not only provides corporations with potentially cheap sources of labour in the global economy, it prevents workers from considering social alternatives to market economy exploitation. If literacy education is restricted to providing learners with merely a superficial understanding and utilization of information, then economically disadvantaged learners, lacking the literacy skills to offer a meaningful social critique, represent little threat politically to the dominant social order. Limiting economically disadvantaged learners to functional literacy education prevents them from obtaining the literacy skills necessary to challenge the corporate supply and demand discourse that views workers as a commodity to be bought and sold in the global market place.

3.3 The Historical Implications of Functional Literacy Education

Advocates of functional literacy education, such as the OECD, discuss the current socio-economic framework as if it was the inevitable result of naturally occurring forces. There is never any discussion in OECD documents, or in functional literacy education for that matter, about exploring alternative ways in which society might operate to improve social justice or equality; there is only one discourse represented; the prevailing corporate one. Again, Reverend Phillip Lee of Saint John N.B. articulates the market economy discourse on current social conditions:[58]

> There is, we are told, an economic system which operates like a force of nature. You and I cannot argue with the system, they say, anymore than we can argue with the laws of gravity. There is a bottom line. There is the rule of supply and demand. There are the necessities of marketing and consumption. There is an acceptable employment level and an acceptable inflation level.

Those individuals supporting this view, such as the OECD's Secretary-General Donald Johnston, seem to believe that society is an intransigent structure that causally determines individual lives. There is no mention in functional literacy

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[58] Glen Allen, *"The time is out of joint"*, *New Brunswick Telegraph Journal*, May 23, 1998, A1.

education of the theory that society is constructed to favour the dominant socio-economic forces. Neither is there any mention of the fact that society can be transformed and reconstructed through individual or group action. In functional literacy education, because its goal is to train rather than educate, the role of the individual is limited to conforming and adapting to existing social circumstances.

Instead of teaching learners how to dialectically engage the world they encounter, functional literacy domesticates them into passively following external instructions and directions. As Lankshear points out, "there is no suggestion here of leading, commanding, mastering or controlling"[59] on behalf of the individual. When they are limited to functional literacy education, learners become estranged from the world of decisions, policies, strategies and developmental plans. If learners are considered the mere recipients of knowledge - the objects as opposed to subjects of the learning process - and they choose to accept this role, then they merely utilize the information provided. They also learn through implication that decisions are made by others, and their role is simply to follow the instructions dictated to them.

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[59]Colin Lankshear, "Functional Literacy From a Freirean Point of View", *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter*, Ed. Peter McLaren & Peter Leonard, (London: Routledge, 1993), p.91.

3.4 Dehumanizing Elements in Functional Literacy Education

The most dehumanizing aspect of functional literacy education is its implication that humans are an organic commodity to exploit within the market economy context of supply and demand. Although humans are clearly distinct from primary resources like coal, trees and aluminum, the corporate discourse that speaks of the "reserve employment pool" reduces humans to precisely that same inhuman level. Speaking of workers in this manner is ideologically effective, however, as it desensitizes society to the real human pain and hardship associated with current free market practices. The most troubling moral aspect of the corporate discourse and the functional literacy it entails, then, is that it reduces persons to the status of mere objects and means, rather than considering them as ends in themselves.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire, supporting observations made by Marx on worker alienation in capitalist societies, complains about the dehumanizing impact free market societies have on workers as a result of the latter's objectification. With the existential need for transforming self and society suppressed, individuals become alienated from their ontological nature and, at least

on one level, are victims of violence:[60]

> If men, as historical beings necessarily engaged with other men in a movement of inquiry, did not control that movement, it would be (and is) a violation of men's humanity. Any situation in which some men prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate men from their own decision-making is to change them into objects.

Denying learners a reasonable opportunity to engage in informed inquiry and subsequent action prevents their humanization because, by nature, humans are thinking, acting, and political beings. For critical inquiry and reflective action to occur, learners not only require the democratic right to criticize and participate politically, givens in most free market countries, they must also possess the necessary intellectual skills to make informed choices and effective political challenges. As a result of functional literacy's limited objectives, learners educated in this fashion are ill-equipped to understand the ways that text influences their individual consciousness and social perspective. Thus, their freedom to think and act autonomously in the truest sense of the word may be significantly reduced.

The social structures allowing corporations control over global education

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[60]Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p.73.

policy limit the material, emotional and intellectual development of economically disadvantaged learners by treating them as a human means to an economic end. In *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant emphasizes the fundamental ethical importance of never treating any human being simply as a means to an end: "Man, however, is not a thing and hence is not something to be used merely as a means; he must in all his actions always be regarded as an end in himself."[61] Duties of social justice, respecting in practice the rights of others, or the duty not to violate the dignity of persons as rational agents are, according to Kant, strict moral maxims because they allow for no exceptions regardless of intentions or circumstances. If we extend Kant's view to the OECD, then, it is difficult to accept that the good intentions normally associated with functional literacy instruction are morally relevant as this form of education threatens the dignity and humanity of other human beings. Freire extends Kant's thinking even further, arguing that humanization must be found within process and not in intentions or outcomes: "To affirm that men are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce."[62]

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[61]Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Trans. James W. Elrington, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), p.36.
[62]Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p.35.

Kant argues that because we intuitively regard our own existence as an end in itself - presumably the owners of corporations see themselves in this fashion - we must extend the same consideration to others. Quite clearly, there can be no rational ground for expecting others to treat us as an end in ourselves, for example, if we are not prepared to afford them precisely that same treatment. The universality of ethical action is built into Kant's idea of morality, as moral acts are categorical rather than situational, and based on an appeal to a universal understanding of rationality. For any action to be considered moral, it must be universalized without exception or contradiction. According to Kant, then, since we do not wish to be treated as a means to an end ourselves, we have a moral obligation not to treat others in that manner.

To analyze the present situation from the Kantian perspective, functional literacy furnishes individuals with barely enough skills and knowledge to function at the lowest levels of mechanical performance. In the process, learners and workers are exploited as a human means to the material ends of corporate profit and material acquisition. As Paulo Freire explains, any form of exploitation that limits human existential possibilities interferes with the humanization process:[63]

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[63]Ibid, p.40-41.

> Any situation in which A actively exploits B or hinders the pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with man's ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human.

Not only does the OECD's conception of literacy limit human self-affirmation and view workers as a means to an end, it is a definition of literacy that fails to consider the requirements for lasting personal contentment, a key element in the humanization process.

A form of literacy education that limits a learner's ability to reflectively engage the world limits that person's opportunity for happiness. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle examines various aspects of human behaviour in an attempt to discover the telos, or objective, of human life. After explaining why it cannot be a variety of other ends, he concludes that happiness is the final object of all human activity. Happiness for Aristotle is not a state of continuous euphoria, that is more likely the domain of fools, but rather is a long term, reflective satisfaction with one's life and accomplishments. Indeed, it is only after looking back on life in a reflective, contemplative fashion that a meaningful determination of one's happiness can be made.

Aristotle suggests that happiness is only achieved when humans fulfill their

primary purpose; in other words, they must function well. He equates proper functioning with virtue or excellence, concepts that apply to more than just human activity. According to Aristotle, the excellence of an axe, for example, lies in its chopping, or that of a knife in its cutting. In short, a thing's excellence is determined by how well it performs the characteristic task for which it was designed. In the case of human beings, of course, excellence lies in reason and reflective action, the two characteristics that most obviously distinguish us from all other living things:[64]

> We have found, then, that the human function is the soul's activity that expresses reason [as itself having reason] or requires reason [as obeying reason]. Now we take the human function to be a certain kind of life, and take this life to be the soul's activity and actions that express reason. Hence, the excellent man's function is to do this finely and well.

In functional literacy education, human happiness is thwarted because the ability to act in accordance with reason is limited in both intellectual and political terms.

The economically disadvantaged in market economy countries, whether they possess functional literacy or not, have little opportunity to achieve happiness as defined by Aristotle. This group includes the poor, unemployed,

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[64]Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), 1098a20, p.17.

underemployed and potentially unemployed, the latter group consisting of most workers in the current era of corporate downsizing and relocation. These people are not just materially disadvantaged as a result of their vulnerable economic circumstances, but many are psychologically and emotionally disadvantaged as well.

In emotional terms, economically disadvantaged persons feel uncertain, disempowered, and often beset by feelings of anxiousness and futility with little interest in, or hope for, the future. Indeed, in his analysis of the psychological factors accompanying economically disadvantaged circumstances, Theodore Sarbin found that, "The degraded poor are rooted in the present and are indifferent to the future . . . and [believe] in the external locus of control over events."[65] Even the gainfully employed among this group may be constantly anxious because of their vulnerability. Given the tenuous nature of employment in the current economic environment , they realize their job is fragile and, as a result, they lack the long term security required to achieve happiness. Intellectually, minimally literate persons are dominated by ideologies steeped in the interests and world-view of those who oppress them. Thus, economically disadvantaged people may

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[65]Theodore R. Sarbin, "The Culture of Poverty", *Psychological Factors in Poverty*, Ed. Vernon L. Allen, (Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1970), p.33-37.

blame themselves for their miserable social circumstances, deepening their feelings of worthlessness, vulnerability and unhappiness.

Educating economically disadvantaged learners in critical literacy equips them to analyze and understand the actual historical causes of their socio-economic exclusion. This recognition can help ameliorate the frequent self-loathing that often accompanies difficult social circumstances. When economically disadvantaged persons better understand the structures limiting their social opportunities, and begin to view history as a humanizing praxis, they can advance emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually.

3.5 Functional Literacy and Imagination

The OECD's conception of literacy fails to consider the tremendously important role played by imagination and creativity within the language arts enterprise. King and Brownell, for example, underline the importance of aesthetic considerations in enhancing humankind's emotional, intellectual, and self-actualizing development: "The fuel for the engine of intellect is that more potent and elusive stuff, the suprarational capacity of man for emotion, for hope, for faith,

for commitment, and for beauty."[66] The corporate culture supported by the OECD and functional literacy education, however, is best preserved by dehydrating the imaginative capacity of individuals in order to limit their vision of possible social alternatives, thereby protecting the existing social structure. Given the goals of both the OECD and functional literacy education, it is not surprising that there is no mention of the imaginative component of literacy in either the definition of literacy or assessment protocols employed in the IALS.

Humanization is achieved only when individuals are free to become what they imagine, and a literacy that limits imagination also limits human potential. In functional literacy education, consciousness is deflected from creative and imaginative pursuits, and becomes transferred solely into a means for individual material existence. In a comprehensive language arts education, the goals of literacy are not only material, but also social and personal, areas where imagination plays an essential role. Creative literacy contributes to the intellectual development of human beings by stimulating their imagination, helping them gain insight and vision, sensitivity and strategy, and conceive of new ways to change not only themselves, but the world they inhabit.

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[66]Arthur R. King, Jr., and John Brownell, *The Curriculum and the Disciplines of Knowledge*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966), p.87.

3.6 Functional Literacy, Employment, and Worker Alienation

The dehumanization that results from the kind of work that functional literacy prepares a person for is an important concern in neo-Marxist critiques of capitalism. According to Marx, humans see their own reflection in the product they produce, the ideas they create, and the activities they pursue. Marx contends that the species-character of human beings is free, creative, consciously-directed activity. When denied the vocational opportunity to imagine, create, and interact with the world as an active subject, humans become alienated from their species-character.

The work performed by minimally literate humans in contemporary society is often intellectually unchallenging and repetitive, lacking a product created or completed by the worker. In the information age, the work, i.e., data processing, is external to and not part of the creative nature of the worker. In the vast majority of information age jobs, workers do not generate the information they handle or determine its ultimate disposition. Thus, workers become estranged from their work on two counts: first, they are denied a creative act of self-expression; and, secondly, they are alienated, or removed, from the product of their work.

An individual's vocation is an important, essential part of a meaningful,

satisfying existence, and for this reason people must be vocationally content. Work environments that reduce the spiritual and physical condition of workers to the level of data processors can make it impossible for them to view their work as meaningful. Furthermore, the type of work that functional literacy training prepares one for is seldom voluntary, but is imposed on workers as a prerequisite for economic survival. Imposed labour generates feelings of anxiousness and disempowerment in workers for which a nominal material reward is unable to compensate:[67]

> Man is alienated not only from the products of his labour but also from himself through the process of production. The nature of labour's productive activity results in man's self-alienation . . . . he has a feeling of misery instead of well-being; rather than fulfilling himself, he must deny himself . . .

Within the functional literacy framework, people are not encouraged to develop their rational, imaginative or creative capabilities. Instead, they are rationally debased as mere human commodity.

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[67]Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Philosophy: History and Problems*, (New York: McGraw Hill Inc., 1989), p.441.

3.7 Consciousness and Praxis as Elements in Literacy Education and Humanization

Reflecting the humanist elements in Neo-Marxism, critical literacy focuses on the ontological need of persons to become fully human through thought and action. In this sense, critical literacy considers proper literacy education to be the key process in the human existential project. Critical literacy education is fundamental to self-actualization because it helps economically disadvantaged learners appreciate the causal factors creating their situatedness, and understand how discourse operates to keep them disadvantaged. It also helps learners recognize that they have the ability, through praxis, to transform their circumstances. As Paulo Freire suggests:[68]

> I shall start by reaffirming that men, as beings of praxis, differ from animals which are beings of pure activity. Animals do not consider the world; they are immersed in it. In contrast, men emerge from the world, objectify it, and in so doing can understand it and transform it with their labour.

As humans, we possess a consciousness distinguishing us from other living things. We are not merely aware in the sense that we are sentient beings - all higher order animals possess this characteristic. Rather, human consciousness is able to grasp

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[68]Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p.119.

the historical context of the circumstances in which it is situated. We recognize our distinctiveness from the objective world we encounter, and realize we can reconstruct that world through action. The recognition of our orientation to the world, and our interaction with it, forms the basis for emancipated human consciousness, praxis and personal freedom: "At all stages of their liberation, the oppressed must see themselves as men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human."[69]

Praxis is a concept first employed by Aristotle, later by Marx and also used extensively by Paulo Freire in his critical literacy pedagogy. It is the sphere of thought and action comprising the ethical and political life of humankind. As beings conscious of ourselves and our ability to influence the world, we consider ourselves and our life project as incomplete. We intuitively understand, for example, that we have lived a different life in the past from the one we are now living, and potentially, through personal and/or socio-political change, we can live a different life in the future. After *conscientization*, we realize that personal and social change is possible by altering the ways we act politically in and upon the world.

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[69]Ibid, p.52.

As evidenced in the OECD policies on education, proponents of the free-market, global economy recognize that their actions influence society and the individual lives therein. By advocating functional literacy education, whether intentional or not, they are prepared to deny this recognition to others. The definition of functional literacy and assessment protocols in the IALS, and the epistemology they carry, imply that the socio-economic circumstances in which disadvantaged individuals find themselves are objective, ahistorical and unchangable. Critical literacy, on the other hand, recognizes humans as historical beings who, through reflection and action, can transform their social circumstances. It educates learners that humans exist within culturally constructed contexts that can be altered by consciously directed action:[70]

> . . . the characteristics that make humans what they are include their openness to engagement in the world and their abilities to gain objective distance from the world, to transcend the world, to engage in critical reflection upon the world, to give meaning to the world, and to create history and culture.

Organizations like the OECD, and the learning philosophies they espouse, are not the inevitable result of history, but rather the consequence of consciously directed action. The OECD, for example, is an institution designed to perpetuate the kind

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[70]Elias, p.52.

of society envisioned by its corporate supporters. Thus, as the direct consequence of alternative human thought and action, transnational corporations, institutions like the OECD and the societies they construct are subject to interpretation, analysis, challenge and transformation through praxis.

3.8 Functional Literacy Education and False Generosity

The OECD's conception of literacy supports a form of banking style education that views persons as passive receptacles for knowledge. Banking education protects the prevailing social order from criticism by indoctrinating individuals with the dominant ideological messages:[71]

> In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry.

Ironically, the harder economically disadvantaged persons work at encoding the information supplied in functional literacy education, the less they attain the critical consciousness required for individual and social transformation. In reality,

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[71]Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p.58.

functional literacy and banking education accelerates the fall into the ideological abyss that is the actual source of the illiterate's despair.

Functional literacy views the world as a fixed and objective theatre to which players must adapt rather than attempt to alter. Within this framework, literacy, as part of the educational/ideological apparatus, becomes an exercise in false communication; it instills the prevailing hegemonic myths in virtually all of popular consciousness. Colin Lankshear describes some of myths promoted in the free market discourse description of social "reality":[72]

> . . . the oppressive order is a free society; all people are free to work where they wish. If they do not like their work situation they can find another job; the social order respects human rights and is therefore worthy of esteem; anyone who is industrious can become an entrepreneur as the owner of a large factory; the dominant elites, recognizing their duties, promote the advancement of the people, and the people for their part should accept and conform to the words of the elites; private property is fundamental to personal development; the oppressors are industrious whereas the oppressed are lazy and dishonest; marginal groups are naturally inferior and elites naturally superior.

In the presence of such overwhelming ideological condemnation, economically disadvantaged persons usually view themselves directly responsible for their

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[72]Lankshear, p.102

miserable circumstances. This misguided self-loathing increases their dependency on the "generosity" of those offering to help them participate in the existing social order. Thus, functional literacy education appears to the economically disadvantaged as an act of social compassion rather than one of control and exploitation.

Powerful ideological messages signal to economically disadvantaged persons that functional literacy and the modes of instruction it entails are legitimate. The message is that the elites, whose literacy levels far exceed the minimalist OECD standards, are being generous and charitable by helping illiterates participate at a subservient level in the contemporary free market framework. In fact, this act of false generosity harmonizes the interests of the ruling elites and further undermines the interests of the supposed beneficiaries. It has the net effect of driving economically disadvantaged persons deeper into the vicious cycle of dependency, vulnerability and despair.

False generosity in literacy education occurs when paternalistic forms of literacy are bestowed on illiterate persons to ameliorate their condition a little, or to lessen the effects of their economic circumstances. Colin Lankshear describes a

paradigm case of false generosity:[73]

> A model case of false generosity is where well-to-do people make their services available to unemployed or poorly paid workers to teach the latter how to budget their inadequate finances. The presumption is that the problem of poverty lies within the individual - in the low or underpaid worker - and not in the economic structure.

As long as the OECD advances a definition of literacy that endorses a domesticating rather than liberating form of literacy education, it engages in false generosity.

It is of little benefit to the economically disadvantaged that the OECD is unaware - if indeed this is the case - of the long term dehumanizing effects of the functional literacy education it supports. Regardless of its intentions, the OECD dehumanizes those to whom they offer a distorted vision of reality and a measure of false altruism. As Colin Lankshear explains, the role of unintended consequences in preserving the social order and promoting dominant economic interests has been clear for quite some time:[74]

> . . . we have been well-warned about the roles (conscious as well as unconscious) of traditional intellectuals within stratified - in our case capitalist,

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[73]Ibid, p.103.
[74]Ibid, p.103.

> social orders. With functional literacy as with many other cases, good intentions may not be enough on their own. To the extent that applied social research proceeds from a mystified view of social reality, it may have all kinds of consequences that are unintended, unwanted, and that remain unrecognized by the researchers themselves.

True generosity consists not in fighting "illiteracy" with domesticating methods of instruction, but rather in challenging the socio-economic structures that marginalize people in the first place. As Paulo Freire explains, "True generosity lies in striving so that these hands - whether of individuals or entire peoples - need be extended less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world."[75]

3.9 Summary

The dehumanizing consequences of functional literacy underline the importance of including esoteric, humanizing ingredients in literacy education. As Colin Lankshear explains, in the final analysis, functional literacy is a "dysfunctional" literacy that creates a passive class of minimally literate automata:[76]

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[75]Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p.29.
[76]Colin Lankshear, "Functional Literacy from a Freirean Point of View, p.109

> . . . we can represent Freire's distinction between domesticating and liberating forms of literacy as the distinction between forms of literacy which impede or enable, respectively, the proper performance of our function as human beings. Domesticating literacy contributes to our dehumanizing in so far as it thwarts performance of our function. . . . we may refer to domesticating literacy as dysfunctional since it undermines our function.

The OECD's perspective on literacy education undermines humankind's rational, creative nature by reducing persons to the level of mere objects and means, rather than confirming and celebrating them as ends in themselves. Instruction in functional literacy is a means to an end approach in education where humans are trained for low level occupations. This form of literacy education detracts from our collective humanity, and violates fundamental moral tenets. It is a view of literacy that estranges us from our species character, thereby precluding self-actualization, and any possibility of lasting happiness.

Although functional literacy provides learners with certain practical social advantages, it fails to satisfy the human need for imagination, creativity and praxis. Literacy education ought to promote those qualities that help the individual achieve self-affirmation and lasting happiness through reflective action. As we have seen, functional literacy education limits the opportunity to achieve happiness

through reflective action by denying learners an adequate understanding of literacy, discourse practices, and society.

Functional literacy education is an exercise in false generosity. Rather than providing economically disadvantaged people with the necessary literacy skills to better understand and transform their world, functional literacy renders individuals vulnerable to further exploitation. Even though functional literacy instruction may be a sincere attempt to improve the material circumstances of illiterate people, it nevertheless remains an act of false generosity. In fact, functional literacy education is one part of the socializing ideological process whereby workers learn to conform without resistance to the free market world view.

Chapter Four:
Critical Literacy - A Humanizing and Liberating View

> In problem-posing education, [people] develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.[77]
>
> Paulo Freire
> *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

4.1 Competing Views of Illiteracy

A major conceptual difference between proponents of functional literacy education and those advocating the critical view is that the latter group considers illiteracy a symptom of economic marginalization rather than its cause. Advocates of critical literacy education, such as myself, believe that illiteracy arises from unequal social relations that affect access to economic opportunities, quality education, and practical applications of acquired literacy skills. The argument is that people are not poor because they are illiterate, a view at least implied in functional literacy education, but are, instead, illiterate because they are poor, and

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[77]Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p.70-71.

therefore have access to only reduced education programs like functional literacy training.

Individuals in difficult social circumstances because of their economic situation often lack the opportunity to achieve high levels of literacy education. In fact, "one of the most consistent findings in the research on literacy is that children's literacy attainment is related to their parents' socio-economic status."[78] In the early stages of their lives, economically disadvantaged children are rarely exposed to literacy of the same quality as children from more privileged social backgrounds. This not only handicaps an economically disadvantaged student's short term classroom success, but may impact on her long term academic performance as well: "Children without a secure literacy background are greatly disadvantaged and less likely to meet with success later on. If early language learning is insufficient, children continue to experience problems throughout their entire schooling."[79]

As a result of their curtailed literacy development and its concomitant impact on academic success and social development, economically disadvantaged students are less often recognized in the classroom for their intelligence. The

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[78]Sloat and Willms, p.14.
[79]Ibid, p.14.

result is that many such students are streamed into programs that marginalize them further by limiting their exposure to high quality literacy instruction and denying them access to the intellectual culture of society. Margret Winzer explains:[80]

> . . . the common assessment measures used by teachers and psychologists may reflect a social or socio-economic bias and reinforce existing inequalities in the selection of these [poorer] children for special programs.

Streaming students into special language arts programs denies these learners access to the intellectual life that only critical literacy education provides. Lacking appropriate academic skills, economically disadvantaged children may fail to meet acceptable standards of social and intellectual behaviour and, therefore, their intelligence may be overlooked within the classroom environment. Winzer observes that, "When children are stereotyped by . . . social status, we are likely to overlook giftedness and tend to underrate them because they do not conform to our expectations."[81] Thus, in many cases, economically disadvantaged learners are marginalized by an education system that should be helping them achieve the same literacy level of their more fortunate peers.

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[80]Margret Winzer, *Children with Exceptionalities in Canadian Classrooms*, Fourth Ed., (Scarborough: Allyn & Bacon Canada, 1996), p.269.
[81]Ibid, p.161.

While economically disadvantaged children suffer the difficulties associated with academic exclusion, many economically privileged children are provided the opportunity to develop comprehensive literacy skills. This process first occurs through early exposure to literature at home, and later through better access to higher education. By achieving a higher quality literacy education, economically privileged children are able to retain their empowered social, vocational and political positions as adults. The differential access to education perpetuates the cycle of social stratification, maintains disparate literacy levels among differing socio-economic groups and, in the final analysis, protects existing class structures.

If correct, the view that illiteracy is a symptom of economic hardship rather than its cause has interesting implications for the OECD's research correlating illiteracy with economic hardship, and on the organization's recommendations regarding literacy education. Rather than low functional literacy levels causing socio-economic disparities, it may be economic disparities causing functional illiteracy. Within the context of educational objectives, this would seem to suggest that less emphasis be placed on functional literacy training, and more on exploring other ways, i.e.critical literacy education, that might help permanently improve the

economic circumstances of socially disadvantaged learners. Providing economically disadvantaged learners with functional literacy training and forcing them into the global reserve employment pool, however, has obvious labour supply advantages for corporations.

4.2 A Humanist Moral Framework for Critical Literacy Education

The humanistic and egalitarian social vision included as part of the critical literacy education advocated in this thesis are predicated on specific moral presuppositions. Indeed, social justice forms the basis for the neo-Marxist, humanist attack I launch on functional literacy education. In critical literacy education, students learn a moral discourse circumscribed by certain ethical guidelines with which they can evaluate both text and society. Moral issues that evolve from text, for example, are adjudicated on the basis of how well they comply with basic humanist principles such as equity, fairness and social justice.

The moral importance of ensuring that all citizens in an egalitarian society have equal access to intellectual culture is clear. In her "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations", Simone Weil articulates the humanist perspective forming

the moral basis for the critical literacy I support:[82]

> Equality is the public recognition, effectively expressed in institutions and manners, of the principle that an equal degree of attention is due to the needs of all human beings. The need for truth requires that intellectual culture should be universally accessible, and that it should be acquired in an environment neither physically remote nor psychically alien. It requires that in the domain of thought there should never be any physical or moral pressure exerted for any purpose, which implies an absolute ban on all propaganda without exception.

As Weil suggests, any society denying some individuals access to its intellectual culture, regardless of the reason, also denies universal access to various conceptions of truth grounded in different bodies of knowledge. Clearly, the restrictive content and literacy model employed in the IALS presents a single view of truth and, in so doing, denies access to both intellectual culture and alternative world views. Within this moral framework and in the present corporate dominated social context, the critical literacy education I promote grapples with how the current economic system and the discourse supporting it affects the access disadvantaged individuals and groups have to the intellectual culture referred to by Weil.

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[82]Simone Weil, "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations" *Two Moral Essays*, Ed. Ronald Hathaway, (Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 1991), p.10-11.

The establishment of a moral framework is essential in critical literacy education because it provides students with a moral basis to justify ethically plans for future action, i.e., praxis. Educational policies and economic agendas, such as that advanced by the OECD, for example, can serve as texts in critical literacy that are judged on how they comport with basic principles of social justice. In keeping with its social justice agenda, critical literacy also encourages individuals to share the intellectual culture of their society with others. As a result, students educated in critical literacy education adopt an existentialist ethical responsibility where individual freedom is achieved only by promoting the freedom of others. In *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, J.P. Sartre highlights the social ethical responsibility that accompanies the freeing of individual consciousness:[83]

> When we say that man chooses his own self, we say that every one of us does likewise; but we also mean by that - that in making this choice he also chooses for all men. To choose to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for us without being good for all.

Sartre's qualification of individual freedom through social responsibility resembles

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[83]J.P. Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotion*, (Carol Publishing Group, 1993), p.17.

the Kantian notion of individual rational will legislating moral action for all humankind. Within both moral systems, individual autonomy is circumscribed by social responsibility. If someone chooses to impose a form of oppression on another, then the oppressor has chosen oppression and, as a result, is also oppressed. Succinctly stated, then, critical literacy judges the moral acceptability of values, beliefs, and assumptions contained in text on how they improve or worsen the conditions of socially disadvantaged people.

4.3 Critical Literacy: A Journey From Text to Context

Most proponents of critical literacy avoid offering concrete definitions of critical literacy. Rather, the focus is placed on what they believe critical literacy does, or is able to achieve. From a personal perspective, I contend that critical literacy is able to help readers resist text and to challenge ways that persons, events, places and a variety of other phenomenon are presented. Within critical literacy, the aim is to encourage learners to construct and challenge texts, and to appreciate how they offer only a selective version of truth and reality. Whereas functional literacy prescribes certain information as objective knowledge, critical literacy exposes all knowledge to question and debate.

Learning to read and write in functional literacy education is considered an apolitical process helping individuals achieve upward economic mobility by preparing them to satisfy the human resource needs of the information age. In this approach to literacy education, students learn to read and write about a social reality that is presented as fixed, objective and absolute. Critical literacy, on the other hand, situates reading and writing within the particular social context in which it occurs. It focuses on the specific social practices validated in text, i.e., ideologies, and considers the social consequences of the thematic messages they convey. In its most ardent form, critical literacy contextualizes reading and writing within the framework of social issues and power relations.

Once learners understand the contextual basis of discourse, they can gain a fuller appreciation for the ways that society is first culturally constructed and then supported by dominant discourse practices. Because society is constructed in response to certain consciously held motives contained in these discourses, however, it is also subject to conscious transformation. Critical literacy education can assist the transformation because it encourages students to question the source of text, reflect on the embedded assumptions, and appreciate the impact on their lives of the "reality" presented. As Kathleen Densmore suggests, understanding

the contextual nature of text is fundamental to critical literacy:[84]

> Recent studies situate literacy in its social context, concentrating on specific social practices and conceptions of reading and writing in particular settings. Scholars argue that particular practices and conceptions of reading and writing vary for different groups of people, depending on the context.

The varying social contexts that occur in a given text often include competing interest groups with differential access to economic and political power in society. By examining the ways in which these groups are presented and the particular spin placed on the information provided, the learner can discover the ideology supported by the text in question. In a similar fashion, monolithic points of view, because they exclude alternative visions and perspectives, also lend themselves to ideological critique.

The various ways in which literacy practices affect social viewpoints are often subtle, but still ideologically powerful. For example, learners should be encouraged not only to question the validity of textual content, but also to ask why certain literacy skills are learned in the first place. If an exercise involves learning to fill out an application for credit, then the consequences of performing this task

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[84]Kathleen Densmore, "Education for Literacy", *The Urban Review*, Vol.27, No.4, 1995, p.301.

should be examined. Indeed, learning to fill out a credit application, an example often employed in functional literacy education and assessment, is not just about learning to read and write. It is a subtle, but nevertheless coercive, form of indoctrination into a specific construct of social behaviour. It validates a market economy system essentially controlled by banking interests, and teaches individuals to depend on corporate "generosity" for their material well-being. In fact, borrowing money from the very institutions that already have a large measure of control over their lives can make economically disadvantaged people even more vulnerable to corporate pressure and control.

When learners begin to appreciate the fact that text carries ideology, they can begin to approach all sources of information with a certain degree of deferred acceptance, a starting point for thinking critically about all issues. Within the free market context, the critical literacy I support encourages learners to question the motives and interests veiled in corporate discourse, thereby helping expose the social injustices that economically disadvantaged individuals regularly face. Critical literacy education can enhance an individual's ability to challenge the moral foundation of cultural belief systems, expose ideological agendas, and analyze political actions according to what may be covert intentions.

All people inherit a language and, as a result, are influenced by the cultural artifacts it carries. Individuals learn to name the world with descriptive symbols, grammatical rules and entire discourses, i.e. the prevailing corporate one, that they themselves did not create. As they learn and employ a pre-existing language, the accompanying values, assumptions and social values it imparts are also transmitted. The primary objective of critical literacy education is to teach learners this contextual aspect of language and, in the process, improve awareness of how discourse influences individual and social consciousness.

4.4 A Critical Literacy Pedagogy: Moving From Theory to Practice

From the earliest stages of literacy education, students should be encouraged to question textual authority by reading in a critical fashion. Reading critically, however, is not as simple as employing one generic technique. Rather, it requires some knowledge of the multi-faceted ways that text conveys meaning and imparts ideological messages. Unfortunately, the emphasis in literacy education within schools is more often placed on selecting "appropriate" texts for learners than on teaching them how to critically engage any text regardless of content. In *Ideology & the Children's Book*, for example, Peter Hollindale argues that there is

"too much stress placed on what children read and too little on how they read it".[85]

Hollindale suggests that children beginning a critical literacy program might be asked a series of questions to help them reveal clandestine messages contained in stories. Some of the questions include: "Are desirable values associated with niceness of character; Who are the people who 'do not exist' in a given story . . . downgraded groups may include servants, foreigners, girls, women and blacks."[86] These type of questions are valuable to the critical literacy pedagogue because they help reveal the ideological messages that books convey through subtle but persuasive thematic devices. (Appendix C)[87] In critical literacy, the objective is not to perpetuate the existing ideological structure by conditioning child behaviour through exposure to socially acceptable texts, a feature far too prevalent in many children's books. As Mary Pipher observes, for example, girls in fairy tales, "wander away from home, encounter great dangers, are rescued by princes and are transformed into passive and docile creatures".[88] Rather than conditioning young

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[85]Peter Hollindale, *Ideology and the Children's Book*, (Oxford: The Thimble Press, 1988), p.7.
[86]Ibid, p.21.
[87]Hollindale provides a fairly comprehensive list of such questions that are of tremendous value to teachers interested in exploring a critical literacy pedagogy. I have included them for that purpose. Appendix C, Ibid, p.19-21.
[88]Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. (New York: Ballantine, 1995), p.19-20.

learners by instilling fairy tale myths, critical literacy seeks to help them understand the various ways that what they read, see and hear impacts on both themselves and society.

To offset the conditioning power of text, critical literacy encourages students to read multiple sources to evaluate the truthfulness and social impact of the thematic messages conveyed. Discussing a variety of opposing viewpoints may reduce the possibility that learners draw conclusions based on an inadequate range of information. In the process of examining various perspectives and discourses, discussion focuses on how the knowledge presented is selected, whose interest it serves, and how it might function to privilege some groups over others. By asking these questions students learn that many books, and the values they convey, are written to serve the interests of specific groups, most often, but not always, the dominant culture.

4.5 Critical Literacy: The Shift in Consciousness

As Paulo Freire points out, the process of becoming critically literate is intrinsically connected to an increased consciousness of one's socio-historical conditioning and situatedness. At the beginning of their critical literacy

education, learners are likely to view the world as a static entity and see their role as one of mere conformity. As they progress along the critical literacy continuum, however, student consciousness and social awareness should be transformed from that of passive information-processors to reflective and active subjects.

If critical literacy education achieves its objective, the transition in individual consciousness should manifest itself in very practical ways. The immigrant worker employed in a textile factory, for example, becomes critically literate in English not only to enhance her employment prospects, but also to criticize and transform through praxis unfair, unsafe and unacceptable employment practices. After coming to understand her situation and then engaging it politically to improve her working conditions, the worker can come to view herself as an active transforming subject rather than the object of corporate oppression. When such an individual is provided with the intellectual skills to understand her situation and possesses the literacy skills to describe and change it, she has attained what Freire terms transitive consciousness, the highest level of literacy education:[89]

> This level [of literacy] is marked by depth in

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[89]Elias, p.127.

> interpretation of problems, self-confidence in discussions, receptiveness to other ideas, and refusal to shirk responsibility. At this level persons scrutinize their own thoughts and see proper causal and circumstantial correlation's between events.

4.6 Critical Literacy: Education and Assessment Practices

The questions asked and the attitudes embedded in assessment practices impact heavily on the messages conveyed to those learning literacy. The attitude of the IALS toward literacy is that the text contains the truth, and the readers job is to find it and manipulate it as directed. Many of the examples employed in the IALS survey reflect consumer or market based contexts. They include filling out credit applications, calculating interest on loans, or reading instructions to assemble purchased goods. The context of these questions not only measures functional literacy abilities, but imparts a world view to survey participants that edifies the free market system.

The protocols used in a survey designed to measure critical literacy would appear radically different from those employed in the IALS. If a literacy survey's questions were based on a textual passage discussing the Third World working conditions of Nike employees, for example, and the corresponding questions ask: Where are Nike shoes made? Why are they made there? What are the working

conditions of Nike's employees; then the kind of responses and the ideological messages conveyed to readers would be radically different from those contained in the IALS.

Problem solving in critical literacy examines the entire social context and theoretical causes of the problem at hand, rather than trying to solve the problem within a limited range of "correct" solutions. In a contemporary educational context, this means that critical literacy not only examines the presuppositions and consequences of the market economy discourse, but also questions the education system operating to support it. As Wolfgang Klafki points out, understanding the connection between social forces and education is fundamental to the establishment of a critical pedagogy:[90]

> . . . critical is best understood in the sense of social criticism, which implies constant reflection on relations between school and instruction on one hand (their goals, contents, forms of organization and methods), and social conditions and processes on the other.

It is only after understanding Klafki's simple but important point that education practices are shaped by social forces that individuals become critically literate. When manipulative ideologies operating within the education system, i.e.,

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[90]Wolfgang Klafki, "Didactic analysis as the core of preparation for instruction", Journal of Curriculum Studies, 1995, Vol.27, No.1, p.14

functional literacy training, are revealed to learners, there is at least the potential that their effects can be counteracted.

The importance of critical literacy education in protecting traditional academic freedom is also quite obvious. Although critical literacy education is framed as a socio-political educational commitment incorporating schools, it attempts to move beyond the concept of schools as institutions of social indoctrination. In critical literacy education, schools should become an intellectually liberating, rather than a domesticating social force. The goal of critical literacy education is to help all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic background or circumstances, become politically participating, informed citizens in truly democratic societies:[91]

> The point of educational praxis, quite distant from the conventional purpose of schooling in American life, is to eliminate oppression by pursuing the notion of an active citizenry based on the self-dedication of a group to forms of education that promote models of learning and social interaction that have a fundamental connection to the idea of human emancipation.

Indeed, without the understanding provided by critical literacy education that

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[91]Knoblauch, C.H. and Lil Brannon, "Critical Literacy: Language and Power", *Critical Teaching and the Art Of Literacy*, (N.H.: Boyton/Cook Publishers, 1993), p.152.

various cultural forces influence individual consciousness, true democratic franchise and personal freedom are virtually impossible.

4.7 Lessons in Critical Literacy

Although there is no set way to proceed in critical literacy, Knoblauch and Brannon offer an interesting example on how a lesson in adult critical literacy education challenging the prevailing corporate discourse might proceed. From a social justice perspective, the lesson plan offered by Knoblauch and Brannon effectively challenges the corporate practices perpetuating the present economic disparities in our global society. The lesson is entitled "The Pervasiveness of the Global Market".[92] Each student in the class is asked to write five responses to five questions on an index card, and they are then provided the opportunity to converse with other students about the information on their card:

1) What is your name?
2) Where do you work?
3) What do you do?
4) Where was your shirt made?
5) Who made your shirt?

Subsequent to the initial smaller group discussion where these questions are first

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[92]Knoblach and Brannon, "Critical Literacy: Language and Power", p.149.

raised, students return to their seats and a general conversation ensues about where the shirts were made, who made them and why they are made there.

Asking questions as to the reason why clothing is manufactured in Third World countries satisfies the critical literacy requirement that textual information i.e., the fact that the clothing is made there, be contextually analyzed, i.e, why is the clothing made there? As a result of their investigation into corporate manufacturing practices, students can begin to understand the human costs associated with global free market practices, and judge the morality of those practices accordingly. Asking where their clothing is made and why, however, is only the first step for learners in raising related questions on corporate activities in economically disadvantaged regions of the world.

In a follow up activity, students in the Knoblauch and Brannon example are encouraged to research, discuss and compare working conditions for garment workers in the countries where their shirts are made with conditions for garment workers in their own country. Not only is this activity likely to improve their literacy skills, as well as their understanding of geography, but students also learn about the real lives of economically disadvantaged persons exploited by market economy practices. According to Knoblauch and Brannon, questions addressed in

this session might include:

1) How many hours a week is the worker employed?
2) What is the hourly wage?
3) Does the worker belong to a union?
4) Who is her employer?
5) What are the worker's employment and living conditions like?

Students are then encouraged to share their findings either individually or on a group basis with the rest of the class. As Knoblauch and Brannon indicate, the answers provided by students to these kind of questions are often socially revealing and, providing an humanist ethical framework has been established, morally troubling:[93]

> (1) Mexico: 48 hours a week; 34 cents; no union; Kimberly-Clark factory; no ventilation, no exhaust fans, lots of dust causing headaches, sore throats, and eye infections. Lives in a cardboard shack with a corrugated tin roof. No running water or sewage. (2) USA; 11 hrs/day; $3.50; no union; Singer factory; machines that burn, sewing machines that cause injuries, a lot of caustic chemicals and potential dangers such as open elevator shafts; lives with a family of five in a one bedroom apartment in Brooklyn.

During follow-up activities students are asked to read about the global factory system and its impact on working and environmental conditions. In another lesson, I would suggest that students might be asked to analyze the effect that trade

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[93] Ibid, p.149

agreements like NAFTA and MAI have on the international garment industry, its workers, and the environment, and report their findings on these matters to the class. They also might be asked to submit proposals on how working conditions for garment workers both at home and abroad can be improved to an acceptable moral standard, and submit these suggestions to the appropriate government authorities. This type of political action following student analysis of the topics at hand engages learners in the praxis element of critical literacy education, and students also learn that improved social understanding increases political power. As a result of their analysis and action, students and teachers can be empowered through praxis, potentially improving themselves, the education system, and the entire global community.

4.8 Expressivism and the Critical Literacy Classroom

Regardless of their divergent backgrounds or opinions, the voices of all students in a critical literacy classroom should be heard, listened to and considered. Indeed, the individual expression of different perspectives forms the basis for a critical dialectic, a fundamental element in critical literacy education:[94]

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[94]Judith A. Langer, *Envisioning Literature: Literary Understanding and Literature Instruction*, (New York: Columbia University, 1995), p.143.

> The ability to participate fully in the conversation is critical; consensus silences marginalized voices, whereas open horizons invite inquiry and expect difference. When all can participate fully, the group changes. Power and control shift as individuals' thinking develops, and social expectations and relationships also change. Envisioning literature classrooms and the pedagogical principles that underlie them provides a context where inquiry and communication are open and where changes in views, perspectives and roles are expected.

Critical literacy education operates on the premise that disagreement and debate are healthy, necessary components of both education and a democratic society, and is therefore open to alterative perspectives. The role of the critical literacy pedagogue is to ensure that students whose voices might otherwise go unheard have the chance to participate in classroom discussion and their views, if not accepted by others, are at least considered. At the same time, students should be encouraged to listen critically to the views of others, and engage them in dialectical discussion to work through collectively the various perspectives advanced. The critical literacy pedagogue who actively encourages expressivism avoids the contradiction of deposing old authoritarian, free market ideologies with other authoritarian viewpoints. By beginning its critical examination of text with issues first raised by students, the expressivist classroom may stimulate discussion

based on student concerns without the teacher paradoxically, and ironically, positioned as the "liberating authority" on text.

In the most ideal critical literacy classroom environment, learners participate in a learning community where they are able to freely express their thoughts and read "against" or challenge the authority of texts. If a cooperative learning atmosphere has been established, students should be able to develop their ideas in confidence, and have an audience dialectically respond to them to test their validity. Students are encouraged to read and write about what is important in their own lives, rather than feeling compelled to accept the prevailing social viewpoint. Indeed, critical literacy places subjective learner experience at the concentric core of textual analysis. By emphasizing the importance of subjective experience - an element absent in functional literacy training - the reader is valued over text with the former intellectually empowered in the process.

Critical literacy pedagogues sensitive to the cultural constraints placed on individual consciousness are a prerequisite for promoting critical classroom debate. The full exploration of a student's immediate, and seemingly trivial, concerns in classroom discussions, conferences or group work, for example, may lead the entire class to broader ideological issues from where such concerns

emanate. Through critical literacy education, learners can also come to understand that many of their so-called personal problems, i.e., low self-esteem, are generated by the current historical, socio-economic or cultural context in which they find themselves; in other words, their "personal" problems may be the result of their social situatedness. To explore one's position in the world, it is necessary to consider the physical form and material conditions in which one enters it. Indeed, understanding one's situatedness, and how it influences perceptions of self and society, is the starting point for transforming individual consciousness and enhancing social awareness.

4.9 Summary

Although there are certain approaches for teachers to employ, there is no single prescribed formula or fixed set of procedures to apply in critical literacy education. There is, however, the constant need for an on-going curious, probing, searching and investigative stance toward text and the world. Reduced to its most fundamental requirements, the critical literacy education I support simply requires a curious mind, the willingness to entertain alternative conceptions of human beings, and an egalitarian social vision.

The primary technical objective in critical literacy education is to help students appreciate the contextual nature of textual information. Once learners understand this aspect of language, they realize that even ostensibly benign stories, i.e., fairy tales, can include powerful ideological messages promoting hegemonic interests. This recognition is followed by encouraging learners to question the moral legitimacy of the ideological messages imparted by text, and by exploring a range of other social and economic issues related to these messages.

Within the actual classroom, critical literacy explores the broader social context in which literacy practices and assessment protocols evolve. Rather than learning to fill out credit applications, for example, students may be encouraged to examine banking profits and question their moral appropriateness within the ethical guidelines of social equity and fairness. Finally, encouraging subjective expression in critical literacy is the starting point for individual political empowerment and social action. A critical literacy encourages individual creativity and imagination to help students recognize their intrinsic value as human beings, and to entertain alternative world views.

Critical literacy is a demanding but engaging process in which texts are related to contexts, and through which the reader's understanding of social

processes is enhanced. This type of education avoids the mechanistic techniques of functional approaches to literacy instruction, the latter being a lifeless drill in memorization and domestication. Being literate in a more meaningful, active, critical sense requires advancing beyond the mere comprehension and application of provided information and unearthing the ideological substrata of the literary artifact.

Chapter Five:
Conclusion - Toward a New Definition of Literacy

> . . . depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one's own 'findings' and openness to revision . . . by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive positions; by soundness of argumentation; by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics . . . by accepting what is valid in both old and new.[95]
>
> Paulo Freire

5.1 Definitions of Literacy: A Synopsis

Central to the argument in this thesis is that conceptions of critical and functional literacy are not found at opposite ends of the same educational continuum. Rather, each view represents a distinct conceptual framework on understanding language, perceiving the world, and on the objectives of literacy education. The OECD's world view implies that the present economic system is an inexorable extension of human history and learners, if they do not wish to perish, must comply with current corporate "human resource" demands. This view

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[95]Paulo Freire in Robert Mackie's "Contributions to the Thought of Paulo Freire", *Literacy and Revolution: The Pedagogy of Paulo Freire*, Ed. Robert Mackie, (New York: Continuum, 1981), p.96.

suggests that literacy education is a means to prepare illiterate individuals for entry, or perhaps more correctly indoctrination, into a society with pre-determined plans for action. These plans for action follow from the corporate agenda behind the OECD's education policy formation, and those individuals restricted to functional literacy education can expect to have no say in their development. As an advocate of critical literacy, however, I have offered a radically different view of society, literacy and what the educational objectives of the developing global community should be.

Within a critical literacy framework, literacy and education are considered political activities, inseparable from the relationships of social power, and political and economic influence. Instead of passively accepting an economic system that marginalizes many individuals, however, critical literacy education maintains that other, more inclusive social systems are possible. It suggests that the free market paradigm is not the inevitable consequence of history, but is an artifact of unequal power relations and economic oppression in society. In critical literacy education, literacy is considered a vehicle for ideological manipulation and social control and, when fully understood, as an emancipating mechanism for individual, social, political and economic transformation.

The philosophy of learning that accompanies functional literacy education considers the reader of text a passive receptacle; a living repository for pre-existing knowledge and information. The role of the learner is simply to encode what is imparted from the "omniscient" teacher and apply that knowledge to function in society.[96] Education in critical literacy, on the other hand, argues that text is always contextual, and that dominant discourses often construct meaning to the advantage of the prevailing hegemony. It questions the ideological content in text, and challenges economic and education practices that perpetuate existing social inequities by presenting the existing social framework as preferred, if not unchangeable.

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[96]In "Freire, Praxis and Education", Reginald Connelly outlines ten ways in which Paulo Freire maintained that functional literacy instruction impedes the existential development of the student. The list describes pedagogical approaches to be avoided by teachers wishing to empower students as active participants in the learning process, and has been included for that purpose. (See Appendix D) Reginald Connelly, "Freire, Praxis and Education", *Literacy & Revolution: The Pedagogy of Paulo Freire*, Ed. Robert Mackie, (New York: Continuum, 1981), p.78

5.2 The OECD, Corporate Influence and Literacy Education

There is an increasing, and I would argue dangerous, tendency in global economic affairs to allow corporate interests to dominate virtually all aspects of our lives, including education. Satisfying the occupational needs of business is no longer just the primary role of technical schools and colleges, but institutions of higher learning are now subject to corporate demands as well. In its recently released article, "Public Expectations of Postsecondary Education in Canada", the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) thanked Industry Canada for supporting the research project leading to its publication. No other interest groups were acknowledged for their contribution. This same document makes explicit the connection between the CMEC and the OECD:[97]

> Historically, 75 percent of CMEC's international activities used to involve two major international organizations: OECD and UNESCO. Over time, other partnerships have been formed with such organizations as the Commonwealth, SEAMEO, the Council of Europe, and the APEC Education Forum, but OECD and UNSECO continue to play prominent roles.

The CMEC document presents a corporate vision, a wish list if you will, for the future development of postsecondary educational institutions in Canada.

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[97] "An Update of CMEC's Activities", Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, January, 1997, p.6.

For those of us holding a more eclectic view of educational orientations and objectives, there are many troubling ideas contained in the document, including its notion of academic accountability: "It is the responsibility of governments to promote the development of shared and relevant goals and to provide a framework for accountability in relation to those goals within each jurisdiction."[98] Indeed, the richness and autonomy of the intellectual culture that has formed the basis of university life in Canada is protected only when universities are accountable to themselves as institutions of higher learning.

Although the corporate hegemony influences education on a domestic level through bodies such as Industry Canada, the CMEC and the Conference Board of Canada, it appears the OECD is the primary international mechanism in the ideological educational apparatus of transnational corporations. From the OECD's point of view, successful literacy education is predicated on the number of learners possessing the literacy skills for employment in the information age. This narrow view, both of literacy and education, may have potentially devastating affects on more traditional humanist educational practices and objectives. Rather than seeing globalization as a way to enhance communication between different peoples, and

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[98] "Public Expectations of Postsecondary Education in Canada", Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, March 1998, p.4.

share global wealth and knowledge, the OECD and the transnational corporations it supports consider globalization a way to reduce workers in all countries to the lowest possible economic common denominator. Larry Kuehn explains this "race for the bottom", its impact on education:[99]

> Unfortunately, the impact of globalization isn't just about NAFTA. It isn't just about turning services into commodities for trade, about "harmonizing" in a race for the bottom in jobs and social services. Globalization is also about turning the purpose of schools into being primarily about the relationship to the economy, of converting community values to the values of the market.

Corporate influence on social policy begins with exerting control over global economic practices through NAFTA, MAI and other similar international trade agreements, but it does not end there. The OECD, the Conference Board of Canada, the CMEC and the corporate interests they represent, threaten the quality of education by redefining pedagogy within the conceptual framework of the market place. The traditional social, cultural, moral and spiritual objectives of education are considered far less important. Within the corporate discourse, direction on all education matters is dictated by the market economy principle of supply and demand.

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[99]Kuehn, p.71

On a domestic level, this narrow view of education is revealed by the CMEC in its document favouring the training aspects, i.e. social relevance, of higher education:[100] "Institutions [of higher education], individually and collectively, work with employers to address issues pertaining to the quality and quantity of graduates, the capacity for research, and employer needs for training and research services." In *Financing for Higher Education*, the OECD describes and supports this international shift in academic emphasis:[101]

> There has been a shift in emphasis away from a general liberal education towards the acquisition of the many specific skills required in a technologically advanced society. The acquisition of knowledge has become the acquisition of specific human capital; and the benefits of this capital are appropriated by the individuals concerned in the form of higher earnings, and by their employers in the form of higher output.

The OECD's focus on the quantifiable, input/output, occupational preparatory aspects of literacy education is, of course, also reflected in the definition of literacy and assessment protocols contained in the International Adult Literacy Survey.

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[100] "Public Expectations of Postsecondary Education in Canada", p.11.
[101] *Financing for Higher Education*, (Paris: OECD, 1990), p.12.

5.3 Functional Literacy Revisited

The kind of literacy measured in the IALS effectively restricts the scope of a learner's critical analysis and, therefore, her subsequent understanding of how social forces influence text. By treating knowledge as something fixed and external to individual experience, functional literacy conveys to learners that society is static, and that they, as objects of the learning process, are obliged to adopt pre-established social practices to "function" effectively. Those choosing not to conform, or who are unable to do so for any number of reasons, suffer varying degrees of economic exclusion and social isolation. According to the view behind functional literacy education, however, the blame for this suffering lies not with the social structure, but is the result of individual inadequacy, i.e. illiteracy, a view often internalized by economically disadvantaged individuals themselves.

When the objectives of education are strictly utilitarian, as they are in functional literacy, education itself becomes a means to an end; the latter being material improvement through enhanced worker productivity for those who control its policies. As I have argued, however, treating learners as a means to an end, and denying them the opportunity to engage in praxis violates basic rationalist, and humanist moral principles. Furthermore, it ignores the ontological requirements of

human nature and, as a result, limits the humanization of learners.

As thinking, rational, political creatures, humans require the opportunity and the skills to engage and transform both themselves and the world around them. Instead of domesticating learners into one social perspective, critical literacy can help students understand how they are influenced by text, and appreciate that they can change the world through reflective action. Viewed in this way, literacy becomes part of the human existential project, a process of making meaning in one's life and in the world through reflective action. Those learners exposed to critical literacy education and understanding its tenets will no longer view reality as a static, ahistorical enterprise. As a result of this change in perspective, they can become intellectually and politically empowered.

It is important that I re-emphasize that this thesis does not accuse or exonerate the OECD and transnational corporations of an orchestrated conspiracy to control education policies and conceptions of literacy. Conspiracy theories, even when true, are notoriously difficult to prove. As a process of unconscious social control and rationalization, ideology influences the views of all persons in a given social context. According to its policy statements, the OECD sincerely believes that raising functional literacy levels is a humanitarian act to improve the

lives of economically disadvantaged persons. The OECD's apparent sincerity suggests that the functional literacy it supports is far more likely the product of false generosity than it is of a corporate conspiracy. Regardless of the OECD's intentions, however, supporting functional literacy education qualifies as false generosity on two distinct levels: first, functional literacy fails to sufficiently ameliorate the circumstances of those previously illiterate and, in some cases, makes them more vulnerable to economic forces than they were previously; and secondly, at the same time it domesticates and dehumanizes learners, international functional literacy standards permit transnational corporations to choose the best locations for their production and still have guaranteed access to the "reserve employment pool". Clearly, the real advantage in functional literacy education is not with the economically disadvantaged learner.

5.4 Why Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy education allows individuals to transform their world in a way that permanently improves the quality - not just the material circumstances - of their existence. In critical literacy, learning to read and write is not considered an apolitical process that prepares students for "success" within the current free

market system. Text by its very nature is always contextual; reading and writing is always reading and writing about some thing, and that "thing" always carries ideological content. Literacy education ought to improve one's understanding of cultural influences, ideologies, and how hegemonic forces influence social and economic policies. As an educational rather than a training force, critical literacy emphasizes how these various social forces fashion individual perspectives on both self and the world, and equips learners to counteract them in an effort to enrich their lives.

5.5 A New Definition of Literacy

Given our contemporary understanding of how language operates, the definition of literacy and assessment protocols employed by the OECD in the IALS are clearly inappropriate tools to measure what it means to be literate. Literacy requires a contextual understanding of information, an appreciation for the dynamic and evolving nature of knowledge, and how language and discourse operate to shape world views. Often, that which is defined as "good" or "normal" within a given context may be good only in so far as it advances the interests of the prevailing hegemony. If certain groups are in a position to fix the standards for

acceptable social or occupational behaviour by defining in discourse what actions are considered appropriate, then their social power increases exponentially.

Contextualizing information enables individuals to ask certain questions about text they may not otherwise entertain. Advertising offers a perfect example. If one is merely required to understand the information provided in a Nike commercial, the message is clear: If you want to be fit, beautiful and happy, then you would do well to buy the shoes! But students instructed in critical literacy will be better equipped to ask questions regarding where the information is coming from, the possible motives of the information source, and other questions that expose the hidden meanings and social consequences of corporate advertising. Clearly, then, critical literacy far better protects the interests of learners than a literacy that teaches them to respond non-critically to corporate billboard exploitation and ideology.

If we draw on the argument presented in this thesis, then, there are a set of criteria that a proper definition of literacy must include. First, it must recognize that language is not a static, uni-directional enterprise, but rather a dynamic, engaging, creative process that can manipulate opinions and control world views. Secondly, a definition of literacy ought to reflect the simple understanding that

learning to read and write is always learning to read and write about some thing. It must recognize that textual information is contextual and not absolute. Finally, a definition of literacy appreciates that power relations in society directly impact on literary practices, and that text can perpetuate discriminatory social practices. A contemporary definition of literacy might read: *A mode of human behaviour, namely, understanding the contextual, ideological and creative elements in text to allow for critical analysis, self-actualization, humanization, political involvement and, if so desired, personal and social transformation.*

This definition of literacy not only provides learners with the ability to read, write and comprehend text, it also empowers them with the tools to recreate society and enhance their opportunity for self-actualization. It encourages learners to consider their interconnectedness with, and moral responsibility to, others, and appreciate the pluralism of meaning. In emphasizing critical literacy, this definition can foster the development of a caring attitude toward the world, and potentially create a truly literate citizenry capable of constructing a democratic, egalitarian global community.

5.6 Implications for Future Research

Although this thesis attempts to answer important questions regarding the corporate influence on literacy education, I confess that it raises as many questions as it answers. These questions, although not necessarily new ones, are of on-going and immediate importance. I have provided some evidence to support the view that corporations working in consort with public organizations like the OECD and the CMEC have gained increasing control over educational policy development. The connection between corporations, various organizations and education policy development requires further exploration. There is a need to determine in concrete as well as theoretical terms the links between education policy development, organizations like the OECD, Industry Canada, the Conference Board of Canada, the CMEC, and transnational corporations. We must question the wisdom and democratic appropriateness of centralizing control over education through politically empowering organizations such as the CMEC, as local jurisdictions are simultaneously dismantled. At the doctorate level, I hope to explore these various issues in greater detail, and examine their impact on education.

Given the OECD's increased emphasis on training as opposed to educating, we need to clarify the distinction between the training model advocated in the

corporate discourse, and education as an holistic, humanizing process. As I have argued, there may be negative personal and social consequences that emerge from adopting the corporate training discourse, and removing the esoteric elements in education that help weave the fabric of a caring, civil society. The corporate agenda reflects an entirely quantifiable view of human happiness where material gain and economic growth are considered central objectives. If the goal of education is to truly enrich the lives of learners, and happiness is the ultimate point of enrichment, then education policy should examine more effective ways to achieve this end. As educators we must ask, "What is the source of human happiness, and how can education help us get there?"

5.7 Other Possible Related Research Questions

1) Who owns education? A study examining the actual views held by Canadians on who should direct or control education policy; What are the first principles and objectives of education?

2) How does a critical literacy classroom operate in practice? An ethnographic study to explore the operation and success of a critical literacy pedagogy.

3) How can assessment practices be designed that comport with the philosophy behind critical literacy education?

4) Committee member Dr. Roger Moore has suggested additional questions that evolve from this thesis included in appendix E.

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Appendix A

OECD Countries and Date of Joining:

1) Australia (1971)
2) Austria (1971)
3) Belgium (1961)
4) Canada (1961)
5) Czech Republic (1995)
6) Denmark (1961)
7) Finland (1969)
8) France (1961)
9) Germany (1961)
10) Greece (1961)
11) Hungary (1996)
12) Iceland (1961)
13) Ireland (1961)
14) Italy (1961)
15) Japan (1964)
16) Korea (1996)
17) Luxembourg (1961)
18) Mexico
19) Netherlands (1961)
20) New Zealand (1973)
21) Norway (1961)
22) Poland (1996)
23) Portugal (1961)
24) Spain (1961)
25) Sweden (1961)
26) Switzerland (1961)
27) Turkey (1961)
28) U. Kingdom (1961)
29) United States (1961)

Source: The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Internet site. www.oecd.org

Appendix B

1994 International Adult Literacy Survey scoring levels:

Level 1 indicates very low level literacy skills, where the individual may, for example, have difficulty identifying the correct amount of medicine to give to a child from the information found on the package.

Level 2 respondents can deal only with material that is simple, clearly laid out and in which the tasks involved are not too complex. This a significant category, because it identifies people who may have adapted their lower literacy skills to everyday life, but would have difficulty learning new job skills requiring a higher level of literacy.

Level 3 is considered as the minimum desirable threshold in many countries but some occupations require higher skills.

Level 4 and 5 show increasingly higher literacy skills requiring the ability to integrate several sources of information or solve more complex problems. It appears to be a necessary requirement for some jobs.

Source: *Background Information on the International Adult Literacy Survey.* Paris: OECD, 1996

Appendix C

Questions to Guide a Critical Literacy Discussion of Text

1. What happens if the components of a text are transposed or reversed? Does examination of the negative, so to speak, show unsuspected blights in the published picture? Is this 'anti-sexist' novel in fact sexist itself, and merely anti-male? Does this war story attack the Germans for atrocities which are improved when the British inflict them?

2. Does the happy ending of a novel amount to a 'contract of reaffirmation' of questionable values which have earlier seemed to be on trial? If some 'happy endings' reconverge on the dominant ideology, is it also true that an unhappy ending is a device for denying such reconvergence, and hence for reinforcing a blend of ideological and emotional protest?

3. Are the values of a novel shown as a package in which separate items appear to interlock? Are they being grouped together in order to articulate some larger, aggregated virtue or vice, such as white Britishness?

4. Is it a noticeable feature of some major 'classic' children's books that they test and undermine some of the values which they superficially appear to be celebrating?

5. Are desirable values associated with niceness of character, and vice versa? How far is a book's ideology conveyed by moral symmetry in character delineation?

6. Does anyone in the story have to make a difficult choice in which there is more than one defensible action? Or does the plot merely hinge on a predetermined choice, and interest depend on whether it is successfully or not carried out?

7. Does any character belong as an accepted member in more than one subculture or group? If any character does so, is one such group represented by the author as deserving higher value than another?

8. Who are the people that do not exist in a given story?

Source: Hollingdale, Peter. *Ideology and the Children's Book*. Oxford: The Thimble Press, 1988.

Appendix D

Ten Ways That Functional Literacy Disempowers Learners

a) The teacher teaches and the student is 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 the 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 programme content, and the students comply.

i) The teacher confesses 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.

Source: Quoted from Paulo Freire in Reginald Connelly's "Freire, Praxis and Education". *Literacy and Revolution: The Pedagogy of Paulo Freire.* Ed. Robert Mackie. New York: Continuum, 1981, p.78.

Appendix E

Suggestions by thesis committee member Dr. Roger Moore for future research in the area of critical literacy education.

a. What is the relevance of a Brazilian text, written in the sixties, to Canada as it approaches the Millennium?
b. What sectors of Canadian society, if any, are most affected by Freire's theories on education and social reform?
c. What parallels are there between Canada and Third World countries where Freire's theories are most read and discussed?
d. How do we integrate multimedia and audiovisual literacy with its skillful manipulation of the audience into a theory of literacy based mainly on words?
e. Is there any evidence that Marxist or neo-Marxist social change will bring human beings any closer to happiness?
f. Does Liberation Theology, the movement that grew out of and parallels Freire's *concientização* have answers for non Third World countries?
g. By extension, if education is replacing religion as the chief means of indoctrinating people, then should Liberation Theology be central to a renewed education system?
h. Is there an argument for saying that Canada is, in fact, a Third World country, and that an alternative education process is essential for Canadians?
i. Is there evidence of gender bias in literacy testing results or neo-Marxism?
j. Further analysis of functional literacy text vs. critical literacy text: Examples of textual analysis and control group analysis.
k. An examination of Noam Chomsky's *Language as Freedom* and *The Responsibility of the Individual.*