

# Learning how to read is a political act

The "political" encompasses more than how and who gets reliable banks, decent parks and maintained sidewalks, handy food markets, viable hospitals, or police who don't beat you up.

In fact, according to Prof. Lewis R. Gordon, the "political" is an act of radical commitment. When you act politically it's not about "What's in it for me," but because of the collective responsibility of us, an "us" that transcends the present. This "us" includes the ancestors, it includes the descendants, and it includes the conception of life that may even be radically different from us. Here, every political action ultimately reaches the anonymous. So ultimately that committed act which translates into political responsibility ultimately addresses the anonymous even though we ourselves are not anonymous to ourselves.

Here we see that libratory action is political action. Here we link love and politics and radicality and politics. Here the political is a commitment to the life and freedom of others.

"Schools are political sites. Having a place (school) to socialize children, initially makes sense. A society has a duty to prepare the young to fit in; yet, *cui bono*? Who benefits from this set up? For example, who defines basic knowledge? In fact, who decides who defines what knowledge needs to be 'common'? Whose interpretation of 'facts' and history are perpetuated as reality? These questions must be asked because schools are political sites which can reproduce the social hierarchy. Thus, going to school for Black American children is a political act."

~ John Harris Loflin, "What is a high quality education for urban students?  
Education for Liberation: Education as the act of freedom"

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## Learning how to read is an existential act for African American children

"This is not about education at all, it's about power" ~ James Baldwin

"Whoever controls the schools...controls the future." ~ Anonymous

Whether we want to admit it or not, our public schools are political sites. With IPS under the influences of neo-liberal corporate reform (privatization), education has a business-economic purpose, not a purpose of self-discovery, community/cultural empowerment, or critical citizenship. The politics and power disguised by the emphasis of economics of literacy benefit some more than others, especially those at the top of the economic order. This same political result which maintains the power of the mainstream, does not happen for those at the bottom of the economic order where economics is seen as the only purpose of literacy.

With decades of failure around having students reading at the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade level by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, or the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level needed for basic employment, past approaches to literacy and today's business model have both failed to work, notably for students of color and working-class whites.

What is needed is making the purpose of literacy political. In fact for African Americans, *learning how to read is an existential act*, and act of survival.

### What is needed is a literacy with an attitude

*Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in Their Own Self-Interest* by Patrick Finn sees literacy as a political act. "Literacy is powerful right of citizenship. Education...should focus on a powerful literacy—a literacy with an attitude—that enables working-class and poor students to better understand, demand, and protect their civil, political, cultural, and social rights."

We have to distinguish between literacy education for the working class and the powerful:

1. Functional literacy is a characteristic of a *domesticating education* that leads to the kind that makes a person productive and dependable, but not troublesome. One learns to be a "good worker": wear the company uniform properly, be to work on time, get along to get ahead, follow directions, and work hard to maintain their employer's profits.
2. Powerful literacy is a function of *empowering education* that leads to the kind of schooling leading to power/authority. This enables one to know how to think for oneself. It helps to understand how the system works, how to critique and change it, and how to acquire power and authority in it. This is the type of empowering education and critical literacy skills the children of upper- and middle-class people receive.

What is needed is making the purpose of literacy political for students on the margins: an existential act, and an act of survival by enabling a *critical literacy* (reading the world): the ability to read texts in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships. Here songs, novels, sculpture, conversations, statues, pictures, movies, quilts, etc. are also considered texts and foster political awareness.