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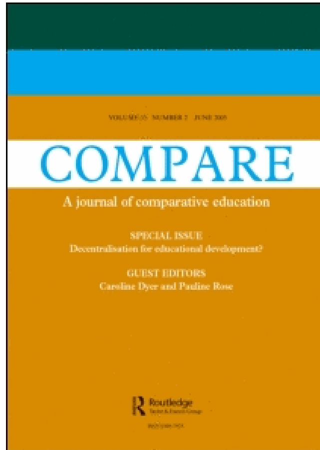

Compare: A journal of comparative education
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713410984

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To cite this Article: , 'The comparative ethnography of educational projects: youth and adult literacy programmes in Brazil', Compare: A journal of comparative education, 37:2, 151 - 166
To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/03057920601165421
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057920601165421

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Compare
Vol. 37, No. 2, March 2007, pp. 151–166

Routledge
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The comparative ethnography of educational projects: youth and adult literacy programmes in Brazil

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This article elaborates the concept of educational projects, a term that signifies consistent constellations of institutions, financial resources, social actors, ideologies, theories of knowledge and attendant pedagogies that shape local cultural practices of schooling. The article demonstrates the utility of the concept of educational projects for comparative and international educational studies by examining competing educational projects in Brazilian literacy programmes for youth and adults. In conclusion, the article argues that the concept of educational projects provides a theoretically rich comparative tool for the field of comparative and international education.

Keywords: *Brazil; Freire; Literacy*

Introduction

In his landmark publication, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Paulo Freire posited a significant dichotomy in pedagogical approaches. Freire distinguished between 'banking education', which he said aims to 'maintain the submersion of consciousness' and 'conceal certain facts which explain the way men exist in the world', and 'problem-posing education', whose task is to promote 'the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality' (1972, p. 54). Freire drew particular attention to the ideologies that shape curricular and pedagogical decisions in the classroom. While banking education rests upon hierarchical relations between teachers who act as if they own knowledge and students who are treated as 'objects of assistance', problem-posing education relies upon an egalitarian relationship between teachers and students and a dialogical pedagogy (1972, p. 56). Freire recognised schooling as a political act that could emancipate or further oppress. His distinction between banking and problem-posing education continues to resonate through research and practice in the field of comparative and international education.[1]

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ISSN 0305-7925 (print)/ISSN 1469-3623 (online)/07/020151-16
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DOI: 10.1080/03057920601165421

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Yet Freire's distinction between banking and problem-posing education is, I argue, too narrow. While it hints at linkages between classroom interaction, politics and sociopolitical structures, it does not adequately conceptualise those connections. Also, although Freire referred, generally, to forces of oppression, he did not examine schooling from a broader political economic perspective; instead much of his critique focused on the classroom level, encompassing questions of teacher-student relations and curriculum (Youngman, 2000; Bartlett 2005).

In this article, I argue that 'banking' and 'problem-posing' pedagogies are embedded in larger *educational projects*, or aggregations of institutions, financial resources, social actors, ideologies, discourses, pedagogies and theories of knowledge and learning that shape the way people think about education and its purpose. Educational projects are durable assemblages of actors and factors that can be identified and compared over time and space. I first trace the historical development of two major educational projects in Brazil, stressing the role played by institutions, material resources and theories of schooling and development in the elaboration of policies and programmes for youth and adult literacy. Then, drawing on 24 months of ethnographic fieldwork in two Brazilian cities, I further develop the concept by examining two contemporary educational projects as they are expressed in teacher practices, theories of knowledge and literacy pedagogies in four youth and adult literacy programmes. In conclusion, I suggest the importance of examining educational projects at multiple levels, and I discuss what the concept of educational projects has to offer the field of comparative and international education.

Educational projects

Contemporary anthropological research stresses the importance of situating cultural practices within the social, political and economic structures that shape local human agency and social interaction. This aim seems particularly appropriate for an interdisciplinary field like comparative and international education. In my effort to examine schooling as cultural practice, I draw upon a concept developed by sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant to compare what they call 'racial projects' in Brazil and the USA. They define a racial project as 'simultaneously… a discursive or cultural initiative, an attempt at racial signification and identity formation on the one hand; and a political initiative, an attempt at organisation and redistribution on the other' (Winant, 1994, p. 24). Similarly, I argue that *educational projects* are cultural and sociopolitical initiatives accomplished by alliances of social actors, including actors in institutions, with differential material resources, who engage and mobilise a variety of ideologies as codified in pedagogies and educational philosophies. Educational projects, then, are durable (but not permanent) constellations of *institutions, financial resources, social actors, ideologies, discourses, pedagogies and theories of knowledge and learning* that shape the way people think about schooling and its purpose. As Freire insisted, educational projects work to the benefit of some and against the interests of others.

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One critical component of an educational project is the overall theory of knowledge and learning implicit in the project. Literacy research and programmes, in particular, tend to incorporate elements from two models: an autonomous approach and an ideological approach (Street, 1984, 1993). The autonomous model entails a non-social, cognitivist, developmentalist stance. Knowledge is factual and exists independent of humans; competences can be arranged hierarchically from simple to complex. Teaching and learning, according to this model, should be sequenced according to a universal, cognitive, developmental series. In contrast, scholars and educators who maintain an ideological of literacy 'view literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society, and recognise the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts' (Street, 1993, p.7). In this view, literacy 'is a social process, in which particular socially constructed technologies are used within particular institutional frameworks for specific social purposes' (Street, 1984, p. 97). The ideological model emphasises the ways that sociocultural contexts mediate learning.

Further, models of literacy incorporate presumptions about the relationship between literacy and social change. The autonomous model of literacy treats literacy 'as independent of social context, an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character' (Street, 1993, p. 5). Educators and development experts who subscribe to the autonomous model are fairly sanguine about the impact of knowledge acquisition on intellectual development, social development and economic mobility. In contrast, the ideological model of literacy recognises the ways in which social forces and cultural contexts constrain the learning and uses of literacy.

The concept of educational projects guided by elements from particular models of literacy builds upon and extends Freire's basic distinction between banking and problem-posing education in several important ways. First, rather than relying on a vague reference to oppressors and oppressed, as did Freire, the concept insists that we examine the material resources and institutional arrangements that buttress schooling as politics. Second, drawing upon Freire, the concept of educational projects suggests that we interrogate the knowledge politics embodied in the curriculum as well as the politics of classroom social interactions between teacher and student and among students. The notion of educational projects goes further, though, to identify the ways in which fundamental theories of knowledge and learning reinforce particular assumptions about the potential relationship between schooling and social change.

In what follows, I examine the competing educational projects as manifested in literacy programmes for youth and adults in Brazil. In the first section, I outline how educational projects developed over time, emphasising the institutional and material influences, key social actors and ideologies that shaped them. In the second section, after explaining my research methods, I draw upon a multiple-case study to examine how two, distinct contemporary educational projects compete to define youth and adult literacy and delimit its uses.

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Educational projects in Brazilian youth and adult literacy programmes

Within Brazil, over time, two discernible educational projects have taken shape. The conventional project portrays literacy as serving individual and societal-wide economic development; it predominates in systems of formal schooling. Those working within conventional literacy classrooms generally employ an autonomous model of literacy, viewing literacy acquisition as a universal, cognitive process involving the mastery of progressively more complex skills with the potential for 'autonomous' effects within the learner's life. Proponents of the second project, widely known as *popular education*, advocate a more communal vision of human development: schooling, directed at marginalised populations, criticises inequity, promotes social, rather than individual, explanations for that lack and encourages political action. This educational project predominates in non-governmental organisations, whose teachers and administrators adopt a more ideological model of literacy. Within Brazil, non-formal, popular educators, inspired by Paulo Freire, mounted and continue to maintain a significant politicised educational project that contests the widespread, hegemonic (but not permanent, ubiquitous or omnipotent) conventional project of literacy.

A historical perspective

Conceptualisations of literacy, its purpose and its relationship to social change have shifted over time in Brazil with the influence of various institutions, resource streams and educational ideologies. In the 1940s, Brazil, like much of the developing world, had an educational system limited in scope to urban centres. As a result, in 1950, 50%, or more, of the population was classified as illiterate. In the wake of World War II, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) changed international perceptions of illiteracy; influenced by modernisation theories, Unesco staff argued in their publications and conferences that illiteracy inhibited economic growth and the spread of democracy (Jones, 1990). In Brazil, from 1947–1964, Unesco inspired state-funded, centralised literacy 'campaigns' to 'eradicate' the 'cultural insufficiencies' of illiterate Brazilians (Paiva, 1973, p.180; Beisiegel 1974; di Ricco, 1979). Despite these efforts, by 1960, 40% of the Brazilian population remained illiterate—and therefore, by law, excluded from the right to vote (IBGE: Censos Demográficos e Contagem da População, 1996).

In the early 1960s, savvy Northeastern political organisers connected to peasant leagues, liberation theology-inspired radical Catholic organisations and municipal and state political parties recognised the political import of enfranchising the masses through literacy; the intense, widespread, experimental and diffuse educational efforts that resulted have come to be known as popular education (see, e.g. Brandão, 1980; Beisiegel 1982; Costa, Jaccoud & Costa, 1986; La Belle, 1986; Torres, 1990; Gadotti, 1994; Scocuglia, 1997). A young Northeasterner named Paulo Freire rose to prominence for his radical literacy pedagogy, which combined Christian notions of equality before God and a Marxist critique of unequal class relations. Freire reframed the fundamental conception of literacy when he argued that an egalitarian

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pedagogy would overturn class divisions and liberate both oppressed and oppressor. Working with many others, Freire initiated major literacy initiatives throughout the Northeast such as the famous 1963 'literacy in forty hours' experiment in Angicos, Rio Grande do Norte (partially funded by US President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, which hoped to counter the radical elements at work in the Northeast through educational efforts) (Fernandes & Terra, 1994; Kirkendall, 2004). Soon afterward, Freire was invited by the populist Goulart federal administration to implement his literacy method nationally.

These and similar efforts were terminated with the military coup in 1964, which criminalised popular education. In 1967, the military dictators inaugurated a national, vocationally-oriented literacy programme called MOBRAL (*Movimento Brasileiro de Alfabetização*, or Brazilian Literacy Movement); influenced by human capital theory, the dictators believed literacy would contribute to national capitalist development (Beisiegel, 1974; Cairns, 1975; Corrêa, 1977, 1979; di Ricco, 1979; Jannuzzi, 1979; Germano, 1992). MOBRAL functioned vigorously throughout the 1970s and was only terminated in 1985 after re-democratisation.

Ironically, Freire's exile by the dictatorship prompted the international spread of popular education. For a decade, Freire worked at the World Council of Churches in Geneva; in that position, he actively participated in projects in Latin America and Africa (Freire, 1978; Freire & Faundez, 1989). Freire also worked for a short time at Harvard University's School of Education, augmenting the interest of US college and university faculty members, who publicised his work widely. Further, Freire's involvement in Unesco-sponsored international conferences enhanced global access to his ideas.

Educational projects, then, require serious and sustained political work at macro-social levels. They involve political alliances, such as the one in the early 1960s in Northeastern Brazil between the Catholic Church, grassroots social movements and elected officials; the tentative alliance between Kennedy's USAID and Freire's Angicos literacy experiment; or the coalition formed by the military dictatorship, USAID and thousands of middle-class volunteer teachers during the period of MOBRAL. Educational projects require significant institutional and financial support, such as the support given to Freire by the World Council of Churches. And they entail the selective appropriation of guiding theories, philosophies and slogans, such as the amalgamation of liberation theology and Marxism guiding popular educators, or the adoption of human capital theory by the post-1964 government.

Contemporary educational projects in Brazilian adult literacy programmes

The educational projects of the 1960s and 1970s survived re-democratisation in 1985. The conventional educational project continues to predominate and features widely in public schooling. After 1985, popular educators resumed their work with the support of Catholic networks and progressive local and state political parties. Furthermore, as I discuss in greater depth below, new initiatives

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have combined elements of conventional and popular educational projects in unusual ways.

After re-democratisation, some popular educators recommenced their political education work. Though the social movement never fully recovered its momentum (Beisiegel, 1982), popular education has survived in non-governmental organisations, churches (especially Catholic organisations influenced by liberation theology), union halls and schools of education in public universities. Popular educators organised in local, state and national networks, such as the *Rede de Apoio a Ação Alfabetizadora do Brasil* [Brazilian Network to Support Literacy Action], serve as aggressive and vocal watch-dogs of federal, state and local policy regarding youth and adult education policy. Further, several key organisations disseminate popular education on a national scale. The *Instituto Paulo Freire* [Paulo Freire Institute] and *Ação Educativa* [Educational Action], both in São Paulo, publish articles, books and reports, maintain archives, provide consulting and offer professional development for organisations across Brazil.

Since 1985, local, state and federal governments have continued to play an important role in literacy politics. The 1996 Law of Directives and Bases of Education (*LDB*) and the 1988 Constitution guaranteed the right to schooling for youth and adults. In the late 1990s, the federal government published a (recommended, not compulsory) National Curriculum for Youth and Adult Education as well as a Manual for the Implementation of the Youth and Adult Primary Education Programmes. While centralising its control of curriculum, the federal government reduced its role in the provision of education for youth and adults (*EJA*) and propelled the municipalisation of basic education. As a result, municipalities increased their share of responsibility for EJA from 24% in 1995 to 45% in 2002, while during the same period state governments reliably taught 50% of EJA students. This shift in responsibility was marked by an overall reduction in investment. Since the late 1980s, in concert with educational trends inspired by the international *Education for All* campaign, Brazil has prioritised the basic education of children, to the detriment of EJA. Throughout the 1990s, public expense on EJA was reduced, representing less than 1% of the total expenses on education and culture by the three spheres of government. This trend was exacerbated by the 1998 implementation of a national funding policy (*FUNDEF*) that did not allow states and municipalities to count youth and adult students in their funding totals (Di Pierro & Graciano, 2003). Thus, since redemocratisation the federal government has increasingly recognised the *right* of youth and adults to literacy while reducing its funds for the provision of that right. Whether state and local governments assume that the responsibility depends largely on the ideologies held by local ministers of education about the importance of EJA. In sum, the conventional educational project continues to be situated within public, educational bureaucracies, though now at various levels; and it continues to receive significantly more (and more consistent) funding than its rival, though its material base has been significantly reduced.

However, increasingly, proponents of the conventional and popular educational projects are working together on specific areas of youth and adult literacy. For

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example, the national EJA curriculum published by the federal government and distributed to state and local levels was developed largely by staff at *Ação Educativa*, a Freirean-influenced organisation that provides professional development and conducts research critical of neoliberal educational policies.[2] Further, the municipalisation of EJA has stimulated a rapid increase in partnerships between local and state leftist governments and civil society organisations; the MOVA experiment in São Paulo city in the late 1980s/early 1990s under a Worker's Party administration and municipal education secretary Paulo Freire is perhaps the most famous example (see Stromquist, 1997; O'Cadiz *et al.*, 1998).

The blending of educational projects is a relatively new experiment. As I discuss below, in the local level classrooms I observed, educational practices appear to cleave, still, to separate educational projects.

Contrasting case studies of educational projects

The data for this section derive from a 24 month ethnographic study of adult literacy programmes in two Brazilian cities. This article features case studies in four schools: two public-school literacy classrooms in a state-funded school in Rio de Janeiro; one Freirean-inspired classroom in a Catholic school that offered night-time classes to female domestic workers in the same neighbourhood; one public-school literacy classroom in a state-funded school in João Pessoa, Paraíba, in the Northeast (the Brazilian region with the highest levels of illiteracy); and three literacy classrooms in a community-based, Freirean organisation funded by European Catholic priests.[3] The cases were selected to represent institutional types (state versus non-governmental organisations). I specifically sought NGOs that embraced Freirean pedagogy, and in each city I sought to contrast public schools to NGOs in the same neighbourhood, in order to increase the similarity between student populations. My goal was to examine to what extent institutions, material resources and overarching theories of schooling and development in each educational project influenced teachers' beliefs and practices. In total, I spent at least one night a week in each of the seven classrooms over a period of at least six months (longer in most cases). In addition, I interviewed the eleven literacy teachers involved in these four schools several times over the course of the research.

The conventional education project in public literacy classrooms

This section draws on intensive participant observation in three public school literacy classrooms (two in Rio, one in Joao Pessoa) and extended interviews with the three literacy teachers (Rosilene, Vanusa and Alineide) to see whether and how the teachers' theories and practices manifested the dominant educational project. The teachers worked in vastly different cities with different local economies and unique populations. Further, they had remarkably different biographies and professional preparation: Rosilene, in Rio, came from an urban middle class family, had a college education and worked as an elementary school principal during the

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day; Vanusa, in Rio, came from a rural, lower middle class family, had a high school education and worked during the day at her family-owned food stand outside a factory; and Alineide, in João Pessoa, came from an urban lower middle class family, had a high school education and taught elementary school during the day. These teachers had never attended professional development sessions together. Nevertheless, the teachers' conceptions of literacy, schooling and knowledge were surprisingly similar, suggesting a coherence of the conventional educational project across systemic levels.

General educational approach

In their classroom interactions and during the interviews I conducted with them, Rosilene, Vanusa and Alineide discussed literacy in a way that suggested that the purpose of schooling was to prepare students for inclusion in pre-existing economic and social structures. In their classrooms, Rosilene, Vanusa and Alineide delivered flowery speeches about the importance of schooling to 'become somebody'; they regularly urged their students to continue in school through at least the fourth grade, a level commonly required by formal sector employers, so that they could attain better jobs with stability, higher incomes and workers' benefits. In private interviews, the teachers stated that a fourth grade credential was unlikely for their students, and that basic literacy skills would not create much economic mobility. They held modest expectations that their students would find work as in-home caregivers, waiters or garbage collectors.

The public school teachers generally located blame for a lack of economic mobility in the students, not in the system. They regularly declared students' lack of ability. Rosilene told me that 'people of this level speak wrong' and 'are hard to teach'. Vanusa said, further, that certain students were not 'civilized'. Once, when two boys were arguing in her classroom, Vanusa told them to quit and then told me 'I have to be a lion-tamer in the classroom'. When a fight between two teenage boys over who could sit at a particular desk resulted in one throwing a chair, Vanusa exclaimed in frustration, 'These students are animals! You have to choose which ones can be domesticated and which can't'.

Rosilene, Vanusa and Alineide maintained an autonomous model of schooling. They viewed knowledge as a collection of facts, like laws, that exist independent of people and context, rather than as suppositions that should be engaged, challenged or interpreted. They conceived of knowledge as an autonomous body of information that could be owned and transmitted: they defined the teachers' work as 'passing information', as though it were a cohesive, singular object to be distributed by educational authorities. Alineide referred to teaching as 'leaving something' with your students. When students asked questions, they were not exploring alternate meanings but 'removing doubts', as it was commonly expressed. Teachers referred to knowledge as quantifiable: I heard them describe people who did not know how to sign their names as '*sabe nada*', or 'one who knows nothing'. Mastery of knowledge was an either/or situation—you either knew it or you did not.

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In practice, this universalistic theory of knowledge and transmission model of learning meant that the teachers regularly asked factually-oriented questions to which they already knew the answer. They followed an initiation-response-evaluation pattern common among teacher-centred classrooms. Questions did not invite discussion, interpretation or argument; instead, they 'exposed' students to knowledge. For example, one evening while writing the date and the name of the school on the board, Rosilene asked students to explain the significance of the names of the school, the public plaza and the main street in the neighbourhood. When they didn't know, she explained that one was the mayor of Rio in 1847, another was an engineer involved in urban planning at the turn of the century and the third was a royal personage. Later, Rosilene proudly told me she had injected a social studies lesson into the class. In that lesson, she had displayed her knowledge to the students rather than exploring with students the impact of those people or their eras on the subsequent development of Brazil or encouraging students in some other way to attach significance or relevance to the facts or think beyond the information provided. The public school teachers viewed knowledge as autonomous—independent, external to people, factual and incontestable.

Literacy pedagogy

For Rosilene, Vanusa and Alineide, teaching literacy required the dissection of knowledge into constituent and digestible bits to be distributed in developmentally appropriate amounts. They believed that literacy instruction begins with training students to correlate letters or letter clusters to phonemes, or sounds. When I asked her, 'How do you teach someone to read and write?', Alineide explained:

> Through the symbols. I show the child [*sic*] the letters as if I were showing them a picture of someone. I say, "Do you see this picture? This picture is a letter. This letter is called 'a'". And I start to develop the alphabetic process, associating the figure with the letter. After learning the letters, they enter the syllabic process. The union of the syllables to form words… I explain the whole process of the alphabet, and from there move to the syllables, and from there move to the formation of words. The student gradually acquires them, seeing them every day and learning them through group activities and reading.

From individual letters, the teachers moved to syllables, which were introduced from 'easiest' to 'hardest'. They taught syllables in what were called 'families', which consisted of a consonant (or consonant cluster) plus each of the five vowels. Students learned the 'easy' syllables first; syllables that required orthographic transformations were saved for last. This strategy was not easy to implement in practice, however. For example, late in the year Rosilene's students were beginning to study the *es* sound. The teacher asked students for examples of words using this sound, and they offered *espada* [sword], *escala* [ladder], *espelho* [mirror] and *espinha* [spine or pimple]. 'That's good', she said as she copied the words on the board. 'But you don't know the *lh* and *nh* yet'. The syllabic logic of instruction caused these teachers to invoke words for their sounds rather than for their meaning. In fact, the

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words and sentences that appeared in the lessons were often quite simplistic and divorced from a broader context.

Language lessons were formulaic, including precisely the same exercises (with different words) each class period: fill-in-the-blank, join syllables to make a word, re-arrange letters to make a word or words to make a sentence and/or dictation. Rarely were students asked to create their own sentences; I found only three such occasions in my field notes, and these exercises lasted only for 1–2 minutes. Repetition featured broadly in these teachers' courses. Rosilene and Vanusa said that copying words repeatedly helped to 'fix' their meaning. This justified their reliance on the blackboard (necessary due to a lack of didactic materials).

Also remarkable was the fact that these lessons featured copying, and some reading, much more centrally than speaking. Copying was the primary activity; students transferred groups of letters from the board to their own papers. Copying did not require comprehension: students regularly transposed letters or mistakenly mixed words from the sentence in exercise a) with those in exercise b) without realising it. Other than 'off-task' conversations that occurred between teacher and students or among students, talk was remarkably absent. Oral interactions were subordinate to the copying exercises; for example, teachers would ask students to read copied words aloud.

In summary, the words and actions of these three public school teachers demonstrated a marked conservative ideology about the purpose of schooling and an autonomous model of literacy. The similarity in their ideologies and literacy pedagogies suggests the relative coherence of what I'm calling the conservative educational project, despite individual biographical, professional and experiential differences among teachers.

The popular education project in NGO literacy classrooms

In contrast, data from observations in four Freirean literacy classrooms (one in Rio, three in João Pessoa) and interviews with eight literacy teachers in the two NGOs suggest that these teachers were strongly guided by the Freirean social critique and an ideological model of knowledge, teaching, learning and literacy that constitute the popular education project. It is important to note that literacy programmes that identify as 'Freirean' vary considerably, and sometimes teachers in 'Freirean' classrooms reject or contest Freirean pedagogy (see, for example, Stromquist's 1997 study of MOVA-São Paulo). Furthermore, here I am discussing *teachers' intentions* regarding literacy and liberation, rather than *actual outcomes*. Indeed, Stromquist (1997) found that literacy classes did not result in widespread student empowerment, a finding corroborated by my own work (see Bartlett, 2005). Educational projects, whether traditional or popular, cannot and do not dictate classroom practice. However, here I wish to emphasise the relative coherence (despite variation) in educational projects—a consistency made possible, I argue, by the institutions, financial resources, ideologies and theories of knowledge and learning shared by a group of social actors.

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The seven NGO teachers in João Pessoa had somewhat different life experiences. Two of the older teachers immigrated as children to João Pessoa with their working class families from rural areas; they had no more than a fifth grade education; they did not hold other jobs. One older teacher had grown up in João Pessoa, had completed high school, and taught during the day in a municipal elementary school. The four remaining teachers, each in their twenties, had grown up in the neighbourhood and completed high school. However, each of the seven NGO teachers in the community-based NGO called VIDA lived in the same working class neighbourhood and had become involved with the programme through their participation in the liberation-theology influenced local Catholic Church. They participated in the same professional development activities twice a month. Therefore, it is not surprising to find consistency in their expression of the ideologies and pedagogies that typify the popular education project. It is remarkable, however, to note the similarity of their practices and expressed beliefs to those expressed by Aliene, the teacher in Rio. Aliene was from an urban, middle class family, had a college education, and taught in an elementary school during the day. She was a devout Catholic who participated in a progressive (though certainly not radical) church. She had been teaching for many years in the NGO, and she reported being influenced by the annual Freirean professional development she received there.

General educational approach

The NGO teachers in both Rio and João Pessoa exhibited a more ideological model of literacy than their public school counterparts. That is, they conceptualised literacy as something deeply embedded in economic, political and social structures, as well as something capable of transforming those structures. They shared Freire's class critique; they excoriated the gaping divide between the rich and the poor in Brazil, and they devoted their energies and resources to providing education for working-class or unemployed people, frequently living in precarious circumstances. For example, when I asked her why literacy matters, Aliene replied, 'Until the poor learn to read and write, they can never demand their rights'. Lisete, from VIDA, offered a similar explanation. She said, 'Literacy is the key to learning to 'read the world and the word', as Freire said. Until we know how to read, we will always be ruled by the rich'.

The NGO teachers were highly critical of the power relations embedded in public schooling, even as they maintained a fervent belief in the socially progressive potential of education. Rather than blaming the students for failure, they blamed society and the educational system for 'denying' students the 'opportunity to learn' (Aliene 14 March 1996; Jaciára 19 August 1999). They firmly believed that society is divided between the wealthy and the labourers; it wasn't difficult for them to generalise the economic and political monopoly of the wealthy to the possession of knowledge as well.

NGO teachers shared a commitment to education in the service of social change. For example, Aliene told the women in the Rio programme that literacy would help them 'demand their rights'. In comparison, Antônia described VIDA's purpose thus:

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> [The purpose] is the formation of families, that they learn their rights as citizens… [Currently], each person worries about himself, his own problems… There's nothing to encourage people to work together, to try to share what they know, [to show] that without joining together to get what they want they'll never get anywhere. This is our objective, to make them know that we, I say we because I'm part of the poor class, that we also have the right to shout, to demand what we need. We weren't born just to be hungry and stay home. We were born to run, to fight, to shout for what we want. [The NGO] does not just teach the ABCs. It's teaches each person to be a citizen.

In an attempt to (as they expressed it) 'rescue' or *resgatar* the 'knowledge' of the poor, the teachers esteemed and promoted 'popular' knowledge. These teachers aimed to teach 'within the students' reality', a ubiquitous phrase. Aliene explained that students (especially adult students) were not 'blank slates' but came to the classroom with their own 'wisdom'. The teachers structured the classroom around dialogue, they said, in order to valorise and take advantage of students' prior knowledge and to make the school relevant to their lives. For example, when I asked Lila to explain how she taught literacy, she said, 'In order to alphabetise, we seek first to see what the people bring, what is their home knowledge. I think it's important to enter their world'. When I asked another teacher to explain the advantage of starting with dialogue, she said: 'We come to know what each one says and thinks. And then it's possible to work [i.e. teach and learn] what we want and what they want… [I start with dialogue] instead of starting by throwing the subject at them… throwing it on the board'. Hence, a VIDA class on human health included home remedies for common illnesses. Aliene began a lesson on housing inequalities by asking students to tell of the deaths caused in their *favela* by a recent flood. The teachers I worked with told me that they valued students' experience as another avenue to knowledge; in this way, they challenged the idea of the school as the possessor and distributor of knowledge. Teachers also said that dialogue contributed to their overarching goal of achieving equity inside and beyond the classroom and, unlike the public school teachers, the NGO teachers encouraged talk in the classroom. As Rafael said, the classroom practice declares that 'we are all equal, there is dialogue here'.

Literacy pedagogy

The literacy teachers in the two organisations I studied did not employ Freire's syllabic method of literacy pedagogy.[4] Instead, they embraced what might be identified as a constructivist approach to literacy and learning, which emphasised context, meaning and whole units of language (such as words or stories). The pedagogy used by the NGO teachers moved from themes to dialogue and/or text to words or syllables and then back to text, seeking to contextualise syllabic and orthographic learning in a social context.

The teachers in both NGOs established themes through discussions and the presentation of visual or written texts. They generally rejected pre-fabricated curricula and opted for dialogue or discussion in the classroom. Further, NGO teachers sought to employ texts—visual or (mostly) written—that were (in their opinion) directly connected to students lives or had an overt political message. So,

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for example, the teacher from St. Mary's used a poster from the National Council of Brazilian Bishops promoting the forgiveness of international foreign loan debt, which featured a photograph of a starving family surrounded by monetary notes flying out of the country. VIDA teachers employed texts written by students from previous years.

After establishing this sociocultural context, the teachers in both NGOs proceeded to engage more traditional content and pedagogy. They taught the 'families' of syllables and encouraged students to copy words and sentences from the text or seek particular forms (e.g. singular and plural) in the written texts. Teachers dictated key words to students at the end of class. Or they asked students to transform a word in print to an all capital or a cursive form. As Lila told me, 'You can't teach just through the dialogue, or just through the blackboard. It has to be both. You have to work through writing as well as through dialogue'. According to my fieldnotes, the NGO teachers in both cities dedicated about half as much time to syllable-level activities than their public-school counterparts; they spent at least as much time on discussions, reading excerpts from formal texts or student-authored texts from previous years and writing (sentences and short essays, rather than the fill-in-the-blank activities that featured in public school classrooms.)

In sum, in comparison to the public school teachers I observed, these popular educators demonstrated a more ideological model of the purpose of schooling and of literacy pedagogy. They excoriated inequality, sought to create egalitarian relations between teacher and student and placed students' oral and written language(s), their prior knowledge and their points of view in the center of classroom practice. These educators embodied the larger popular educational project. Their professional development experiences and their prior participation in liberation-inspired Catholic organisations seemed to provide a philosophical basis for their pedagogical practice. The comparative case study reported here found a remarkable similarity in the ideologies, discourses, pedagogies and theories of knowledge and learning employed by teachers in disparate Freirean literacy NGOs.

Discussion and implications: educational projects in comparative perspective

As the preceding discussion illustrates, two educational projects vie for control of adult educational programmes, pedagogies and resources in Brazil. The first, which prevails in the public schools, enjoys relatively advantageous (though declining) funding, maintains an instrumentalist view of the relationship between schooling and socioeconomic change and employs an autonomous model of literacy. The second educational project, popular education, predominates in non-formal education; it faces resource fluctuations that diminish its potential impact. Popular education favours a transformationalist view of the relationship between schooling and socioeconomic change and an ideological model of literacy. The similarity of educational projects across space suggests that overarching institutions, resources and ideologies exert great influence.

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The field of comparative and international education could benefit from a broader comparison of educational projects. For example, the popular education model, born of the sociopolitical struggles in the Brazilian Northeast during the 1960s, is indigenous to Brazil; however, through the auspices of the Catholic Church and Freire's popularity in some academic circles, it has been exported to other locations. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be valuable to compare how popular education projects diverge when institutional, material and ideological conditions vary (for example, across national contexts). The concept of educational projects thus provides comparative scholars a solid basis for theoretical generalisation across sites.

Attention to educational projects serves several purposes. First, the idea of *competing* educational projects highlights the important political and cultural initiatives carried out through schooling. Too often, literacy instruction is considered to be the transmission of skills. Instead, this comparative analysis demonstrates the ideological work done in and through literacy schooling. Second, the emphasis on the *plurality* of educational projects encourages scholars to attend not only to the hegemonic project of world mass education but also to local, alternative models. People working in and through national and international organisations, such as ministries of education, the World Bank or the Catholic Church, have extensive access to and influence over the institutions, funding, curricula, pedagogies and methods of assessment involved in schooling. But their decisions are not uncontested. They too face the challenges mounted by other interest groups, such as social movements and political organisations, which work through alternate organisational structures and employ competing discourses regarding the purposes of education or the meaning of intelligence. In short, the dominant educational project must accommodate, permeate or surmount rival educational projects to maintain hegemony.

Key approaches in the field of comparative and international education tend to emphasise one level or facet of schooling. Political scientists often focus on institutions; scholars of policy borrowing and lending have emphasised the international politics of educational policy; economists attend to the distribution and impact of material resources; educational ethnographers, in contrast, examine local cultural and classroom practices. The concept of educational projects suggests that, to the extent possible, scholars in comparative and international education need to attend to the cultural, economic, political *and* social structural processes of schooling. This approach promises to be particularly valuable in our interdisciplinary field.

Acknowledgements

I have been developing the ideas presented in this paper over a long period of time. I wish to thank Katherine Anderson–Levitt, Bryan Brayboy, Peter Demerath, Dorothy Holland, Catherine Lutz, Vandra Masemann, Teresa McCarty, Kathy Schultz, Peg Sutton, Wendy Schwartz, Fran Vavrus, and anonymous reviewers for *Compare* for their help as I rethought and analyzed the materials presented in this article.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Archer and Cottingham, 1996; Fink and Arnove, 1991; Foley, 1998; Hamilton and Cunningham 1989; Holst, 2002; Indabawa et al, 2000; Kane, 2001; La Belle, 1987; Magendzo, 1990; Mayo, 1995, 1999; Picon, 1991; Schugurensky, 2000; Stromquist 1997; Wong 1995.
2. See http://www.mec.gov.br/sef/Jovem/procur.shtm; http://www.acaoeducativa.org.br.
3. This data is supplemented by my work with two other Freirean NGOs in João Pessoa: Community Works, which received funding from European Catholic development organisations and provided night-time literacy classes in poor communities throughout the city of João Pessoa; and Building Together, a unique partnership between the public, federal university and the construction workers' union that offered nightly lessons at students' work sites. I attended all teacher-training sessions for Community Works and Building Together. I also interviewed ten teachers from the two programmes.
4. However, during my two years of fieldwork, I observed several NGOs that clung rigidly to 'Freire's method'.

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