

Adolescent Literacy Policy

Critical Literacy, Educational Investment, and the Blueprint for Reform: An Analysis of the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

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In March 2010, the U.S. Department of Education (2010) released *A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. The report opens with a call to action from President Barack Obama:

Today, more than ever, a world-class education is a prerequisite for success. America was once the best educated nation in the world. A generation ago, we led all nations in college completion, but today, 10 countries have passed us. It is not that their students are smarter than ours. It is that these countries are being smarter about how to educate their students. And the countries that out-educate us today will out-compete us tomorrow.

The report begins, as many do, with the language of crisis. The United States has slipped in the world rankings to 11 out of 32 developed nations in college completion rates for 25–34-year-olds. The aim of our current iteration of educational reform, then, is to lead again by 2020. It would be difficult to dispute the merits of this goal. I am not saying that we need to lead the world out of a sense of national competitiveness. We must ask ourselves why we have fallen behind and what we need to do to ensure that our students are ready for their futures as competent professionals and engaged citizens.

To reach this goal, the Blueprint identifies five areas of focus:

1. College- and career-ready students
2. Great teachers and leaders in every school
3. Equity and opportunity for all students
4. Raise the bar and reward excellence
5. Promote innovation and continuous improvement

Coming from a criticalist standpoint, there is much to discuss, including the sociohistorical and political contexts of our so-called educational “crisis,” the framing of the issue in a way that blames teachers, and the absences of discussions of power and ideology.

I begin with what I like about the structure and content of the Blueprint. First, the document points to the need for increased federal attention to and funding for education. Each of the other 10 nations that have passed the United States has strong federal involvement in their educational system. This is important. There simply is more weight and power behind reform efforts in K–16 education when the federal government is involved. Economically and politically, there are steps that the federal government can take that states cannot.

Although we have continually pushed ahead for innovative and radical reforms in literacy education, there is a price tag attached and the myth of educational poverty is allowed to persist within a wealthy nation that repeatedly and consistently funds other social institutions. For instance, the United States currently spends approximately 900 billion dollars annually on defense. Although the United States holds only five percent of the world's population, we spend as much on our defense as the rest of the world combined!

This number, which can approach one trillion dollars in the 2010–2011 fiscal cycle, dwarfs the combined spending of the 50 states on K–12 education. If we truly believe that education is central to our national security, we have to spend on education like we do on our national security. Although we face an uphill battle, I believe the current administration is headed in the right direction by increasing the federal role in financing U.S. education.

In addition, the Blueprint demonstrates a focus on equity. The huge discrepancies in the quality and quantity of the educational experience based on predictable characteristics such as race, class, or geography can leave our youths wondering whether we still believe in public schooling. Differences in resources and achievement simply cannot be written off to poor financial management or unmotivated students who hail from uncaring and unsupportive families. These kinds of outcomes can only be attributed to systemic failure—not the failure of teachers and principals, but the past failure at the executive level to provide resource and oversight to the public school system.

Finally, the Blueprint outlines a commitment to national excellence. In the most altruistic sense I see an inclusive goal here, which is to provide pathways of excellence and access for all of our students. Changing the pronouns in U.S. educational reform from *them* to *us* and measuring our success or failure as a collective enterprise would lead us in a very different and far more positive direction. If we understand that our national well-being is better determined by the education of the median student than by the student in the 90th percentile, then perhaps we will take steps to cut down the substantive differences between them.

As an example, the New York Philharmonic is going to have violists in the 50th and 90th percentiles by definition, but they all perform at such a high level that it is going to be difficult to tell. By contrast, our schools performing in the 25th, 50th, and 99th percentiles often look like the products of different nations, even different eras.

However, I am concerned with some implicit assumptions contained in the Blueprint as well as some of the less-than-original ideas being put forth to realize this goal. The report, as we have come to expect, calls for higher standards, better assessments, teacher training, and more accountability. What are some of the implicit assumptions behind these statements?

First, the statements locate the problem outside of the federal government. The (implicit) problem, according to the U.S. Department of Education, lies with uninformed teachers, unskilled and unmotivated students, and school districts that hold students to low standards. Such assumptions only lead to increased standardization and increased assessment without increased investment in the human capital of teachers and students and communities.

Critical literacy is a matter of life and death. Students, families, communities, and neighborhoods simply cannot survive in the 21st century without raising literacy rates. At a time when U.S. attention has turned to education, we need to make this point loud and clear. We have invested in banks, we have invested in war, and we have invested in a number of initiatives that, while important to our national security and welfare, are not nearly as important to our future as the education of U.S. children.

In California, they are laying off qualified teachers and cramming students 35 to a class. Last night, I sat in a café with three teachers from East Los Angeles high schools who were trying to figure out how to teach the way they need to with increased class sizes and the possibility of seeing 200 students every semester. I struggle to understand how collaboration and professional development are going to make it manageable for literacy teachers to successfully reach 200 students!

Investing in literacy education means making it possible for teachers to do their jobs in a humane manner. It means equipping schools with the new

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media resources that are required to tap into students' facility with 21st-century literacies as we leverage this knowledge and motivation to teach students academic skills and concepts. Investment also means valuing communities and honoring their histories and cultural wealth in the development of school cultures and classroom instruction. For this to happen, we have to confront the contradictions between making explicit connections to communities and the drive

toward U.S. standards. It is possible to connect to a set of national ideals around excellence while investing in the creativity and passion of local teachers and communities.

U.S. students will be motivated to take the necessary risks to obtain higher education when they are confident in their ability to do so and when they feel that the activities they are being asked to take part in are relevant to their present and future lives. A blueprint for reform has to understand engagement and has to make education relevant socially and culturally. Our best critical literacy educators know how to do this, but many do not feel the freedom or sanction to do so at present.

I would like to see clean, well-lit, and well-resourced schools and classrooms stocked with traditional and new media literacy texts and staffed by teachers who are well trained, who understand connections between theory and practice, and who believe deeply in the potential for excellence in all of their students. We can do this. We have the financial means and pedagogical knowledge to make this vision a reality. Our other federal and state institutions pass this economic threshold without much difficulty. Why are the government facilities that accommodate our adults nicer than the ones that shelter our children?

I agree with President Obama: It is not a question of a lack of intelligence in students and communities. What we have is a lack of investment of our national economic capital and in our local human capital. Our investment has to be more than rhetorical, and the

resources have to fit the shared vision. Critical literacy educators are well positioned to articulate this shared vision. We have knowledge of what powerful teaching looks like and what powerful language and literacy learning entails.

So what do we do? As critical literacy educators, how do we intervene in matters of state and educational policy? First, we invite ourselves to the party. We edit our journals, and we host our annual conferences. Policymaking happens simultaneously at the state and federal levels, but academic organizational business and state educational politics are segregated and nonconversant discourses. We need to become committed to cultural production which, in this sense, means amassing all that we know about effective critical literacy instruction and sharing that information with the silent majority that is secretly repulsed by the standard-testing regime, but who at present sees no better alternatives. We can do something about that.

As a national literacy research collective, we can engage in a close investigation of the tens of thousands of successful classrooms in the United States. What is going on in these classrooms and other nonschool spaces where children are learning, where they are happy, where they feel good about themselves, and where they have maintained strong connections to families and communities while learning skills that make them ready for college and for the world of civic engagement?

We can establish a clearinghouse of research on successful critical practices that cut across geographic and socioeconomic contexts. Many teachers and community-based educators are succeeding, and if we learned from them, supported them, and let them share their talents and philosophies with others, then that success would multiply. We simply have to do a better job of amassing data on the scores of highly effective secondary literacy teachers who are consistently achieving results in high-poverty, high-need schools.

Of course, we have to say more about what we mean by "results" or "effective." We need to expand the language of effectiveness to mean more than test results only, but we cannot avoid this task as a community of educators and scholars. The answers to many of our most difficult questions in literacy

education are located in these successful classrooms. The other set of answers lie in the pocketbooks of our state and federal legislatures.

We need to study youths closely and understand how they live, what they do, who they are, and what they need. I see very little in the Blueprint that shows an understanding of who our youths are and what they need as literate beings. The International Reading Association can help to create this reservoir of knowledge. We can continue to lead the way in the social investigation of the literate lives of youths in the United States at the dawn of the 21st century. How about developing a commission on youth literacies in the 21st century—but not a commission whose sole charge is to create position papers? How about giving some teeth to our findings? We need virtual press conferences, newspaper editorials, and digital video documentaries. We need a greater volume of output and a more sophisticated messaging and outreach strategy to influence the larger discourse and to create a connection between research on youth literacies and classroom literacy curricula.

And we need to listen to the youths. We need to see them as people who want desperately to succeed, as people who are demonstrating in numerous ways that they are capable and cognitively sophisticated beings. We need a national campaign promoting youths and their talents and telling them that we believe in them, we are proud of them, we hear them, and that we will invest in them. This national reconciliation with our youths is more than a gesture. I do not think that we do a good job of sending our youths positive messages about how we feel about them or what we think they are capable of.

Finally, we need to boldly insist on the language of critical literacy in conversations about reform.

Although the term *critical* may not be appealing, we can argue for the ideas. In creating a shared vision around the term, we have to insist that the education beyond basic reading and writing has to be about critical thinking—it has to be about developing voice, agency, and the power of production across traditional and new media genres. Literacy has to be empowering, or else what is the point of demanding it?

The world needs independent, free-thinking, open-minded intellectuals who can come together to collect, process, and produce information that will help to solve the most challenging problems of our time. If we work backward from this goal while moving forward from the indigenous literacy practices and authentic learning that happens in homes and communities, if we resource teachers and classrooms and give them sound examples of success, and if we provide for autonomy and voice simultaneously we will help to realize this ambitious and worthwhile goal of increasing critical literacy and college access for our most vulnerable populations.

References

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