

## **IDEA 45 Literacy with an attitude: Educating working-class children in their own self-interest**

School as an institution is designed to maintain the status quo (Trueman, n.d.), thus *for urban families of all colors, learning how to read must be a political act.*

- Public education for all\* does not include educating all\* to the same high levels.
  - “Don't educate the masses to such a high level they'll want to change anything”
- Public education is, at best, different for the working classes than it is for those who are expected to achieve powerful status in the community.
  - “Give the students of the upper middle classes powerful levels of literacy fitting for the positions they will inherit”

A *functional* (domesticating) literacy is a level of literacy which is traditionally required of the working class typified by:

- instruction in reading/writing designed to make students obedient citizens and useful workers in occupations of manual labor, retail, and in the service sector.
- a domestic literacy, a combination of performative literacy (decoding, sentence structure knowledge) and functional literacy (ability to read *USA Today* and complete a job application, read instructions)
- a system that maintains a basic level of literacy that is sufficient so
  - the masses are employable and content, but
  - not so much that they will seek power.

This is opposed to *powerful critical* literacy, a type of literacy reserved for the children of the middle and upper classes typified by:

- the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize
  - needed in/for occupations of leadership and power.

*Why teaching student to have a functional literacy does not work*

- Strategies for this low level of literacy include many skill-driven, fragmented activities, and students are neither encouraged to use their imaginations nor to create “what if” situations.
- Boredom sets in early, so does “checking out.”
- Functional literacy is unexciting and dull. It produces an attitude of: “If that's what reading is about, who needs it?”

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Mack, A. (2001). Book Talk: A review of *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in Their Own Self-Interest* by Patrick J. Finn. *Center X Forum*, UCLA Graduate School of Education. 1(2).  
Trueman, C. (n.d.). Pierre Bourdieu on Education and Social and Cultural Reproduction. The History Learning Site. [www.historylearningsite.co.uk/sociology/education-and-sociology/pierre-bourdieu/](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/sociology/education-and-sociology/pierre-bourdieu/)