Teaching Functional Literacy in Schools: A Personal Reflection

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The truth is, that the knowledge of external nature, and the sciences which that knowledge requires or includes, are not the great or the frequent business of the human mind... We are perpetually moralists, but we are geometricians only by chance... Socrates was rather of opinion that what we had to learn was, how to do good, and avoid evil.

— Samuel Johnson

Johnson's terse yet inclusive perspective, written over 3 centuries ago has relevance to the diverse levels of discourse that a discussion on literacy inevitably commands and the essential value systems that education promotes. In that context, literacy in and of itself is of important social interest. Government funded initiatives to improve academic literacy and numeracy and on going assessment and revised program initiatives testify to endemic efforts to improve student school learned academic competencies. Yet, is justice being served to the concerted and unidirectional efforts to successfully operationalize and improve literacy if its very definition is qualified and discussed from solely an "academic" perspective? While it is not my intention to offer a substantive and research-based theory in response to this question I do propose to share some reflections from my professional experiences and practice that have led me to become aware of a seemingly complex question. That is, why is so much time spent on describing

school success in terms of academic literacy when "assisting learners to understand and cope with the environment and surroundings in which they live (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Freire & Berthoff, 1987)¹ would perhaps be more functional and productive learning paradigm. I have come to appreciate as do many experienced teachers, that literacy must be viewed from a perspective that more realistically encompasses the learner in their totality, including the social, physical, and moral complexities that combine to define *experience* or how they function. I sometimes question how efficacious discussions about improving literacy can be if they occur asynchronously from those that recognize that for students feeling isolated and alienated from their peer group and detached from formal education there is little affinity for the inculcated priorities of academic literacy.

My career as a teacher and administrator in both secondary and elementary schools have helped me to understand that this notion of literacy to which I speak, namely "critical literacy" or functional literacy, is equally applicable to all sectors of schooling. While one must appreciate the vast array of subject-specific literacy resources, web-based e-Learning modules, early intervention reading strategies, greater accessibility to curriculum consultants, increased assessment and evaluation practices and of course implementation of com-

parative external assessments to measure compare and report on student achievement there seems to me to be a need to understand and recognize literacy beyond what is normally understood. Literacy necessitates more than a consideration of *academics* in order to properly service the needs of students as both learners and individuals. As Dewey (1938) stated,

What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worth while, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur? (p. 49)

My position is based on the fact that I have spent countless hours observing and appreciating the dedicated efforts of teachers and others who while summarily confined to the context of "the curriculum" work everyday with students to help them understand the circumstances that govern their lives and to develop the necessary coping skills to manage their surroundings by interpreting the social, emotional, physical, and moral interplay of their lives. This is what I refer to as meeting the quasi-critical or functional literacy needs of students. The concurrent realities of day to day life often challenge students who are finding it increasingly difficult to meet the complex performance standards and objectives of the current curriculum. For instance:

- **Academic Demands.**

Student stress is on the rise. "Students have always been faced with academic demands and these demands are not inherently stressful. Demands become stressful when

people perceive that the demands exceed their resources for coping" (Mailandt, 1998). There is the pressure of underachieving.

The anxiety of failing grades. The worry of processing a seemingly unredemptive compressed curriculum. The attempts to successfully manage time in order to balance the demands of academics with external commitments and pressures. Certainly these are not concepts that represent students with subtle particularity. It should come as no surprise that academic and social demands are perceived by some students as hurdles, while others consider them improbable obstacles to overcome (Mailandt).

- **Challenges of Social Integration.**

The difficulties of carving a niche in the peer group, be it in the sandboxes of the primary years or in the privileged senior seating arrangements of the high school cafeteria. Making sense of somehow wanting to be aberrantly ordinary. Struggling to justify blatant societal injustice. Coping with peer pressure, and the innate fear of being ostracized from the social group. Not to mention the struggle of harnessing the physiological and hormonal changes of adolescence. Research suggests that comprehensive programs aimed at fostering "positive social skills in children often contain many of the same ingredients as effective programs designed to prevent violence, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and a host of other negative outcomes" (Viadero, 2003).

- **Environmental Demands.**

"Today, children, just as adults, experience higher levels of stress than ever before. Negative life events such as community and school violence, domestic terrorism, poverty, divorce, poor parenting skills...are a reality for many children. These stressful life events can cause emotional and psychological problems. Furthermore, children have little control over their environments and therefore may not be able to actively

prevent or seek alleviation from stress" (Edwards, Gfroerer, Flow-ers, & Whitaker, 2004). For students of all ages, by far the most puzzling and challenging curriculum can be defining the baleful reality that exists beyond the school walls and meeting the daily expectation of having all the confusion sorted out by the opening bell. The unfortunate reality is that the negative life events already described are not dissipating any time soon. Students' oscillating emotional states may be depleting the same coping resources that become self-perceived by the individual as inadequate and hence result in stressful environmental demands (Kern, Gfroerer, Summers, Curlette, & Matheny, 1996).

I stated earlier that there exists in schools a literacy that, though nonacademic, cannot be ignored. I used a simple description of critical literacy to describe the efforts of teachers to help students understand their own life circumstances and to better cope with the *real world*. This is especially significant for those students who perceive education and formal schooling as an undermining force to their esteem and who are perpetual witnesses to, but rarely if ever participants in, the ceremonies that celebrate academic, athletic, and social achievement in school. For whatever the reason, be it a manifestation of the stresses, anxiety, or lack of coping skills already discussed, these are the students who have fallen prey in Darwin's ultimate competition of the "survival of the fittest." In my attempt to capture this most functional form of literacy, I turn to the figure of speech called metaphor.²

Recall for a moment a trip to the ballpark. The game of baseball in all its ritualistic splendor. You may recall that the spectators behind home plate sit securely behind a mesh screen of sorts,

protected from the salvo of foul balls. For the avid fan of baseball, the screen affords them the often taken for granted security to actively participate in the events of the ball game. The ball game, in turn, represents the various dimensions that constitute academic literacy. Quasi-critical literacy, as I have described it, represents for the mainstream student the *screen* that equips them with the often taken for granted but necessary coping strategies to understand and actively participate in the events of schooling and in the circumstances that define their lives. Imagine now having the opportunity to sit in these exclusive seats but not be able to partake in the fanfare excitement of the game for the distracting presence of the screen. In other words, finding it frustratingly difficult as the game labors on to not be able to see past the very mesh that is in place to protect you. For students struggling with the curriculum, experiencing failure, and unsuccessfully coping with their environment and surroundings, the same protective screen that seemingly vanishes in the action of the game for "the fittest" of students, becomes in fact more prominent and hence more distracting than the event itself. I have been privy to witnessing teachers and support staff cater to this functional literacy that affords dissenting students especially a means to acknowledge, rationalize, and cope with the issues that have surfaced in their lives. In doing so, these students are further afforded an opportunity to gain a relative perspective in better understanding their surroundings.

Quasi-critical literacy or functional literacy as I have described it, entails helping students cope with the interrelations of their academic, social, physical, spiritual, and moral lives and is a literacy

that summons the attention and energy of both students and staff. Many teachers ingeniously tailor pedagogy to address the perspectives of this functional literacy and should be recognized for their efforts. For example, lessons are structured thematically, be it in religious studies, philosophy, or language arts classes, to implicate students in ethical decision-making. Such lessons are complemented by regular visits to the school from the clergy to provide opportunities for students to further their understanding of personal moral development.

Teacher-led intramural sports and clubs allow students a reprieve from the discomfitures of managing academic anxieties and offer alternative socially structured gatherings. School staff facilitates student-led leadership initiatives, including peer mediation and tutoring opportunities, to allow students to meaningfully assert their contributions to their immediate surroundings.

It is heartening to know that school boards too have been vigilant in their response to such literacy concerns. The Halton Catholic District School Board has placed Family Service Workers, through a contractual agreement with the Children's Aid Society, in schools deemed to be especially in need of more support. The Family Service Workers' caseload consists primarily of individual and small group sessions with those students who struggle to understand and cope with their environment which in turn interferes with their ability to learn. Further, programs such as the Transitions Elementary and Secondary Classrooms are joint efforts between the public and separate school boards, as well as various community agency partners in Halton. They cater specifically to those students who are having difficulty being successful

in the regular school setting and benefit from a smaller classroom placement with additional supports (i.e. child and youth counselor, educational assistant, family support etc). These are students who may have behavior difficulties or mental health needs. In addition, Woodview Children's Center offers a program to specific students in grades 6, 7, and 8, who exhibit significant symptoms of depression and anxiety, often resulting in attendance (truancy) issues. The half day 10 week program recognizes the debilitating cycle of how student anxiety impacts upon their attendance that negatively affects their learning; thus, as students lag behind in their school work, their anxiety is further heightened. All of these programs focus on the fact that students need to develop the social and emotional proficiencies necessary to cope with their various circumstances before they can successfully manage curriculum-related demands.

The contributions to quasi-critical literacy that may be especially noteworthy are those manifested in the compassion that teachers, educational assistants, and child and youth counselors in particular show for the human dignity of each student. At certain times it is a lucid glance and reassuring word from an educational assistant to a special student struggling to understand the impulses of their own behavior. At other times it is a counselor's promise to a troubled adolescent that period three lunch can be spent talking about the despairing conditions of home in the tranquil comfort of her office. There is the intermediate teacher who unsolicitedly shares the better part of his lunch to sit with the schoolyard bully on a day when no other child would. Then there are the quiet conversations between teachers and stu-

dents, complete with the understanding that there is nothing shameful in shedding a tear. I often reflect upon the efforts teachers invest in assisting students to understand and cope with what can be relentless circumstances. There are the times too when teachers and support staff distinguish for a misunderstood student the difference between bad choices and good character. The occasions when they explain to a discordant adolescent already feeling detached from the pursuit of learning that effort is often a better indicator of success than a grade. Not to forget of course those times when educators silently consent to the role of nurturing parent in the presence of a child who, for all intent and purpose, is without one. The examples cited above are testament to a quasi-critical literacy that teachers and support staff adhere to by unselfishly providing students with a commodity already in great demand—time. Time for students to talk about the circumstances of greatest relevance in their lives that often have very little to do but impact significantly upon issues of academic literacy. Teachers and support staff, given this paradigm of critical literacy, are instrumental in taking time to listen to the issues that seem to disjoint the lives of students. By giving of their time and modeling an emphatic understanding, these educators offer students a perspective (and not necessarily a solution) to the plights that trouble them. In offering perspective, these same educators provide opportunities for students to consider (or reconsider) their circumstances relative to their own lives. In doing so, students are better equipped with at least a means of coping (and the range and influence of these are far too great to mention) to make some sense of the world, the people, and their place in all of it.

Obviously we must continue effort to improve academic literacy. In doing so, however, we must applaud and recognize educators who, despite the swelling external pressures of provincial curriculum mandates and assessment scores, remain sensitive to nurturing, in a spirit of compassion, and students' understanding of their place in the world and to what Dewey refers to as the all-encompassing *experience*. Functional literacy recognizes the needs of students as individuals in an increasingly complex and confusing society. Functional literacy should be understood to be conceptually grounded with the same tacit relative value and social interest that schools attribute to what is referred to as academic literacy.

Notes

- 1 This is certainly not to suggest a more intimate comparison with Freire's critical consciousness movement that sought, through a more elaborate

schema of critical literacy as a political tool, to liberate the oppressed from the dominant class.

- 2 As the poet Wallace Stevens stated, and the scholar Northrop Frye explained, the motive for metaphor is a need to associate, and ultimately identify, "the human mind with what goes on outside it" (Frye, 1963; p. 11).

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Multiple Sclerosis and Literacy

Twenty Eight years ago the M.S foundation started a program called MS Read-A-Thon. Since its beginning more than 25 million books have been read by school children in support of MS It is estimated that more than 37 million dollars has

been raised for Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada. Teacher and parents are encouraged to become involved. Read On for MS Read-Athon. This is a unique and very special way of encouraging literacy in schools and communities. For information on how to

begin a READ-A Thon program and become a member of a growing list of honour roll inductees contact a local chapter of Multiple Sclerosis or the Ontario Division at info.ontario@mssociety.ca

ABC Canada and Literacy

Since its inception in 190 ABC CANADA has worked to improve the literacy skills of Canadians. As an organization supported and directed by the private sector, ABC Canada is concerned about the economic future of Canada. To this end it is devoted to research, public

awareness, and workplace education. According to their fact sheet (based on a National Survey: Stats Canada 1990) twenty two percent of adult Canadians have serious problems dealing with any printed materials and an additional twenty four percent of Canadian can deal only with simple

reading tasks. About 45 percent of new jobs created in this decade will require 16 or more years of education. ABC CANADA will work with schools and community groups to provide information and resources contact them at their home page www.abc.canada.org