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Literacy's verb: Exploring what literacy is and what literacy does

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Abstract

This article considers contemporary policy claims about "what literacy is" and "what literacy does." First, the article reviews in-depth the ways in which development discourses define literacy, and the claims made in development discourses about the "consequences" of literacy for economic and political development. I then draw on 24 months of ethnographic research in Brazil with 41 highly impoverished literacy students from four literacy programs in two cities in order to demonstrate that there is no predictable "impact" of literacy on development. Instead, I show that the opportunities afforded by literacy depend greatly on the *types of literacy* and the *types of literacy programs* made available to students, as well as students' cultural understandings of literacy and the social, political, and economic contexts within which they attempt to assert new literacy practices. The article concludes that we should not consider literacy as an actor with some "impact"; instead, we should examine how people use literacy in ways that are conditioned by social and cultural forces.
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1. Introduction

Popular conceptions hold that literacy has some kind of "effect," that it provides those who become literate with improved job prospects and/or empowerment. In their laudable attempts to garner international monetary support for literacy programs, development publications also suggest that literacy "confers benefits," such as improved employment opportunities and/or political engagement. Drawing on 24 months of ethnographic research among literacy programs for youth and adults in Brazil, this article examines the so-called "consequences" of literacy education in terms of economic mobility and political participation. I first review claims in mainstream development discourse about the "consequences," "effects, or "benefits" of literacy, and I critique these models that suggest literacy will have some kind of automatic, universal "effect." I then present two key findings from my case studies of both public and non-governmental, Freirean literacy organizations. First, the economic mobility achieved by students as a result of participating in these programs resulted from the *relationships and networks* they cultivated through and in schools, rather than the literacy they learned in school. Second, while several of the literacy programs I studied seemed to have little effect on students' political engagement, one of the Freirean organizations did, in fact, encourage a limited increase in some students' political engagement by organizing students to participate in various political events. Notably, however, it was not *literacy*

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per se that encouraged political engagement for some students; it was the visibility of accessible political events as well as the rhetoric, in class, urging participation. This article concludes with a reflection on the conditions under which it might be reasonable to expect critical literacy programs to promote social change.

2. Orienting concepts

Much of contemporary development discourse about literacy constitutes what anthropologist Brian Street called an *autonomous model of literacy*. 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). The autonomous model is really more like a bundle of beliefs or ideologies about the nature of literacy. Autonomous ideologies tend to conceptualize literacy as a skill learned gradually as the individual moves through universal stages of cognitive and physical development. This skill, many claim, results in individual rational thought, intellectual development, social development, and/or economic mobility. Autonomous approaches also assume a homology between the individual and the society; they predict that literacy at the individual level will result in economic, social and political development at the national level. Most importantly, as Street (1984) writes, the autonomous model ''isolates literacy as an independent variable and then claims to be able to study its consequences. These consequences are classically represented in terms of economic 'take-off' or in terms of cognitive skills'' (p. 2). Proponents of an autonomous model tend to understand literacy in fairly narrow terms, ignoring the incredible diversity of literacy practices; they privilege certain kinds of literacy and certain ways of using literacy, disregarding the arbitrary nature by which certain practices are elevated as superior to others. An autonomous model of literacy prevails in current literacy policy and popular discourse.

In contrast, anthropologists and other sociocultural scholars generally subscribe to an *ideological model of literacy*. Advocates of this position ''view literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society, and recognize the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts'' (Street, 1993, p. 7). An ideological model

> forces one to be more wary of grand generalizations and cherished assumptions about literacy 'in itself.' Those who subscribe to this second model concentrate on the specific social practices of reading and writing. They recognize the ideological and therefore culturally embedded nature of such practices. The model stresses the significance of the socialization process in the construction of the meaning of literacy for informants, and is therefore concerned with the general social institutions through which this process takes place and not just the specific 'educational' ones. (Street, 1999, p. 56)

This ''social turn'' in literacy studies resulted from a steady stream of influential research produced over the past 30 years.[1] Recent scholars have shown how contexts such as schools, religious organizations, and families radically alter what counts as literacy and how it is practiced (see, for example, Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Barton et al., 2000; Hull and Schultz, 2001). Gee (1996) emphasizes the serious sociocultural negotiation of identity and self that all people do when they engage particular literacy practices (see also Bartlett, 2007a). Scholars have questioned the unity of literacy itself, emphasizing the multiplicity of literacies, which vary by language, script, domain, role, network, participants, context, and other factors (New London Group, 1996, 2000). From this analytical perspective, literacy cannot and should not be defined *a priori*, as it is by most conventional measures of literacy; instead, what counts as literacy is itself the result of on-going, complex sociocultural negotiations. Finally, the realization that literacy practices shape and are shaped by larger power structures owes much to Paulo Freire's insistence that, while both the absence and presence of literacy have generally served to oppress the poor, reading and writing ''the word and the world'' might also contribute to their liberation (Freire, 1970; Freire and Macedo, 1987). Critical scholars of literacy continue to investigate the connections between

[1]Key contributions were made by Heath (1983) and Scribner and Cole (1981), among others. See Street (1984) for a full review of the key studies that informed his distinction between autonomous and ideological models of literacy; see Collins and Blot (2003) and Collins (1995) for a helpful overview of the broader field.

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literacy and power,[2] for example by revealing the impact of standardization and testing regimes on linguistic and cultural diversity (McCarty, 2005), or by examining the complex and unanticipated outcomes of Freirean pedagogy (Bartlett, 2005a, Shor and Pari, 1999).

Lately, scholars in literacy studies have ventured criticisms of some of the ethnographic studies of literacy. Maddox (2007) suggests that the autonomous-ideological dichotomy has become a ''new great divide'' that obstructs the generation of cross-cultural generalizations. Brandt and Clinton (2002) argue that ethnographic studies of literacy ''exaggerate the power of local contexts [and human agency] to define the meaning and forms that literacy takes'' (p. 337). Instead, drawing on Latour, they argue that text has a materiality, a 'thingness,' that transcends the local and human intention; they call for ethnographic studies that consider ''technologies as actants at the scenes of reading and writing, as active and ideological social agents toward which readers and writers orient'' (Brandt and Clinton, 2006, p. 255). Further, Brandt and Clinton (2006) recommend that, rather than looking for causality, scholars examine mediation. In other words, as a technology, literacy provides certain ''affordances'' or ''potentialities;'' its 'uptake' by people is (in turn) shaped by cultural, social, political, and economic forces.

In general, then, sociocultural approaches focus more on the *types* of literacy being employed by people, the *meanings* with which they are imbued, the ways in which literacy practices participate in larger power structures, and the ''affordances'' provided by literacy skills or literacy status. As McCarty writes, ''the key question is not whether one reads or writes or does not, but rather the social meaning of languages and literacies—their roles in human social life'' (2005, p. xix). Such an approach steers anthropologists away from attempts to arrive at causal links and toward careful study of the complex social and cultural interactions that influence what kind of ''outcomes'' will result from schooling.

3. What literacy is: development discourses

Definitions of literacy are not innocent: they incorporate beliefs and assumptions that have political implications. Development discourses of literacy tend to include a variety of ideologies about what literacy is: a tendency to conceptualize literacy as a singular phenomenon; the assumption that literacy is made up of a discrete set of skills that can be arrayed in a developmental hierarchy; the conceptualization of literacy as something that can be separated from its social context; and the belief that literacy is measurable by standardized tasks.

Most quantitative analyses of literacy and development reported in development studies rely on indirect measures that define literacy as ''either/or,'' either literate or not. The census or survey data reported by national Ministries of Education often employ the UNESCO definition of literacy as the ''ability to read and/or write, with understanding, a simple short statement on everyday life.'' In cross-national comparisons of literacy rates, language of literacy is rarely specified; it is difficult to know whether the statistics reported for a country represent literacy in a single official language or include literacy in one of several official languages, not to mention non- or semi-official languages (Wagner, 2003, p. 298).[3] Further, until quite recently, all of these literacy estimates were based on one of three measures: self-declaration, report by household head, or proxied by years of schooling (either attended or completed, depending on the situation). These indirect measures of literacy have tended to overestimate literacy; recent direct assessments of literacy have shown that ''(a) a standard educational attainment proxy for literacy across developing countries does not exist and (b) educational thresholds for widespread literacy tend to be *higher* than previously assumed'' (UNESCO 2006, p. 182) The variability of measures has introduced serious concerns about their reliability.

In recent years, international development organizations have advocated for the use of direct literacy measures and a wider definition of literacy. Since the 1990s, many countries and agencies have initiated household surveys with direct assessments (Schaffner, 2005; Wagner, 2003). In addition, during the same period, the OECD initiated several cross-national, comparative surveys of literacy. These surveys expanded the definition of literacy from an ''either/or'' construct to consider various domains. For example, the International Adult

[2]For an excellent overview of critical literacy, see Lankshear and McLaren (1993).

[3]For studies of the interactions between languages and literacies, see Street (Ed.) 2001; Martin-Jones and Jones (Eds.), 2000.

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Literacy Survey considered prose, document, and quantitative literacy. In addition, within each domain the IALS developed a hierarchy of literacy tasks from simplest to most difficult. On this basis, they scored individuals on a continuous scale that was categorized into five "levels" of literacy (OECD and Statistics Canada, 1995). While this model is well-regarded in the field, there is growing recognition that it has limited feasibility for development contexts, which require literacy assessments that are "smaller, quicker, and cheaper" (Wagner, 2003).

Newer measures of literacy, too, incorporate literacy ideologies. For one thing, though they claim to measure literacy, they often deal primarily with reading. Assessments that incorporate scales of tasks rely upon four key assumptions that should be considered: the idea that literacy is a cognitive skill possessed (or not) by individuals; the belief that skills can be arrayed hierarchically; the idea that the hierarchy of skills is universal, that is, that it is the same across different languages and contexts; and the belief that literacy is measurable.

First, literacy assessments treat literacy as a property of individual cognition; for example, IALS uses "a model of literacy that treats it as a set of information-processing cognitive skills" (Hamilton and Barton 2000, p. 379). This model contrasts sharply to sociocultural approaches to literacy, which do not take the individual as the unit of analysis or cognition as universal but rather foreground cultural and social relations in literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1992; Street, 1984). So, for example, Gee (2001) argued that literacy

> is not first and foremost a mental possession of individuals. Rather it is first and foremost a social relationship among people, their ways with words, deeds, and things and their institutions. Literacy is primarily and fundamentally out in the social, historical, and political world. It is only secondarily a set of cognitive skills, skills which subserve literacies as social acts in quite diverse ways in different contexts. (p. iv)

Indeed, cross-national literacy assessments assume that it is possible to 'filter out' culture; as Hamilton and Barton explained, they treat "culture as error":

> Surveys in the tradition of the IALS are based on standardizing assumptions which mean that culture inevitably is seen as a problem: it becomes a distracting variable whose influence must be minimized in order to eliminate test bias. From the IALS perspective, the search for validity involves identifying a common cultural core of test items which elicit a similar pattern of response across all cultures and language groups. Within this tradition it is common-sense that any literacy practice not recognised beyond a particular cultural group cannot be used to generate test items for a cross-cultural study since this would constitute cultural bias. However, from the new literacy studies perspective, which sees literacy as *constituted by* its cultural context, the … search for cultural neutrality directs attention away from the very features that are most essential for an understanding of literacy and its dynamic within everyday life. (p. 382).

Literacy assessments are founded upon the assumption that literacy tasks can be extracted from cultural and social contexts. Wagner (2003) refers to this as an "etic" perspective, in contrast to the "emic" perspective adopted by sociocultural approaches. Wagner writes that

> [e]tic concepts are those which are deduced or derived from a position outside of any particular system, and have as a primary goal the analysis of more than a single social system or society…. [An] etic approach utilizes external, quantifiable, comparison-oriented measures…. For example, an etic perspective on literacy assumes that skills such as decoding, word-picture-matching, and reading a bus schedule ought to have substantially the same meaning to different individuals and across different cultural groups. (p. 296)

A sociocultural approach would question whether any notion of literacy can stand "outside of any particular system," and it would certainly argue that literacy tasks rarely have the same "meaning" to people within the same society, much less across national and cultural contexts.

Second, situated firmly within a view of literacy as cognitive skill, newer literacy assessments that measure "levels" of literacy maintain a developmentalist notion of "stages" or "levels" of literacy acquisition. This view prioritizes form over meaning, assuming that the comprehensibility of language is due to complexity rather than content. It assumes a stable linkage between skill and text. The notion of a hierarchy of skills, so prevalent in contemporary literacy pedagogy and policy, has

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been roundly critiqued by contemporary socio-cultural literacy scholars. For example, Luke and Freebody (1997a, b, 1999) have demonstrated that people use multiple skills or cuing systems simultaneously as they read, and that each of those systems is mediated by cultural and social contexts. Luke (2000) makes it clear that even phonics and phonemic awareness are thoroughly cultural and social, influenced as they are by diverse cultural and linguistic resources as well as the naturalized but culturally arbitrary privileges related to class. Likewise, Dyson's research (2002) questions stage-wise developmentalist notions of writing; she demonstrates that children's literacy practices entail a complex recontextualization of children's practices and symbolic resources in each new literacy event in ways that are hardly linear or even predictable.

Third, such assessments not only assume that there is a hierarchy of skills: they assume that the hierarchy is universal, or at the very least that it is cross-linguistic and transcontextual. This assumption is called into question by research in the acquisition of second language reading and writing. There is evidence to suggest that different languages and orthographies require different sets of literacy skills, even though some skills (especially metalinguistic ones) may transfer between languages. That literature is too large to review exhaustively here; a few examples will suffice. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998) argue that a skill such as "phonics" cannot be standardized across dialects of a language, which calls into question the validity of standardized tests like direct literacy assessments.[4] Goswami (1999) examines the relationships between different orthographies, different languages within orthographies, and the phonological skills needed to learn how to read in each of them. Koda (2005a, b) has demonstrated how people use different strategies when reading different scripts. As Bialystock notes, though "a whole range of skills in decoding and reading strategies transfer from the first language to the second,"[5] studies "comparing reading acquisition in different languages point to the specific concepts of spoken and written forms needed to read in a given system" (Bialystock, 2002, pp. 161–165).

Finally, literacy assessments assume that literacy is objectively measurable. Yet the construction of literacy measures is an utterly political process. The levels of literacy on standardized assessments are in fact "invented statistically" and "arbitrarily fixed" to allocate "a significant proportion of people to each of the levels, including the lowest; this may bear no relation to the distribution of everyday tasks people perform in their lives" (Hamilton and Barton, 2000, p. 384). Raising questions of construct validity, some scholars question whether the standard psychometric scaling techniques used in such studies are measuring a "single underlying 'dimension,'" or (quite possibly) several (Goldstein, 2004a, b, p. 9). Critiquing the US National Adult Literacy Survey, which used a similar set of domains or "scales," Reder (2000) likewise questioned the collinearity of the scales. Further, Blum et al. (2001) demonstrated that decisions about how to differentiate between levels and whether to take the "best" answer or the "average" answer yielded markedly different results.

There is, unsurprisingly, considerable disagreement over item construction in literacy assessments like IALS. Even when they mimic real-life literacy tasks, literacy assessments set up a markedly different, test-based context, which from an ideological perspective completely changes the literacy practice. As Hamilton and Barton vividly explained,

> In generating test items, the starting points were real life texts such as bus timetables, advertisements, and consumer instructions. These then underwent various transformations to turn them into test items.... There was a constant selection process, getting rid of any items that did not give consistent response patterns across different populations and they were subtly changed to turn them into more reliable test items. Each step makes the test item less life-like.... Answering test questions based on a timetable may bear no relation to people's day-to-day activities, even if they do travel by bus and use timetables. Once a real life text such as a bus timetable is wrenched out of its real life context it ceases to be a timetable and it becomes a test item. (p. 382–384)

Further, scholars have critiqued the idea that it is possible to select test items that are linguistically and culturally neutral (Goldstein, 2004a, b, p. 9; see

[4] See also Collins and Blot (2003, chapter 4) on the politics of American dialects and standardized testing.

[5] According to Bialystock, "Specific examples of transferable concepts and strategies include scanning, skimming, contextual guessing at words, tolerance for ambiguity, reading for meaning, skipping unknown words, monitoring, recognizing textual structure, and using previous learning and background knowledge to understand text" (Bialystock, 2002, pp. 161–165).

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also Levine, 1998 on item comparability). Issues of translation confound the complications introduced by "scales" or "levels" of literacy. There is some data to indicate that "items translate differently in terms of relative difficulty because of the different cultural contexts, and this is extremely difficult to allow for" (Goldstein, 2004b, p. 322). Finally, literacy measures draw from highly politicized, "scientific" theories and psychometric studies.

Yet, despite such cautions, reports of literacy rates are often taken at face value. The messy social construction of literacy becomes naturalized and reified through its measurement; literacy is transformed from social process to social fact. In contrast, ideological conceptions of literacy would argue that we must not confuse any measure of literacy with literacy itself. Literacy practices are so contextual and so variable that it would never be possible, *a priori*, to invent a measurement that would be able to account for their diversity. Literacy measures are, themselves, imbued with literacy ideologies, or particular ways of framing what literacy is.

4. What literacy does: development discourses about the "consequences" of literacy

If we agree that there is no singular definition of literacy, that all definitions of literacy are socially interested and politically motivated constructions, and that they are often internally coherent, then it becomes much more difficult to think that literacy is a monolithic "thing" that can have some "effect." Nevertheless, development documents often make autonomous claims about the effects of literacy. In this section, I want to explore the mainstream development discourse concerning the "outcomes" of literacy. The 2000 Dakar Education for All agreement set as one of its six goals the achievement of a "50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women;" the 2006 Education for All Global Monitoring Report (GMR) selected literacy as its primary theme (UNESCO, 2006). Given its prominence as an international global policy document, and because it usefully reviews the broader literature regarding the economic, political, social, cultural, and "human" "benefits" of literacy, in this article I take the 2006 Report as a prime example of development discourse concerning literacy.

The 2006 Report dedicates an entire chapter (Chapter 6) to explorations of the diverse meanings of literacy. It acknowledges that "academic… theories of literacy have evolved from those focused solely on changes in individuals to more complex views encompassing the broader social contexts" (p. 147). The chapter it cautions against reductionist definitions of literacy. Further, in its discussion of "why literacy matters," the report warns readers that:

> Benefits of literacy ensue only when broader rights and development frameworks are in place and operating effectively.
> Benefits also depend on the channels through which literacy is acquired and practiced.
> Most research has not separated the benefits of literacy per se from those of attending school or participating in adult literacy programmes. More generally, there is a tendency to conflate schooling, education, literacy and knowledge.
> Little research has been devoted to adult literacy programmes and existing studies focus mainly on women; the benefits of acquiring literacy in adulthood are thus less clearly established than those of acquiring cognitive skills through education in childhood.
> Research has focused on the impact of literacy upon the individual; few authors have examined the impact at the family/household, community, national or international level.
> Some effects of literacy, e.g., those on culture, are intrinsically difficult to measure.
> Literacy is not defined consistently across studies and literacy data are frequently flawed. (pp. 137–138)

Despite its recognition of plural notions of literacy, and despite its cautions about the reliability of literacy data and literacy research more broadly, the report then goes on to speak in fulsome prose about the political, economic, social, and cultural "benefits" of literacy. In this section, I focus particularly on the claims of economic and political benefits from literacy.

The 2006 Global Monitoring Report claims that literacy has a positive influence on macro-economic growth and that it demonstrates reasonable returns to investment. The GMR reports that one study, using data from the International Adult Literacy Survey, "concluded that differences in average skill levels among [the 14] OECD countries *explained* fully 55% of the differences in economic growth over 1960–94" (p. 143; all emphases in this paragraph are mine). Other studies reported here

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are more circumspect: two found that literacy rates "*exert a positive impact on growth*;" another found that literacy in African countries "was *among the variables* with a positive effect on GDP per capita growth" (pp. 143, 144); two suggested that increases in literacy rates "at intermediate [literacy] levels characteristic of many developing countries do have an important *effect*" (p. 144). The section concludes that, "while there is evidence relating literacy and education to economic growth, the mechanisms are not well explained" (p. 144).

Regarding the private and social rate of return, the Report comments mostly on studies that use data on schooling as a proxy for literacy; unsurprisingly, those studies show positive rates of return. However, the GMR does relate a review of three World Bank-financed projects, which each showed private and social rates of return of between 14% and 43%. The Report concludes that the "sparse evidence that exists indicates, therefore, that the returns to investment in adult literacy programmes are generally comparable to, and compare favourably with, those from investments in primary education" (p. 145).[6]

The 2006 Global Monitoring Report makes similarly optimistic claims about the relationship between literacy and political benefits, which it discusses as political participation, the link between literacy and democracy, ethnic equality, and reconciliation in post-conflict settings. The Report claims that participation in adult literacy programs is "*correlated with*" increased political participation. Many quantitative studies of literacy show correlations between literacy and other factors, yet somehow the analyses of this data inevitably slip into causal talk about "impact" or "effects."[7]

The Report is more circumspect about other features of political development. Regarding the relationship between literacy and democracy, the GMR reports:

> The expansion of education *may* contribute to the expansion of democracy and vice versa, yet *the precise nature of the relationship between education and democracy remains unclear and difficult to measure accurately* .... For example, a comparison of countries over 1965–80 and 1980–88 found *no impact* from expansion of primary and secondary schooling on various measures of democracy. (p. 139, emphasis mine)

The presumption that democracy is the ideal political system obscures some of the more interesting questions regarding what constitutes a democracy and how democracies function. Here, schooling (more broadly) is a proxy for literacy. As with other elements, the direction of the causal arrow between literacy and its supposed "outcome" is unclear; literacy *may* contribute to democracy, and/or perhaps democracy *may* contribute to the expansion of literacy. The history of literacy suggests that there have been times when both were true, and times when neither were true (Arnove and Graff, 1987). This fact points to another limitation of this approach: efforts to "prove" a causal relationship between literacy and certain forms of development are free to recognize the results of some studies and ignore the results of others.

Finally, the Global Monitoring Report states that, according to the IEA study of civic education, "the more students knew about democratic institutions, the more likely they were to *plan on* voting as adults," and that "democratic classroom practices were the most effective means of promoting civic knowledge and engagement among students"

[6]It is interesting to contrast the claims in the Report to the document, prepared by Cameron and Cameron (2006), on which this section of the GMR rests. The background paper is considerably more circumspect about literacy's "effects" or "impact" on economic growth. The authors write, "although numerous claims for economic benefits have been made in studies of literacy interventions, these have not generally been backed up by formal economic analysis which would enable strong conclusions to be drawn on the economic benefits... . The report emphasizes that the economic returns to literacy at both the macro- and microeconomic levels appear to be *highly dependent on other aspects of the economic context*. However, there is evidence that literacy benefits *at least some individuals*, and also that the literacy of one individual can benefit others in his or her household" (p. 1). Reviewing precisely the same studies presented in the GMR, the background paper reaches a more tentative conclusion, emphasizing that "by highlighting the difficulty in drawing specific conclusions from such a small and disparate set of research findings, and pointing to the practical need for more systematic monitoring and evaluation of literacy interventions" (p. 1).

[7]For example, the IALS was able, at most, to correlate "levels" of literacy to economic standing reported by participants; nevertheless, they "over-interpreted" this data, relying on "existing explanatory frameworks which are based on previously defined policy goals," to make causal claims about the relationship between literacy and economic growth (Barton and Hamilton, 2000, p. 386). Reliable evidence about the effects of literacy would more realistically derive from longitudinal studies than from the cross-panel studies that are commonly used in literacy studies.

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(p. 140). It then concludes, "it can be *surmised, although it has not been established*, that the same *may* be true of literacy programmes for youth and adults" (p. 140, emphasis mine). Notably, this passage conflates literacy *per se*, political content regarding democratic institutions (which is rarely present in adult literacy programs), and a particular, 'democratic' pedagogy, and on this basis ascribes 'benefits' to literacy. Regarding ethnic equality, the Report states that "There appears to be no research into the impact on ethnic equality of either literacy or participation in adult literacy programmes. It is *probably reasonable to assume*, however, that the impact of literacy is likely similar to that of educational expansion, i.e. that it has the *potential* to benefit disadvantaged ethnic groups but will not necessarily do so" (p. 140, emphasis mine). Finally, citing two empirical studies, the Report states that "literacy programmes *can* have an impact on peace and reconciliation in post-conflict contexts" (p. 140, emphasis mine).

It is interesting to note, throughout the Global Monitoring Report, the frequent use of very tentative verb constructions. Literacy "may" contribute to democracy; the same "may" be true for literacy programmes as for basic education; it is "probably reasonable to assume" that literacy influences ethnic equality, or at least it "has the potential to" do so; literacy programs "can" impact peace and reconciliation. The discussion of literacy is couched in terms of possibility and potential. These careful constructions have the advantage of not explicitly stating that literacy *will* have a certain effect, regardless of the context, while nevertheless giving the impression that it is somehow likely (despite a lack of empirical evidence). I draw attention to these verbal constructions because they provide a clear picture of the ways in which autonomous claims about the "effects" of literacy have been softened without withering away. Like similar reports, the Global Monitoring Report avoids making directly autonomous statements about the "consequences" of literacy while still suggesting that it *potentially will* have a certain, predetermined effect.

Further, despite the qualifications offered in the review of the literature in each section on the impact of literacy on human, cultural, political, and economic development, each section concludes with an autonomous claim about what literacy does. The entire chapter concludes that literacy "*confers distinct benefits*, whether acquired through schooling or through participation in adult literacy programmes" (p. 145, emphasis mine).

5. Reconsidering the "benefits" of literacy from an ethnographic perspective

One problem with research claiming that literacy produces "benefits" or "consequences" is that it tends to treat literacy, and the schooling through which it is often procured, as a black box: because the studies rely on large, aggregate data sets, they do not consider the *type* of literacy acquired, nor do they investigate the school-level processes by which outcomes are purportedly produced. The research methods virtually require that the studies employ autonomous notions of literacy as independent of social context. Ethnographic research provides the methodological remedy to this shortcoming. Ethnographers assume a more skeptical approach to the topic of literacy and development, examining (as I do here) the cultural politics of defining literacy (or development), of doing literacy, and of claiming "outcomes" for literacy. Further, sociocultural scholars focus more on the *types* of literacy being employed by people, the *meanings* with which they are imbued, and the ways in which literacy practices participate in larger power structures. Such an ideological approach steers scholars away from attempts to arrive at causal links and toward careful study of the complex social and cultural interactions that influence what kind of "outcomes" or "benefits" literacy and/or literacy instruction might afford.

In the last half of this article, I use ethnographic data to illuminate the relationship between literacy, economic opportunity, and political engagement. The data show that literacy had no predictable "effect" on students. Instead, students engaged with what they found in the classroom—which included emergent skills in reading and writing, but also discourses about in/equality, authority structures between teachers and students, and relationships with student peers—in ways congruent with their own cultural understandings of literacy and schooling as well as their perceptions of social relations in order to use literacy in particular ways. In other words, literacy had no effect; particular students, with particular histories, social positions, and understandings of literacy and schooling, took up literacy in variable ways and applied literacy to different ends.

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Some may feel the data in this article are unconvincing because they only represent the economic and political changes in students' lives over a single year. However, it is important to remember two things. First, these students were not illiterate ''blank slates.'' All of them came to the literacy classroom with some literacy abilities, and many of them had been enrolled in school for several years, whether as children, as adults, or both. Therefore, they certainly had more than a year of literacy instruction (formal or informal). Second, most studies on this topic do not bother to examine change over time; instead, they pinpoint associations or correlations between literacy ''levels'' and purported outcomes. Thus, while a longer-term longitudinal study would be even more desirable, I argue that a study looking at students' literacy practices over the course of a year yields more accurate data at change over time than much of the literature making autonomous claims about the effects of literacy.

6. Methods and setting

In this article, I draw data from a 24-month ethnographic study of youth and adult literacy in two Brazilian cities: Rio de Janeiro, a southeastern metropolis with somewhere between eight and 12 million inhabitants, and João Pessoa, a state capital in the Northeast with approximately 600,000 residents. In each city, I studied two cases, one public school and one non-governmental organization. The study was organized to investigate, from a comparative perspective, what difference Freirean, ''critical'' literacy pedagogies made for how students acquired and used literacies.[8]

A description of the schools will help to contextualize the study's findings. The two public schools in Rio and João Pessoa were located in poor neighborhoods; most of the students lived nearby. The teachers of the literacy classes I observed worked full days elsewhere and commuted to the school to teach at night; they did not live in the neighborhood. In general, the pedagogy resembled pedagogy for children. (Indeed, of the four teachers I worked with, three taught children during the day.) In general, teachers wrote decontextualized exercises on the board; students copied them into their notebooks and then completed them. In both cases, I selected non-governmental (NGO) schools close to the public schools so that the comparative cases drew student populations that were similar in terms of socioeconomic status and ethnicity.

At the non-governmental (NGO) school in Rio, every weekday evening a Catholic congregation offered schooling for female domestic workers. The pedagogy was influenced by Paulo Freire: teachers sought respectful relations with students; they used dialogue in their classrooms; and they used more texts and contextualized language activities than the public school. Likewise, the Freirean NGO school in João Pessoa featured more egalitarian student–teacher relations, used dialogical pedagogy, and included student-generated texts in the classroom. However, the NGO in João Pessoa had a stronger basis in the community; they offered not only literacy classes but also pre-school, after-school tutoring, and youth activities. Further, and importantly for this study, they were networked with leftist political groups in the community, and the organized political events on behalf of community demands, such as demands for bus service or sewer maintenance.

At each site (two public schools, and two Freirean NGO schools), I worked with at least 10 focal students, interviewing them and conducting informal participant observation with them at school, work, home, church, and during free social hours.

[8]The literacy environments in Rio de Janeiro and João Pessoa differ in important ways. In general, the Southeast is a wealthier region that for decades has afforded not only greater opportunities for the poor to go to school but also better schools for them to attend. As a result, levels of formal schooling are higher in the Southeast, where according to conventional measures a much larger percentage of the population is able to read and write at a basic level. (Keep in mind, however, the larger argument of this article, which highlights the limitations of quantitative measures of literacy.) At the time of this research, the literacy rate for the population aged 15 and over in the Southeast was 91.3% as compared to 71.3% in the Northeast (IBGE, PNAD, 1997). Literacy rates in both regions increased slightly by 2004, to 93.4% and 77.6%, respectively (PNAD, 2004) (see http://tabnet.datasus.gov.br/cgi/idb1998/fqb01.htm and http://www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/trabalhoerendimento/pnad2004/sintese/tab31.pdf). In 2000, Rio de Janeiro and João Pessoa reported literacy rates of 93% and 88% (see http://www.ibge.gov.br/english/estatistica/populacao/censo2000/). The inability to read and write at a basic level is most prevalent in the rural areas of these regions for several reasons: until fairly recently many rural areas lacked basic educational infrastructure; even today, many families in rural areas lack the economic status and stability they would need to spare the labor of their children during school hours. Many of those living in cities like Rio de Janeiro and João Pessoa who cannot read or write at a basic level have migrated there from the countryside.

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(In one site, the sample included 11 focal students.) I came to know these 41 focal students very well. In general, they seemed to enjoy the novelty of an English-speaking, wealthier foreign friend, and they would often ask me to teach them English vocabulary or interpret American political and cultural events. My willingness to 'hang out' and listen seemed to fit well with the laid-back, sociable, friendly manner that most of them cultivated and valued. We often held spontaneous, intimate conversations about family, studies, religion, and other topics, which brought us even closer together. Even after completing the research segment at each site, I maintained contact with each focal student through letters, phone calls, and visits for at least 1 year and with some for a much longer period.

The specific data set for this article consists of formal interviews with and informal observations of the 41 focal youth and adults. All interviews and observations were conducted solely in Portuguese, a language in which I am proficient thanks to several years of language study, two years of immersion, and the patience of my interlocutors during my first few months in Rio de Janeiro. Interviews generally lasted 1.5–2 h, though some extended to as long as 4 h. They were generally conducted during class time (classes were held at night between 7 and 10 PM, depending on the school's schedule) in an empty classroom. Each interview was taped by me and transcribed by a fluent Portuguese speaker. After reviewing the tapes, I regularly asked follow-up questions during informal interactions with students; their responses to these questions are also part of the data for this article.

6.1. Literacy, *educação*, and employment

During my ethnographic study of literacy in Brazil, students explained to me that literacy instruction could foster economic opportunity—but not primarily through the formal mechanism of an increase in skills, as propounded by autonomous models, human capital theory and contemporary international literacy policies. Instead, as I have described at length elsewhere (Bartlett, 2007a, b), the students explained to me that *educação*, their word for a mix of book knowledge *and* social skills gained *in part* through formal schooling, helped them to establish and maintain the sociable attributes and social networks that furthered access to economic opportunities. In brief, then, the students I interviewed and observed told me that they valued literacy and education not solely or primarily for its provision of skills but rather for the opportunity to enhance their "educated" persona and extend their social networks.

As the students were keenly aware, economic and other opportunities often came through social networks with social superiors and/or peers that were established and maintained through the cultivation of an educated persona. Several students joked that IQ (or *QI* in Portuguese) stands not for intelligence quotient (*quociente de inteligência*) but for "who is interested" (*quem interessa*). Knowledge (*conhecimento*), they said, is not only *what* you know, but *who* you know. Valuable contacts, they said, fell into two basic categories: peers, generally friends or family, and more powerful acquaintances. Friends provided important information, assistance, and support. Patrons provided important social bridges to economic resources. Having someone "on the inside" assured a person an edge in a tight labor market. Various slang for this phenomenon included "big shark" (*tubarão*), "fish stew" (*peixada*), and "godfather" or "godmother" (*padrinho ou madrinha*).

According to my data, literacy schooling did help some people secure greater economic opportunity—but not in the ways that contemporary development discourse predicated on human capital theory predicts it might. At least in the short period of 1 year of literacy classes, students did not improve their economic situations as a result of their increased proficiency in reading and writing. Instead, literacy schooling helped some students to expand their social networks in ways that benefited them economically. They did this both through the physical setting of schooling (i.e. through the contacts they made there) and, more abstractly, through the kinds of sociability and manners that they felt they gained in the classes. Of the 41 students I interviewed, only 24 people were actively looking for economic opportunities; others were at home caring for children, retired, disabled, or not seeking work. Of these 24, 15 experienced a job change during the year of our acquaintance. Of those 15, seven got jobs or work through school-related contacts; school networks seemed to be particularly important for women, who reported that their opportunities to develop relationships with people were severely limited.[9] The other eight

[9]See also Stromquist (1997), whose study of literacy classes for women in southeastern Brazil discovered that women highly

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students used contacts beyond the school to get their jobs.

For all of them, social networks, not literacy skills, were the key ingredients for securing economic opportunities. Only two people reported that their new jobs that required reading or writing in some capacity: Zé got a job as a waiter, where he learned a short-hand writing system to record customers' requests; Maria Lúcia started selling Avon and had to learn to record her customers' names and product requests on the order form provided by the company. None of the other 15 students who got or changed jobs reported that they used their improved literacy skills on the job.

Further, several of the students told me that they felt that being enrolled in literacy classes contributed to their educated persona and thus to their social networks. In other words, schooling contributed to their education not only by providing a site to meet other people, but also by encouraging them to speak, act, and be perceived as "more educated." For example, Roseli stated that by being in school she had learned to "open up," which allowed her to make more friends. Josete reported that, before coming to literacy classes, she was a "quiet thing" who kept to herself; she felt that she had learned to become more social since enrolling at school, which ultimately helped her develop contacts that led to economic opportunities.

For the 41 students I interviewed, literacy did not produce an autonomous economic effect, nor did it result in human capital that translated into economic mobility. Instead, literacy instruction provided important social contacts that benefited some students economically. Further, the students told me that they believed that schooling in general helped them to develop their communicative competence in ways that ultimately helped them to build or maintain critical social networks. Only by examining the meanings of education, specifically the centrality of speech and sociability to the educated persona, can we understand the potential of literacy instruction or other forms of schooling for economic mobility.[10]

6.2. Literacy and political engagement

Conventional development discourses also claim that literacy confers political benefits. More specifically, the discourse holds that literacy increases political participation. Likewise, Freirean critical literacy asserts a link between reading and writing, reflection, and social action. The comparative case study I conducted questions the purported links between literacy and political participation.

In general, the students in the two public school literacy programs did not experience, nor did I observe, changes in their political participation during the study period. In fact, only two of the 20 students mentioned a change: one registered to vote, and one said he had joined his neighborhood block association. For the most part, this group of students did not feel optimistic that they could intervene in politics. For example, Reginaldo, a student in the public program in Rio, told me, "in our dear Brazil, only the rich people have a voice" (14 October 1995). Jacemar, a student in the public school in João Pessoa, had a similar view. He said, "the politicians are all corrupt. Only those who have [money] have a voice. *Poder aquisitivo* [buying power] is power" (19 October 1999). Many of the students in this group said that they do not feel entitled to attend political meetings, much less to speak at them; several mentioned speech shame particularly in reference to the idea of engaging in political speech. As Dalva, a student in the public school in João Pessoa, said, "I don't have the courage to speak in a meeting. I am ashamed to talk in groups" (6 July 1999). Finally, many of the students in this group said they simply had no time to engage in politics. As Barbara, an 18-year-old mother of two studying at the Rio public school program, said, "My day is very busy [*corre corre*]. I take my son to school; I return home and clean my house; I take care of my baby; I go back to school to get my son; I cook dinner. I have to get the kids ready for bed before my husband gets home, and then I run to my [literacy] class. Who has time for politics?" (2 November 1995).

One of the public school students reported that enrolling in school and getting more practice writing her name had helped her have the courage to register to vote. In Brazil from 1881 to 1985, only literate people had the right to vote. Today, those who do not know how to sign their names are required to give (often publicly) a fingerprint. Given incredibly negative preconceptions about

(*footnote continued*)
valued the classes for the opportunities the courses provided to network with other women and to improve their confidence to speak.

[10]For more details on schooling, social networks, and sociability, see Bartlett (2007b).

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'illiterates,' having ink on one's finger is a serious stigma, one strong enough to discourage some of the students I interviewed from registering to vote. One of the students enrolled at the João Pessoa public school, Eunisa, told me a very interesting story that revealed the profound emotions connected to literacy and voting. At the time of our interview Eunisa was 33 years old, married, with no children. She was a dark-skinned woman of African descent living in the poorest area of Cruz. As a child, Eunisa had gone to school for only 1 year before having to drop out and take care of her younger siblings. As an adult, she had studied 1 year in VIDA, the neighborhood-based Freirean literacy program, before matriculating at the public school because, she said, it would be easier to measure her progress toward the fourth grade, which was her goal. In her adolescence, Eunisa worked as a maid, but at the time of the interview she had been unemployed for years. The year I knew her, Eunisa was heavily involved in one of the evangelical churches that had sprung up in the neighborhood.

During one of my visits to her home, and at my request, Eunisa was discussing the limitations placed on her life by not knowing how to read and write. When I asked her to give an example, she offered the following story:

> One day I went to get my Voter's Card (*titulo de eleitor*). This guy took us for free…. He's a town councilman. Poor thing, many times he runs for office and doesn't win. He came to get us, a group of us, in a car ... to get our documents for free. When we arrived, there were a lot of people.... So we got in line, a lot of us, and a man said, "Whoever is going to sign, sign here." And the girl beside me, Betânia, she also later studied at [the NGO], but then she quit. The man said, "Who's going to sign?" And Betânia said, "Me, but I'm not going to sign, I'm going to use my fingerprint." And the man said, "Here's the 'father of the donkeys'"(*pai dos burros*), which was the pad of ink to wet your finger and put in on the [document.][11] And I got so ashamed, my God, you know?… I knew how to write my name, but I had forgotten. My husband, when I would go to do any document, he would write my name on a sheet of paper for me to copy the length of the page, so I could remember. This was before I went back to school…. [So I prayed,] my God, God help me; help me sign my name because I don't want to be embarrassed. [Betânia] had already finished, and he said to me, "Come, here's the 'father of the donkeys.'"I felt so ashamed, and I thought, my God, I'm going to sign my name, one way or another. I said, "Look, I don't know how to sign well, okay? But I want to try." Because he had already said that to the other woman, and I felt ashamed… He said, "Do it slowly, that's fine, no problem." Another guy showed up and said, "No problem, don't hurry yourself." So I picked up the pen and signed. My name was kind of crooked but it came out. (3July 1999)

Eunisa's words illuminate the temerity required for people with emergent literacy to register to vote.[12]

In general, the students in the Freirean non-governmental organizations criticized unequal power relations in Brazil more than their public school counterparts. Like the public school students, they talked about it in dichotomous, us/them, rich/poor terms. But they often added tag phrases to their comments, indicating their sense that the current arrangement was unjust. For example, Josete, a student in the Rio NGO program, said, "only the rich people *tem voz e vez* [a phrase indicating voice and influence], which isn't how it should be" (4 September 1995). The students seemed to be incorporating, or at least mimicking, the kinds of discourse they heard in the Freirean classroom. For example, Zezinho, a student in the João Pessoa NGO, said, "I never knew we had the same rights as the rich until I came here [to school]" (10 July 1999). Obviously, not all of the Freirean students echoed this view, but many of them did during our interviews or during observations I conducted.

However, only students from one of the Freirean groups increased their actual political participation, according to the interviews and observations I conducted. VIDA, the community-based organization in João Pessoa, was intimately connected to local politics. The directors of VIDA were very active members of the Workers Party, and they held

[11]'Donkey' is a common insult applied to people who don't know how to read or write.

[12]Voting is technically mandatory in Brazil. Illiterates can request exemption from the obligation to vote, though no one I met ever did. More commonly, they simply abstained from voting. For more on voting in Brazil, see Power and Roberts (1995).

party meetings in the neighborhood. During the time I spent working with the students of VIDA, two of the 10 literacy students I focused on began attending political meetings for what they reported to me was the first time. Further, VIDA administrators enthusiastically organized neighbors for political action when they felt it was necessary. For example, several years before I arrived, VIDA had organized community members to put political pressure on the city to pave the main road through the community, which would become impassable during the rainy season. The year I was there, VIDA organized community members to march during a political protest in solidarity with the controversial *Sem-Teto* [Homeless] movement members who had taken up residence in a field in the neighborhood. Ten of the VIDA literacy students (not all of them focal students for my study) joined the march; eight of them told me it was their first time attending a political rally. I spent some time with two of them immediately afterward, and I can still recall how excited they were over the event and how proud they were of the red *Sem-Teto* hats they received during the march.

Much of the literature on literacy suggests that students become ''empowered'' through an increase in self-esteem—that is, that increased self-esteem is a result of literacy, and that it in turn might result in political development of some sort. Like other scholars,[13] I found that many of the students in all four programs reported an increase in self-esteem as a result of studying at school. For some, this pride resulted from being able to read or write in public; Eunisa's comments about signing her name to register to vote illustrate the pride students felt regarding this achievement. For others, the pride resulted in simply being enrolled in school and striving to (as they saw it) improve oneself. Seu Manuel's comments reflect this sense of pride. His father had, in his words, ''denied him a career,'' refusing to let him go to school and forcing him to work in the fields. Seu Manuel worked most of his adult life in agriculture, and he longed for schooling and for the ability to read and write. At the age of 63, he said,

> now I'm retired, and I earn enough to get by. Also, now I am learning things I never knew before, thanks to the [VIDA] classroom. I was like a blind man. I didn't know what a classroom was like, I didn't know anything. Thanks be to God, today I can say that I'm happy [literally, good with life]. I'm learning things I never knew. It's good for us to learn, and to get as far as God wishes. If a person is interested, he will move ahead. Now, when he isn't interested, it's the same as being an animal.... [A]s long as I am alive I won't give up on studying, because study is the most important thing in my life.

At the time of our interview, Seu Manuel had been studying in a VIDA classroom for 3 years. According to his teacher, his literacy abilities had barely improved. Yet Seu Manuel declared to me that he would never leave the classroom; he intended to study with Lila until ''the day I die,'' he declared. As Papen (2005) noted, many students come to literacy programs ''for the experience of school, something they had missed out on in the past;'' schooling holds ''strong positive connotations'' and symbolic significance for them, and, for many, ''becoming a learner [is] already an achievement'' (pp. 11, 12).

The increase in self-esteem that many students derive from improved literacy skills or enrollment in literacy programs may help students avoid the negative social positioning they experience as a result of classism, racism, or sexism.[14] This possibility was suggested to me during my interview with Graça, a self-identified *negra*, or black woman, who grew up in a poor rural area of Minas Gerais (a large, mountainous state bordering Rio de Janeiro), where her family worked as sharecroppers. As a child, Graça was never allowed to attend the school, located 2 miles away, because her household needed her labor from her earliest years. During our two hour interview, she talked about the prohibition, as a poor black, against speaking to the landowners in the region, unless in response to a direct question. Graça explained that, when she turned 14, her parents sent her to the city of Rio de Janeiro to work as a maid. In a South Zone apartment facing the famous beaches of Leblon, she worked from 5 AM until 11 PM single-handedly cooking, cleaning, and caring for two parents and their four children, the oldest of whom was 2 years her senior. Graça told me that she vividly remembered one moment from her time with that family.

[13]Stromquist (1997) reported that self-esteem was an important outcome of the literacy programs she studied in southeastern Brazil. See also Egbo (2000) and Lauglo (2001).

[14]Elsewhere, I have written about how literacy becomes an important tool in social positioning; see Bartlett (2007a).

In the midst of cleaning the room of the younger children, a particularly colorful book caught her eye, and she wandered over to pick it up. Just at that moment, her *patroa*, or boss, walked in the room and started yelling, ''Don't touch that! I forbid you to touch their books! You don't have time for that. Besides, what would you learn for?'' Graça complied, hurriedly replacing the book on the shelf and resuming her chores. Years later, during our interview, she reported, ''Those words stayed in my head. What would I learn for? Why would a person like me study? I was never going to get out of that life of slavery. I felt sad and absolutely isolated.''

Graça told me that, for many years, she was haunted by those words; she felt she wasn't the kind of person who deserved to know how to read or write, and so she did not seek to learn. However, many years after she had stopped working for the family mentioned above, she met a woman at church who was attending St. Mary's, the Catholic literacy program in Rio. At this woman's invitation, Graça too began to attend. Gradually, according to Graça, she started to think of herself as the kind of person who could and should learn to read and write. At the time of our interview, Graça had been attending St. Mary's for 3 years, and she was still in the literacy class; she had not developed rapidly in the traditional sense of becoming literate. However, when I asked her, ''How are you different now that you are studying here?'', Graça replied:

> I talk more with people. I'm happier. I used to be ashamed to enter places. For example, if there was a party, I wouldn't go, because I thought since I was black I couldn't mix with whites.... For us, being black, and not knowing how to speak, and not knowing how to read a word, you are isolated. Because you don't know how to speak, other people don't pay attention to you, because you don't know how ... to converse with people. Now it's different. I arrive in any place, I know how to talk, I know how to buy things, I don't have that shame to look at people. I have confidence. I know that I will arrive [in a store] and people will wait on me.

In other words, Graça felt that being enrolled in the Freirean literacy program had helped her feel that she was the kind of person who could inhabit commercial and social spaces and expect respect. Before attending the literacy program, the weight of anticipated racism combined with prejudice against those who do not know how to read had prevented her from risking participation in diverse social spaces; she felt that the instruction at St. Mary's had helped her master speech routines and interaction patterns that made her presence in those public spaces viable. In this case, Graça's participation in a literacy program helped her to develop a sense of self as a person worthy of respect.

The comparative case study of literacy programs and political participation yields three important insights. First, the Freirean programs did provide a critique of unequal class relations that some (but not all) students took up and used. This political critique did not emerge from literacy *per se,* but rather from the type of literacy pedagogy used in the Freirean classroom. The critique of inequality was, however, class-based; I rarely heard references to gender, racial, or other key forms of inequality from students in the Freirean NGOs. Second, not all Freirean programs lead to political participation. Only VIDA, which organized specific political events, prompted an increase in actual political participation among some of its students. Neither literacy generally nor specific literacy pedagogies (like Freirean dialogue) necessarily prompt political participation; instead, literacy programs with specific political events afford an opportunity (taken up by some, not all) for political participation. Third, according to my interviews with students from four literacy programs, students often gained a sense of pride from either improving their literacy proficiency or attending school; this sense of pride might, in turn, encourage students to overcome their pervasive sense that, because of poverty, racism, sexism, or some other factors, ''*ali não dava pra mim estar*'' [it wasn't right for me to be there], as one student put it. On the whole, my work in Brazilian literacy programs suggests that certain *types of literacy* and certain *types of literacy programs and pedagogies* afford opportunities for political critique and political participation; whether these opportunities are accepted, or not, depends fully on how the student takes up the literacies, the discourses, and the offer to participate in events.

7. Implications and conclusions

I return to the question implied in the title of the article: What is literacy's verb? Does literacy *cause* economic and political development? Does it *promote* development? Does it *confer* distinct benefits? Does it *afford* opportunities that are then variously taken up by social actors? On the basis of

my ethnographic research, I would suggest that literacy does not have a verb; it is misleading to conceptualize literacy as a single phenomenon that has a predictable economic or political "effect." Instead, literacy *is* the verb: that is, diverse social actors, who are variably situated in social, cultural, political, and economic contexts, *read* and *write* disparate texts for different purposes and with unpredictable outcomes. Social and cultural factors that are only perceptible and understandable in the local context influence how students understand and "take up" literacy practices and literacy pedagogies.

My interviews and observations revealed a close link between students' literacy ideologies and the ways in which they used schooling to pursue economic opportunities. The students said that sociability, manners, and social networks, rather than their emergent abilities to read and write, provided them access to jobs. The comparison of four literacy programs in relation to political participation revealed that, while Freirean programs were more successful in promoting a critique of class inequality (what might be taken by some as evidence of "critical consciousness"), only the organization that organized specific opportunities for political action encouraged political participation on the part of (some) students.

This ethnographic study suggests that educational researchers should reconsider theories about the relationship between literacy and development by distinguishing between *types of literacy* and *types of literacy programs*. It is insufficient to treat literacy in the singular, or even to treat it as a single skill arrayed on a hierarchy of measurable levels. Ample ethnographic evidence exists to challenge this notion (see, for example, Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Barton et al., 2000; Robinson-Pant, 2001; Street, 1984, 1993, 2001). Likewise, it is inconceivable to expect that vastly different literacy programs—ones that emphasize vocational skills, embrace a "neutral" stance, critique class inequality, teach information about birth control or the transmission of AIDS—will have similar "effects." Literacy programs are guided by their own visions of what literacy is and what literacy does. These visions influence the sorts of discourses and pedagogies available to students in the classroom and the connection (or lack thereof) of literacy pedagogies to events outside the classroom.

Further, it is essential that literacy researchers and program planners attend to cultural processes through which literacy is understood, acquired, and used. Literacy is not an agent: literacy is a tool variously taken up by students with their own histories and literacy ideologies. The impact of literacy programs on the students who participated in my study was filtered through their specific, cultural definitions of education, their social networks, and their positioning in larger social structures. Though the relevant social and cultural factors will undoubtedly vary in other contexts, they are sure to be significant enough to influence what counts as literacy, what students expect from literacy classes, and how students make use of the literacy schooling provided. As Papen (2005) noted, "we have to take account of learners' discourses about literacy;" we should consider not only students' uses of literacy but also the meanings they attach to it (pp. 7, 14). As recent research in the field of literacy studies has explored, students' opportunities to access and employ literacies are also constrained by their social positions and identities (see, e.g., Bartlett, 2005b; Collins and Blot, 2003).

But a full understanding of the cultural politics of literacy cannot rest on the literacy ideologies of students or programs and pedagogies alone. Diverse literacy ideologies that come to bear on literacy practices always, inevitably play out in particular historical and social conditions. Indeed, this is one of the key insights of a sociocultural approach to literacy. Autonomous models like contemporary development discourse will always fail to predict the "impact of literacy" because they ignore the cultural and social conditions that constrain opportunities to acquire or use it.

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