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LITERACY AS A TOOL OF CIVIC EDUCATION AND RESISTANCE TO POWER

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Abstract: This paper discusses literacy as a socio-political phenomenon from the perspective of several relatively independent educational discourses. The first is critical education theory and research revealing the hidden mechanisms by which education policies act in the interests of a global market economy. The second is the perspective of critical pedagogy scholars on contemporary educational challenges, who offer responses similar to those discussed in current discourse on informal civic education. The third is the heated discussion of high-stakes literacy testing (related to OECD literacy studies such as PISA, IALS, etc.) the results of which are used as a source of argumentation for diverse attitudes and educational consequences. Based on an analysis of literacy theory, research on active citizenship and civic education, the term "civic literacy" is proposed and argued as a relevant conceptual frame for conceptualizing school as an institution which can be involved in resistance to all forms of power politics or ideological indoctrination and manipulation, while at the same time, respecting the traditional values and aims of general education.
Keywords: literacy, civic education, critical pedagogy, high-stakes-testing

A pedagogical reflection on neoliberalism

If we are to even briefly outline the socio-economic context of the theme we are concerned with, it is hard to avoid mentioning phenomena such as globalisation and neoliberalism. A more in-depth critical analyses of the means by which these popular concepts have been employed within social science studies over the last two decades reveals that on the whole they are not defined at all (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009) or are misinterpreted in a variety of ways (Monkman and Baird 2002). Setting foot in this territory therefore means that we are unlikely to avoid the problem. Nevertheless, we will attempt to proceed, since the questions with which we are concerned in this article are a natural reaction to these phenomena and the social consequences that are manifested in all areas of social and public life. This is particularly so in education.

Let us therefore, at least briefly, interpret the ways in which the current political economic ideology of globalized capitalism is reflected in the intense critical pedagogical discourse which is developing in the shape of a wide-spectrum of critical pedagogical studies and educational policy analysis.

Although various streams of thought can be identified within this discourse, there is basic agreement on the important and obvious issues. The most common target of critique is educational policy reform, which brings into the sphere of education not only the rhetoric, but also the mechanisms of the globalized market economy. Educational systems, built upon national, cultural or educational traditions, are being reformed in the name of new aims and a new social order dictated by interests which share little in common with traditional education, knowledge, the philosophy of education or traditional pedagogical thought. They are simply driven by a vision of a globalized market economy subjugating the goal of education to creating "human capital" as a flexible, effective work force capable of adapting to the changing demands of everyday life, dependent on changing job opportunities, which appear and disappear in accordance with the economic return of investment of supranational capital (etc.). These processes affect the lower socio-economic sections of society first and foremost, particularly in the third world, where neo-liberally run education is becoming a means of recycling and consolidating old colonial relations through cultural colonization and the levelling out of traditional values, instead of contributing towards diversification and innovation of the economy (Olutayo 2010). At the same time these processes are undermining the basic principles and values to which Western democracies adhere. Subjugating all aspects of political, cultural and social life to the rationality of the market has meant (according to McCarthy et al. 2009) that democratic institutions are becoming an irrelevance. A neoliberal interpretation of globalisation is bringing into people's lives a new type of rationality and logic, so that they are manipulated more than ever before by both state and supranational capital alike, and drawn into an increasingly large discourse system of materialism (*ibid.*) "*Neoliberal rationality is not simply the rationality of economizing the social but also the individual*" and it is becoming "*a new means of existing and thinking*" (Kaščák and Pupala 2010, 774); hence, it is also a tool for creating the personal identity of the individual.

A not insubstantial source of criticism in critical pedagogical studies is that these processes operate with the direct participation of nation states, which not only cease to be the guarantors of the defence of democratic traditions and the values of education, but directly—through administering education, educational policy decisions and reform—participate in promoting the interests of the free market and are becoming part of its infrastructure (Robertson and Dale 2009). All this is achieved with the considerable assistance of information and communication technologies, which long ago ceased to be simple tools of social stratification (i.e. the issue of the "digital divide"), but also tools for reconstructing knowledge as such, with serious consequences for planning the aims and content of education (Kaščák and Pupala 2010).

The educational challenge of critical pedagogy

Notwithstanding the general agreement about the subject of critique, there are differences between the various strands of critical pedagogy. Besides stemming from different theoretical positions, they differ particularly in the practical implications (if any) that can be derived from their critical reflection. According to Rice and Vastola (2011), there are two groups, one of which proffers the new emancipating knowledge as an opportunity to overturn and undermine neoliberal indoctrination, while the other attempts politically and ideologically

to resist and defy this hegemonic neoimperialism. This difference also resounds within discussions between the representatives of the two streams of thought, evident in their work.

Critical pedagogy, as presented by various generations of predominantly American authors (M. W. Apple et al., 2009), linked in terms of ideas to the work of H. Giroux (1983, 2005) and P. Freire (1970), rooted in neo-marxist theory (A. Gramsci) and traditional pragmatism (J. Dewey), perceives its mission to be one of instituting educational and social change. The aim of critical education theory and research is not simply to expose the reproductive forces of schools, i.e. the mechanisms whereby the official educational policy of a given social order established via powerful superstructures reproduces and strengthens itself, but at the same time to show the means and ways in which it can be weakened (Apple, Au and Gaudin 2009). Instead of "pure critique", there is talk of the possibility of action and resistance; instead of a "pedagogy of critique", they proffer a "pedagogy of hope or possibility". They are thus moving towards seeking out and documenting possible solutions, uncovering important knowledge and spaces for counter-hegemonic action. According to McCarthy et al. (2009) it is important to implement "cultural mechanisms", specific practical and programmatic applications within the specific conditions of institutionalised education, with the aim of introducing changes in the interest of social justice.

The question therefore arises as to what options the representatives of this stream of thought in critical pedagogy have found to counter hegemonic actions, what forms of education and what kind of content they provide, or, what the "important knowledge" is that enables resistance to hegemonic powers against which their critique is directed. In recording these possibilities they stretch far back into the "collective memory of education", into the history of radical anti-racist or anti-colonial educational attempts to address a wide range of issues including: educating blacks (for instance, the case of Harlem in New York City between 1935 and 1950) and various diasporas in different parts of the world; several important feminist movements seeking to improve the position of women of different colours and social classes; and projects as well as case studies that are currently ongoing.[1] The options highlighted by this stream of critical pedagogy mostly lie in supporting progressive social movements and civic and pro-democratic community activities. In other words, they attempt to challenge the clear anti-democratic tendency of neoliberalism and market fundamentalism by supporting civic activism, within which schools as public institutions of education—along with teachers—have a key role to play. One of the main missions of the teaching profession is to support the principles of democracy, educating citizens so that they are capable of using and asserting their freedom, participating in the democratic exercise of power and defending the principles of a democratic society, which have now become a fringe interest for the political elites (see also Giroux 2005). Intentions along these lines, with regard to teaching and education, have been expressed by a number of those who criticize education run along neoliberal lines. M. Olssen (2006, referred to in Kaščák and Pupala 2010) sees potential in "*global learning as democratic participation, actively engaging in*

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[1] They consider the following to be illustrative examples: the Citizen School Project in Porto Alegre, Brazil, analyzed in detail by Gandin (2009); the case of the teacher's union movement in South Korea (Kang 2009); the ethnographic study of community-based education in the Latin American setting of Michoacán, Mexico (Sandler 2009); and refer to further examples (Anyon 2005).

the democratic process and participating frequently in the life of the community" (*ibid.*, 794-795). A similar solution is found in SWAP (Sector Wide Approach Partnerships) methods, which oversee the educational remit of schools, based on cooperation between various local bodies, institutions and non-governmental organizations (see, for instance Klees 2001).

Civic education in contemporary European policies and other discourses

The appeals found in critical pedagogy studies can be seen as calling for a shift towards civic education, albeit in an extracurricular form. In fact, these "informal models" dominate even in today's relatively intense discourse on civic education, reflecting the pressing need to re-legitimize the traditional values and principles of democracy, in theory and in research, just as much as in practice. In part, approaches are being implemented that emphasize learning through experience, based on a reappraisal of traditional models of civic education, be they "moral education" or "knowledge-based education" (conceived of as knowledge drawn from politics, history, economics and other social sciences). In terms of civic education this means involving students in a wide spectrum of civic activities, creating opportunities for them to gain practical experience of civic participation, through practicing democracy and civic responsibility in real situations in school (through local governing bodies within schools, student councils and parliaments) and outside school (in cooperation with public institutions) i.e. through a wide range of extracurricular influences. This type of civic education is also found at the level of European educational policy.[2] Indeed, the effectiveness of similar school activities has been substantiated by research (see Zápotočná and Lukšík 2010). The recorded effects of informal civic education both within and outside school indicates that the social impact of teaching and the mechanisms used are important, motivating students to actively participate in civic behaviour. On a theoretical level these findings correspond to so-called "structural models of citizenship" (Whitely 2005; Lopes et al. 2009) and the theory of social capital (Putnam 1995[3]).

Nonetheless, there are legitimate questions as to whether framing education for democratic citizenship in this way is more educational or political. Are these activities, involving local politics within schools, which then become home to various campaigns (Pykett et al. 2010), conducted at the expense of the goal of acquiring knowledge? That is, do they not suppress other issues concerning aspects of education that are no less important (Kaščák and Pupala 2010)? Despite their legitimacy, these informal extracurricular civic education projects are rather time-consuming and their long-term effects, beyond the length and intensity of the programmes, are dependent on the ongoing and future individual civic and political interests of the participants involved (Pasek and Feldman et al., 2008).

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[2] In European terms, civic education is a policy priority for the Council of Europe and is implemented through numerous projects (for instance, Education for Democratic Citizenship since 2007; by declaring 2005 the European Year of Citizenship through Education) and mediated by a whole range of political, educational and research institutions.

[3] Robert Putnam employs the concept of social capital—the participatory productive potential of a society, limited in terms of "associational density" (the extent to which citizens participate in associations) and mutual interpersonal trust, including the cumulative nature of this potential—to ascertain the level of democracy within a society.

A more academically acceptable solution is offered by curricular programmes where civic education is integrated alongside more traditional educational content. There is a whole range of educational fields, besides the social sciences, the arts and the natural sciences, which are important for civic education and a number of authors have considered this. A relevant example of this kind of approach is the concept of civic education within "aesthetics and arts" (Mistrík 1996), the aim of which is to encourage individuals to become aesthetically aware and identify with their own culture, its cultural traditions and artistic values, as a prerequisite to developing empathy, openness, and emotional and intellectual tolerance towards other cultures, which is an important element of citizenship in the multicultural society of today.

Indeed, a good schooling in citizenship might be provided by natural science education, aimed at developing "scientific literacy" as the ability to recognise, discover and build knowledge through activities that require students to actively identify things (see Žoldošová 2007). This kind of education, modelling the principles of scientific research in becoming familiar with the world around us, is an exceptionally potent tool in forming an active attitude to the world as such. Civic education is understood in this way in a number of approaches formulating explicit environmental and civic educational goals within natural science education (e.g. Mijung 2005; Miller 2006; Ayala 2004). By highlighting aspects such as ethics, values and an enthusiastic attitude towards nature, all of which are important for judging the consequences of different political decisions on serious ecological issues, these approaches attempt to create the basis for active civic engagement in these processes later on in life. The breadth of social science disciplines that provide opportunities for civic education is such that not even history—the means whereby schools can present and interpret historical events—should be left behind (Weinstein 2006).

Literacy as a route to active citizenship

Incorporating civic education goals into the subject matter of education necessitates working with information presented in texts and particular genres, amongst other things. Reading texts, to the level where they are comprehended, and developing reading literacy itself are key prerequisites for any attempt at education, including civic education, to succeed. There is sufficient historic evidence to suggest that there is a relationship between the level of literacy a population has and its ability to exert public control over the governing powers; nonetheless, in the concluding section of this article we will attempt to explore this relationship further in terms of reviewing the literature and relevant theories.

This link is already evident within the interpretation and definition of literacy found in theory and research. In both socio-cultural approaches and new literacy studies, literacy is presented as a multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept containing a wide range of specific dimensions, alongside the individual (linguistic, subjective and imaginative) we also find cultural, historical and political dimensions (Roberts 2000; Manese 2000) and the different areas to which they apply. Literacy is therefore associated more with a plurality of literacies ("multiliteracies"), distinguished via a number of literacy "adjectives". *The Literacy Dictionary* (Harris and Hodges 1995) lists dozens of these "literacies", which represent a wide range of ways and experiences regarding the use of literacy within various spheres of

knowledge and behaviour. Literacy, according to Gee (1990), is a form of social practice that allows individuals to become actively involved in the social and cultural sphere within the context in which it is always situated. Since we are concerned with a continuum of levels of literacy, it is possible to speak of passive literacy (in the sense of adaptation to the demands of society and culture, or simple survival, so-called "survival literacy") at the lowest end, stretching through to more active forms of literacy (in the sense of individual development or of contributing to the development of society and culture) up to actively asserting one's own "social influence" and "power" (Harris and Hodges 1995). In other words, when considering the level and extent of functional literacy, it is necessary to distinguish between active and passive forms (consumerist or adaptational), between productive and receptive (or reproductive) forms, and to reflect upon the sociocultural dimension (civic, community or public) in contrast to the psychological or private at the level of the individual. In this sense the shifting interpretation of literacy best corresponds to the concept of "cultural literacy", or as Bamberg (2002) has it, as literacy understood as "cultural identity"; the opposite of which is not illiteracy but "cultural ignorance" (Santana 2000). Thus far then, from this brief characterization of literacy, which is by no means simply a theoretical construct, but has direct consequences on research and education in practice (Gee 2004; Alverman 2000; Brand, Clinton 2002; Englert 1996; Richgels 2002, etc.), it is clear that a certain degree of active citizenship can probably be explained, or satisfied, at the level of literacy development. In other words, developing literacy, whilst bearing in mind the criteria above, is likely to produce more potentially active citizens, or at the very least, students who assimilate the educational content and field of knowledge (including the civic component) more effectively.

One example of the conceptual framework that explicitly formulates a relationship between literacy and citizenship, i.e. that approaches civic education through the creation and cultivation of mature reading literacy and critical thinking, is that of the American linguist D. Lazere (2005). His theory of *argumentative rhetoric* provides a conceptual frame for grasping the controversies of everyday public life and an understanding of that which envisages critical analysis based on discussion. The aim within this conception of civic education is to teach students to identify and understand a wide range of ideologies in today's world, to perceive the standpoints of different information sources, to assess the linguistic, rhetorical and argumentative quality of opposing viewpoints, including developing an awareness of their own subjective points of view as a key moment in cultivating a critical distance from any topic of study and their different ideological interpretations. Civic education understood in this way attempts to ensure that students are not indoctrinated into any ideology (be it the author's or teacher's), but are capable of critical independent thinking, of looking at different social and political questions from a variety of perspectives and in all their complexity. All this is to be achieved through reading (and writing), since literature (literary theory and criticism) is considered to be a unique model and source of critical thinking and reflection on public discourse (Lazere 2006).

Developing literacy as a tool of critical thinking ("critical literacy") and the route to active and independent citizenship, in fact, represents one of the methods highlighted by critical pedagogues, from Paolo Freire's literacy emancipation programmes, the pivotal work of Henry A. Giroux from the late 1980s (Giroux 2005) calling on the role of schools and the

potential of schooling in the struggle to maintain democratic values of public life, to the work of current theorists (Au 2009; Kellner 2009).

The current discourse on literacy in relation to civic education mostly foregrounds the more recent areas of information and media literacy. Initially there were fears associated with the development of information and communication technologies particularly regarding the risks facing the population—fears of the loss of social identity, the isolation of the individual and the elimination of the public space (Barrell 2000), which later gave way to other kinds of problems such as the off-line citizen—and the fact that we should not underestimate the dangers that the virtual sphere represents in terms of negative influences (see Bauerlein 2008). However, it is clear that these technologies have become one of education's permanent affordances, provided that schools and the education systems are able to use them effectively to the benefit of their educational goals, including education for citizenship.[4] Notwithstanding the oft-noted decline in the civic and political engagement of young people across different cultures (particularly where traditional forms of electoral participation are concerned), there is also research that provides us with data on promising new forms of civic participation, conducted via the internet using a variety of the on-line mediums preferred by the "digital-native" youth of today, indicating that engagement is on the increase, and this corresponds to higher levels of education (Listhaug and Gronflaten 2007; Bennett et al. 2009). Events in Africa this year also suggest that there is truth in the assertion (Blanchard and Horan 1998) that civil or social capital can under certain circumstances be accumulated through virtual communities and social networks.

Creating media literacy, as another important component of civic education, can be understood in different ways. According to Mičienka and Jirák (2007), it should fulfil both educational and protective roles, and provide opportunities for users to benefit from the media, yet ensure they are safeguarded against its adverse effects at the same time. While the first role of media literacy partly overlaps with information literacy, the second i.e. targeting the negative influences of misinformation and "brain-washing", resonates more with issues concerning active citizenship. Experts are becoming more aware of the fact that the media, through its commercially motivated production of "entertainment", draws attention away from the more essential questions of public life and is becoming a serious obstacle to active citizenship. Understandably, these consequences are even more alarming where young people are concerned. Educational institutions are tackling issues such as maintaining the reputation and authority of educational content *vis-à-vis* the increasingly popular pop-culture. Some solutions on offer (such as that proposed by Alverman and Hagood 2000) are moving towards an acceptance of the content of pop culture within schools, providing that it becomes the subject of study and part of school discourse rather than being feared as its competitor. On the other hand, as Milner (2002) believes, the problem with media is that it weakens and undermines reading literacy since reading levels and interests drop dangerously and as

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[4] Programmes to create school information centres or to supply old libraries with up-to-date technology, qualified library staff and information specialists providing a service for teachers and students, and assisting in the search for relevant information sources and study materials (Eastman, McGrath 2006; Abilock 2006) present opportunities for the development of the "new literacy" whilst maintaining all the parameters of the "old" (Nixon 2003) within all educational contents.

a consequence the influence of the mass media is expanding and becoming increasingly mass market. Anyway, we can generally surmise that having a systematic proactive policy targeting the positives and the potential benefits of media education is a significantly more constructive approach and, it is developing quite quickly, according to Vanmeenen (2006), as an independent area of education "via" the media, while at the same time encouraging students' ability to critically analyze and evaluate information from the media, including their own creations, and so forth. Media education therefore encourages students to publish work as one of their fundamental civil rights, i.e. the right to express oneself in public, to engage in debates on issues in public life with the express aim of improving and increasing the level of democracy in society. The Scandinavian countries have a long tradition in this area (see http://www.mediakasvatus.fi/node/194).

The concept of civic literacy and its empirical investigation by Henry Milner

Henry Milner (2002) provides us with a more in-depth analysis of the concept of "civic literacy" in his research study, whose strength lies in the extensive empirical data that leads him to the well-documented and convincingly argued proposition that there is a direct link between active citizenship and literacy.[5] Civic literacy is defined as the capacity for knowledge and the ability of citizens to understand the meaning of the political world, which is a necessary prerequisite for the willingness and predisposition to engage in public discourse, evaluate and monitor the work of the civil service and public administration. Beneficial active civic and political participation is therefore a question of how knowledgeable and informed the individual is or simply concerns rational decision-making and common sense. In contrast to the notion of "social capital" (R. Putnam 1995), in relation to which civic literacy is defined, it is considered to be richer in explanatory terms mostly because it contains not only the social dimension but also the individual dimension, including the possibility that individual contributions to the level of democracy within a society might be different. Conceived of from the perspective of the individual, this dimension is primarily a cognitive processing capacity, that is apart from the "*civic side of civic literacy*" (represented by civic and political knowledge and in terms of education, by courses on citizenship), composed of a "cognitive capacity component", which corresponds to functional literacy. In other words, within the two separate aspects of civic literacy, particular emphasis is placed on the more general literacy aspect of citizenship (the "*literacy side of civic literacy*"). Thus conceived, citizenship and civic participation are significantly more closely linked within the context of primary schools, that is, in terms of their implications for primary and lower secondary education.

One source upon which Milner bases his arguments is political science research and the methodological issues and findings of studies that survey the factors determining electoral

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[5] Through extensive meta-analysis of the findings of a number of international comparative political science research projects, the author not only ascertains what "civic literacy" is but also identifies the cause of the enormous decline in civic engagement in the US as being a consequence of the low level of education, literacy and particularly political knowledge in young people (p. 45) in comparison to other countries (Scandinavia, Australia and New Zealand).

participation, which represent significant indicators of civic participation. A whole series of studies have shown that using data that target "knowledge", particularly relating to political issues, including factual information, was much more revealing when compared with so-called "soft data" such as political interests and attitudes or even when compared with levels of formal education (Milner 2002, 38-49). High levels of electoral participation are therefore linked especially to how well-informed the individuals are, and this is widely believed to be the best predisposition for civic participation and especially for better political decision-making.

Other and more important sources of Milner's argumentation are the comparative international studies on reading literacy of different age groups, such as: the International Adult Literacy Study (IALS – OECD), regular international testing of reading literacy in primary school children (PIRLS – IEA Progress in Reading Literacy Study) and lower secondary school students (PISA – OECD Programme for International Students Assessment, TIMSS – NCES Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), and last but not least, research into political knowledge (Eurobarometer, IEA Civic Education Study, etc) and studies into scientific literacy (Miller 2006). The results from the various different countries show that the above measures highly correlate to each other, and that the countries known to have traditionally high levels of civic participation (indicated by statistics on electoral participation) achieve repeatedly and systematically high rankings in literacy levels (Milner 2002, 53-65). The analysis and findings place the Scandinavian countries, particularly Sweden and Finland, amongst these.

Exceptionally valuable parts of Milner's research are the analyses of educational conditions of schools and external social influences in countries selected according to long-term statistics on civic participation. Sweden is an example of a country with a consistently high level of civic participation and is to be contrasted with countries with particularly low levels, or even rapidly decreasing levels of involvement in public life and public affairs, for instance the USA. In the case of Sweden, Milner illustrates how various social institutions contribute to the systematic and coordinated effort to increase the level of reading literacy amongst citizens with the aim of supporting their civic participation[6].

In his work (based on his own long-term experiences in the countries under investigation), Milner (2002) notes that the determining factor in the level of civic participation is the ability of schools and other social institutions to systematically produce and distribute a high level of reading literacy equally throughout the population. The substantial differences

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[6] A well-known area and source of civic participation is media policy that supports the educational influence of public media through high levels of state funding to protect them against commercialization. Television broadcasts include a significant share of educational programmes and foreign programmes, including children's are broadcast with subtitles exclusively. The result is that besides moderate viewing levels and high level of foreign language literacy, printed media are also popular, both in terms of actual reading and the related use of libraries. Statistics show that the renowned library of Umea, which is a famous cultural centre in the area, is visited by up to 4000 people daily. Adult education is another area that comes into its own. Swedish "study circles", funded from public finances, are widespread and are actively sought out by adults. These activities have particular relevance during election campaigns, when political parties hire professional education institutions. The overall effort invested by political parties into education and informing the voting population is above average at the very least.

between countries with low and high levels of civic participation lie precisely in the extent to which the education system is able to foster good reading habits and required levels of reading literacy, and consequently, produce informed citizens as a prerequisite to active and competent decision-making and behaviour within the civic sphere. His findings support the notion of what is referred to as the rational model of citizenship ("rational choice theory", "cognitive engagement", "rational-actor theory", see Lopes et al. 2009; Cassel and Lo 1997), which emphasizes knowledge and the cognitive aspects of participation, pointing to the fundamental significance of knowing politically relevant information and having a wide knowledge and understanding of politics.

A not inconsequential aspect of Milner's study is that he posits the notion of civic literacy against statistics on the economic prosperity of the countries surveyed, documenting the wider socio-economic background of the concept. He comes to the conclusion that equal distribution of education together with a high level of literacy and an informed population with the consequent high level of active participation of citizens in deciding the important questions in public life is, amongst other things, a guarantee of the equal distribution and control of resources and public finances. In the end this leads to a more promising investment in public affairs and social programmes, helping reduce and level out extreme socio-economic inequalities as a guarantee of higher political and economic stability with the prospect of long-term sustainable economic prosperity (a "sustainable welfare state", Milner 2002). Milner's conclusion is in line with the opinions of literacy scholars, who understand literacy to be a "*prerequisite for economic growth, social mobility and political stability*", while illiteracy is associated with "*increased poverty, higher crime rates, unemployment, political volatility, and economic stagnation*" (Roberts 2000, 434).

Concluding thoughts

Over the last few years, the international assessment of reading literacy through so-called "high-stakes-testing of education outcomes" (such as OECD – IALS, PISA, and so forth) has justifiably been the subject of increasing levels of criticism including from within critical pedagogy studies, which sees them as dangerous tools in the hands of the flourishing neoliberal education establishment for pursuing the interests of the globalized market economy. Many literacy experts, including representatives of the "new literacy studies" were amongst those who first identified and sharply criticized the ideological backdrop to the first published OECD international surveys measuring adult literacy in various countries of the world (IALS, International Adult Literacy Studies, 1995, 1997, 2000). Their arrogant rhetoric and ambitions, justified as finding the "human capital" rationalizations for these policy goals and promoting the dictates of the "new world-order vision" were received with general dismay (Hamilton and Barton, 2000). It is of no surprise when hearing the "OECD project developers" voicing unequivocal intentions such as to acquire "*international political power*" as quickly as possible and further expand it into new territories with the aim of taking over "*the global labour-force training market*" and then present this as a "*planetary vision*" (Hautecoeur 2000, 357). Substantial criticism was directed at the narrow interpretation of literacy, reduced to a "set of skills" required in the processing of information as "*the passport to the knowledge society*" (*ibid*., 358). Roberts (2000) believes that "knowledge" is being substituted by

"information" or is even identified as such, and the very concept of an information society is being presented without further description, torn from any kind of historical context or theory of knowledge. Expert communities, reacted in much the same way (pointing to many other problems concerning intercultural comparisons, where "culture is treated as error—becomes a distracting variable" and the questions used in tests have no relation to the real life situations, in which the level of literacy is supposed to be tested, etc.) to further promotion of "high-stakes-testing" (PISA and NCLB), which despite this continue to be implemented on a large scale across various samples groups within and outside the OECD countries.

Since the theoretical basis of Milner's concept of civic literacy is based, in part (although not exclusively) on these measurements, we might well express certain reservations. Nonetheless, it is worth considering (if we detach the ideological background and the unfortunate way in which the measurements are used—see Hickman this volume—including all the methodological flaws, as part of quantitative methodology), whether in fact these indicators (however narrow) do, at least to a certain degree, correspond to a real state of literacy. Moreover, there are other studies on reading literacy or civic engagement amongst the youth showing similar results (Bauerlein 2008; Giroux 2004; Lewis 2001; Dudley, Gitelson 2003; Macháček 2002). In any case, we can probably acknowledge that the findings on literacy that the "high-stakes-testing" provide need not be limited by the aims which they were to serve originally, but can be interpreted in a much more productive way; for example, by taking into account the contexts they themselves ignore—whether these be the cultural traditions of education within the countries under investigation or (as is the case with the work of Milner) the wider socio-economic and political context. What is criticized in the context of the methodology of "high-stakes-testing" as "throwing the baby out with the bathwater" (Hamilton and Barton 2000) could—paradoxically—occur if we were to allow ourselves to believe that the level of reading literacy amongst young people is sufficient, i.e. that it measures up to what literacy is expected to be according to current academic discourse on literacy. Despite the fact that what these tests actually measure is not what we have in mind when we think of active, productive, critical or cultural literacy, students who receive a true and excellent "critical reading and literacy education" (Comber and Nixon 2011) or those who enjoy reading and do so a lot (PISA, 2009) manage these tasks easily and well. As even Roberts (2000) admits, many of the findings which the surveys have produced could be used in meaningful ways, starting with the way in which they have opened up a space for public discussion. It is important, at least, to acknowledge that literacy itself, i.e. literacy, which restores the ethical, aesthetic, civic, political, historical and critical dimension of knowledge can be used as a cultural mechanism for creating the cultural identity of the individuals, thus empowering "critically literate global citizens" to respect, critically reflect upon, and if required oppose and defy the established social order, "*identifying oppressive as well as liberating features of life in a society*" (*ibid*., 449). At the very least, we can say that literacy in the sense that it is currently understood by social science provides a sufficiently productive frame for reflecting on school education, whilst maintaining its fundamental values and goals.[7]

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