

Literacy as a Means for Re-imagining a Woman's Identity

by *Mariana Souto-Manning*

If we are to go beyond first world representations of third world women as passive, subservient, and lacking in creativity, then clearly one important task for feminist ethnographers alert to and respectful of the differences between women is to listen well to the stories that other women have to tell, capturing the key images and offering interpretations that mirror the narrative forms they themselves use to tell their life stories. (Behar, 2003, p. 272)

Awakening

Growing up in Brazil, I never thought about questioning the system in place. I had a nanny; there was a maid who cooked my meals and cleaned my room. What I didn't realize at that point was that being a maid or a nanny was just one of their identities, and most importantly, I didn't realize it was not a self-identified or chosen identity, but an identity imposed on them by social, economic and political conditions (hooks, 1994). In this paper, I investigate the relationship between power, Discourses, literacies and cultures as seen by Madalena (pseudonym), a maid in my mother's house, and by me, a former early childhood teacher whose students in the Southeastern United States came largely from Latin American immigrant families. Further, I describe a model currently in practice in rural cities of Northeast Brazil that may help some of the parents with discourses whom I work.

I first became aware of the disparity between my life and Madalena's when I was a teenager. Reading about the United States as the first world power house and the oppressor of countries such as Brazil in my world history classes, I realized that the oppressed can also be oppressors. I certainly couldn't articulate this idea then as clearly as I can now, but I had a feeling that there were inequalities everywhere, starting in my own house. It was a very relevant issue, an issue with which I was uncomfortable, but I just didn't know how to get started trying to address it. At that time, it was easy to ignore it and move forward with my life. Although I say I ignored it, there wasn't one day I wouldn't think about

Madalena's situation. Madalena was a permanent fixture in my mother's house—or at least, it seemed like she was. She had worked in my family home for almost ten years. She made less than two thousand dollars a year, yet well above the minimum wage. She seemed happy, but could she be satisfied with the life she was leading? How had she gotten there? When these questions arose, we started talking. "We talked. We listened to each other. We knew that the answers were in the engagement. We knew that the engagement was the answer. We talked." (Fecho, 2003, p. 92) Those were topics I could no longer ignore as I tried to find answers to the social oppression present in the Southeastern United States, the oppression that affected so many of my students' parents.

Engagement as the Answer

As Madalena waited on me one morning during the summer of 2003 and served my breakfast, I hesitantly asked her to sit and talk. Overcoming some awkwardness and reluctance at first, our talking sessions became routine. Eventually, I began tape-recording our conversations with her permission. At first, because of our class difference, Madalena expressed concern as to whether or not her experience would be relevant to someone who held more knowledge than she did. The class differences were never couched in terms of money, in terms of haves and have-nots, but in terms of literacy as a tool for personal and professional growth.

While there was sameness in that we were both from the same geographic area, there was also much otherness in that sameness. I got to know Madalena better, and as rapport developed, Madalena told me her life story. She told of the Discourse she learned, the role of the multiple identities she took and the importance of the piece that wasn't there—literacy, as couched in terms of learning a secondary Discourse (Gee, 1996), more specifically the Discourse of power. James Paul Gee defines Discourse as "ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes" (1996, p. 127). She couldn't, therefore, use

a particular Discourse to critique other ones. This lack of acquisition of the Discourse of power is the base for resistance to oppression and inequality (Delpit, 1996).

Madalena's story denotes the fact that in Brazil, neither governmental nor nongovernmental adult literacy education prioritize women's education (Rosemberg, 1993). She told me that when she was a child she had gone to school.

Madalena: Where I lived there was only one school, only one really, and it was only until fourth grade. So, I went to school until the fourth grade. When I finished fourth grade my teacher wanted me to go to Campina [pseudonym] to the 5th grade. I cried much but my mother didn't let me. Girls didn't go to Campina. Only boys really. Then, my teacher let me repeat the fourth grade two times. I couldn't do anything, anything really. My brothers went to the 5th grade and I couldn't. Can you imagine?

In Search of New Possibilities

Madalena proceeded to tell me about the reason why she had come to Porto (pseudonym), the capital of the state and the city where she had lived for the last 15 years or so. Her motivation lay in the prospect of having the opportunity to further her education.

Madalena: When I had sufficient age [was old enough], I came to Porto. I was happy, [you] know. I thought I was going to school again, but working in people's houses, I never got out early to go to school.

She had been told there were schools everywhere. What she had not been told is that she would probably have no chance to attend school, not even in the evenings. To maintain herself, as arranged before she had left her own house, she would work as a maid in a family house. She was told she would have her own room and she wouldn't have to pay for rent or utilities. What she hadn't been told is that as long as she was in the house she was on duty. There was no start time or finish time for her day. She had not been told the low salary she'd make.

I always thought people became maids because they

didn't go to school, but I never thought about them being denied the opportunity to go to school and ending up in Porto looking for a way to further their educations. I talked to six maids who had come from rural areas, a common practice. All of them had come searching for more education; all of them had difficulty reading and functioning in the power Discourse. The unsettling thing is that none of them ever furthered their education by even one grade level. I believe there is a political agenda behind it all. The power Discourse does not want to lose the convenience of maids. I started thinking about the situation of illegal immigrants in the Southeastern United States; how different is their situation from the situation of these maids? The reality is that "we are experiencing a rapid "Third-Worldization" of North America, where inner cities more and more come to resemble the shantytowns of the Third World" (Macedo & Costa Freire, 1998, p. ix). I started wondering if there was anything at all being done and if things had changed any from the time Madalena went to the big city, about 15 years ago.

Pernambuco's and Madalena's Realities

In Pernambuco, Northeastern Brazil, there were very few literacy or basic education programs specifically directed to women (Ballara, 1995).

Madalena: There weren't any special classes, like today, in some places. I heard today if you don't get out in time and miss class you don't have to repeat the year...you don't have to see it all again.

Women-focused literacy programs target those women who have problems participating in typical adult education programs. "They tend to be...poor women who work in domestic tasks and the care of small children. These women's literacy groups establish more flexible classroom schedules, but their participation still requires support and cooperation of all family members. When women do manage to accommodate domestic labor and child care with their studies, those with family responsibilities and reduced autonomy choose to attend programs close to home" (Stromquist, 1994).

Until the point when we last talked, Madalena had not yet enrolled in an adult literacy program satisfactory to her. Themes that surfaced in our conversations

regarding the deficiencies of programs she had previously attended were: classes having too many youngsters (teenagers), which made her feel inappropriate; lack of child care, since her husband works until 11PM as a security person; and lack of a program that is close to her home. These were common obstacles she would have to overcome in order to finish her education and change her life situation.

Lack of Success in Schools and in Literacy Programs

Madalena still hasn't given up hope that one day she can go back to school, which is admirable. Her story is one of strength and persistence—15 years trying to continue her education. Although she repeated fourth grade, she has limited reading and writing skills and regrets not being able to help her son, who is in Kindergarten, with his homework.

Madalena: I think the teacher thinks all the children come from the same place. I pay for my son to go to school. It is a very big sacrifice, but the teacher thinks I don't care because I don't help him. Then she decided to make him repeat the year. He is in Kindergarten again this year and I am paying it all again. I don't know if he will go to first grade, you know, because I can't help him.

After Madalena's comments, I started thinking reflectively about my own practice as a teacher. Was I respecting each child's culture? Was I conceiving parental involvement as school involvement or as real parental involvement (anything a parent does that will affect the present or the future of the child)? Are we as educators blaming parents for our failing of their children? Is success a socially constructed concept in which children such as Madalena's son are not successful if they don't assimilate the power Discourse? According to Au, "when children learn to read, or fail to learn to read, they do so in a particular social, cultural, and historical environment. Their success or failure in reading cannot be understood apart from the environment" (1997, p. 184).

What is, then, a successful literacy program? How do we construct one? Gee (1996) argues that it is a balance of acquisition and learning that should be the goal of a strong literacy program in school. To understand what

Gee is proposing when he defines a strong literacy program, it is important to look at his definitions of acquisition and learning:

Acquisition is a process of acquiring something (usually, subconsciously) by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, without formal teaching. It happens in natural settings which are meaningful and functioning in the sense that acquirers know they need to acquire the thing they are exposed to in order to function and they in fact want to so function. . . . *Learning* is a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching (though not necessarily from someone officially designated a teacher) or through certain life-experiences that trigger conscious reflection. This teaching or reflection involves explanation and analysis, that is, breaking down the thing to be learned into its analytic parts. It inherently involves attaining, along with the matter being taught, some degree of meta-knowledge about the matter (Gee, 1996, p. 138).

Often, schools focus on learning and assume that acquisition happens at home. Yes, it does happen in the homes of middle class families, but this is not the case with Madalena's son. She regrets not having read to him, but she doesn't read fluently. Besides, by the time she got home, she had to wash her family's clothes, cook and clean. She had to bathe her children and put them to bed. Then, she had to go to bed herself, to wake up early the next morning. Assuming that acquisition was happening at home was failing Madalena's son at school.

It is my belief that literacy (the skill Madalena's son is struggling with) is related to cultural identity and reflects social and cultural differences, and the impact of these differences on school success as "readers and practices of reading are situated within histories of locality. . . and class. Literacy learning is part of these histories, not something that children do as a cognitive task divorced from their lives" (Hicks, 2002, p. 37). Ignoring these only means benefiting those children whose home culture is the culture of power, the culture reflected at school. For children whose home culture is not that of those in power, home and school cultures often require different Discourses. That's what was happening in Pernambuco. Madalena's story was coloring my take on what literacy is and what it ought to be for that

region—Northeastern Brazil. According to Laubscher and Powell, “richer learning is possible through attention to such politics of difference” (2003, p. 221).

Along with acquisition, learning is an essential part of a successful literacy program, as there can be no critique of a Discourse without learning; for it is through the process of learning that meta-knowledge can be developed. Learning is part of teaching for social justice. Madalena talked about the fact that her son is starting to disrespect her, “*because I don’t know what’s important [at school].*” When there is a mismatch between the definition and significance of literacy as they are represented in a person’s cultural identity and in the learning situation, the individual is faced with a choice: to either adopt the perspective of the school and risk undermining their cultural identity, or to resist the externally imposed activities at the risk of becoming alienated from the school (Nieto, 2002). Madalena’s son, as she reports, is clearly conflicted as to whether he should choose the school culture or the home culture. I thought much about behavior problems displayed by children whose home Discourse is not the school Discourse. I thought about the display of those so-called inappropriate behaviors, and whether they happen at home or only at the school. I continued to think. My thoughts were starting to scare me as I thought about the many children whose home Discourses differ from the school Discourse, and how many of these children ended up in Special Education.

I personally experienced this deficit-oriented belief towards Discourses that differed from those employed in schools while in the hospital right after giving birth. One of my good friends came to see the baby; she asked me if I was going to teach him my native language. I enthusiastically said yes. She looked down and told me that there was a good possibility that he would end up in Special Education, speaking with a voice of authority as she herself is a Special Education teacher in a neighboring county. Then I started asking myself, is bilingualism a disability? Are students for whom English is not their native language treated as having a disability? Is a disability the lack of ability or willingness to conform to the power or school Discourse? As I come to think of it, using their home Discourses at school is considered a misdemeanor or wrong. What teachers don’t see is that they are forcing students to make a choice.

To choose between their home culture and their school culture puts them at an educational disadvantage. If students choose the school culture, they will be outsiders in their own cultures. If they choose the home culture, they will likely not fare well enough at school. I started thinking about how to deal with this issue, as a mother and educator. We teachers need to instill respect and tolerance for cultures and languages, therefore respecting bilingualism in schools. Teaching the power Discourse to enable students to critique it is the goal Delpit (1996) defends and I have tried to embody.

In any culturally diverse society, there will be different conceptions of what it is to be literate, that is, there are multiple literacies (Gee, 1996). By conversing with Madalena, I realize that one of the problems she is experiencing is related to the restricted definition of literacy that many teachers have. We must, as Gee (1996) highlights, promote multiple literacies.

Madalena defines herself as illiterate; that is one of her identities—besides her identity as a maid and mother. I asked her why, and she said that she can’t read or write. Yet, she functions quite well in her community and is very smart and astute. She can calculate her budget and plan a meal for the family plus guests. She can carry on a long conversation and have a deep understanding of political issues:

Madalena: ...the politicians only think about us when it is time to vote, but you can’t learn like that, it takes longer than their campaign, you know, and once they are elected, they don’t care about us anymore all we have to give them is our vote...they always promise but don’t always do what they promise.

Literacy as a Tool for Social Change

In Pernambuco, women with limited literacy skills “continue to be a large group, the majority of Brazilian women possess limited schooling, and discrimination persists in terms of educational access for the subgroups of low-income women, and especially . . . [those] who live in rural areas and the North and Northeastern regions of the country” (di Pierro, 2000, p. 66). According to Paulo Freire (1985) literacy should be a tool for personal transformation and social change, and it can only be so if what the students are learning is directly related to

their lives. If the idea is that education and knowledge have value only if they help people free themselves from oppressive social conditions (Freire, 2000), this is a situation in which education would have much value—by providing the tools for social change. Madalena is reading the world before reading the word; but how can she make this transition?

Círculos de Educação e Cultura (Circles of Education and Culture) is a current program that takes place in the rural area of my state, Pernambuco, where Paulo Freire started his journey as an educator who believed in literacy as a means of social change. As a self-identified “illiterate person,” Madalena would qualify to participate in this program if she still lived there. The program educates adults who are generally workers in the rural sugar cane farms in the state of Pernambuco. Many of them had to drop out of school to work in the fields to sustain their families—many never even went to school. Girls, as in Madalena’s case, were not allowed to continue their education, as middle schools and high schools were scarce and required students to walk a long time to get to school, something only boys could (or should) do. Since children could start working and making money as early as they could start school, school was not a priority as working was essential for their survival. This program has made it possible for thousands of rural workers to open their minds to a new world.

The areas in which Paulo Freire developed participatory literacy programs have been supported by government-sponsored programs and by non-governmental organizations (called ONGs in Brazil) throughout the world. The program discussed here is supported by both the government of the state of Pernambuco and many non-governmental organizations (ONGs).

Before this program was implemented, the rural workers would complain that they would work the whole day in the field, and could not cope with going to school to learn things that were not important in the field. School was regarded as a luxury, or as something that gave people something to do until they could find a job. The underlying thought was that if you already had a job, you did not need to go to school, because you go to school so that you can find a job. In 1996, at the implementation of these circles by the state government

with the support of some ONGs [NGOs], 34% of the population of the state was illiterate. Even worse, 59% of the population in Pernambuco’s rural areas was illiterate (Secretaria de Educação e Esportes, Governo do Estado de Pernambuco, 1997).

Something had to be done to counter the effect of secular socio-political-economic conditions that did not work for the benefit of the people in the Northeast of Brazil. Fortunately, even though these people had lived under such harsh conditions, and worked so much and for so long, they still had hopes of better days. They really stand behind the saying “*nunca é tarde pra aprender*”, which translates into “it is never too late to learn”. That is exactly what the *Círculos de Educação e Cultura* (Circles of Education and Culture) have been proving: it is never too late to learn.

Students determine the curriculum taught. Teachers facilitate. While in Pernambuco, during the months of June, July and August, 2003, I observed the teaching of very practical skills such as learning how to sign names and calculate salaries based on the number of hours worked, among other skills. Some of the very functional skills that many students were particularly proud of was being able to read the signs that indicate where the bus is going, where a car is from (by reading the license), and the fact that they could read and write the name of the surrounding communities. The first things taught were very practical and functional aspects of reading and writing. I can understand how these skills are important to the students—using public transportation and knowing where they are—but I cannot imagine how a teacher would include those skills in the curriculum if the students weren’t the ones to dictate the curriculum. That is a very good aspect of this program. Its pedagogical intent is still the same: to democratize education and culture. More than formation, it tries to promote the social competence of people of low socio-economic status (SES), and improve the quality of life. These circles take place in many locations. Primarily, they take place wherever it is convenient for most of the members. Some of them take place in schools, clubs, syndicates/unions, and even in churches. They take place whenever and wherever it is convenient for the community.

More specific technical skills are also taught. The workers in the sugar cane fields discuss their techniques and practices as well as the purpose of their techniques

and practices. They come to truly understand what they are doing and become specialists in their area. The technical words learned in the field are reviewed in class, making the literacy learning in the circles directly related to their lives.

The rich experience of each of the individuals is respected in the circle. There isn't a member who doesn't know anything; every person has important life experiences to share. These experiences become the themes for the meetings. The people are not classified as illiterate, but as learners. Each one of them brings knowledge, explanations, ideas regarding themselves and their worlds. They bring and share their dreams, wishes, fears, questions, doubts, and frustrations, and those are the starting points of the educational action. The contents must be common to the community—the prayers, the syndicates, the social behavior of the group—nothing should escape the attention of educators.

Teachers must know and believe that dialogue is the essential condition of their work—the teacher's job is to coordinate and to facilitate, and never to influence or impose. The teacher's role is to facilitate the entrance of men and women into the world of knowledge and literacy, a world in which there is no absolute knowledge (Harding, 1986), but a world in which partial knowledge (Hill Collins, 1990) is celebrated.

Final Thoughts

While Madalena is eligible for this program, it is not yet in place in Porto (pseudonym), the city where Madalena lives. When told about this program and asked if she'd be interested in participating, she said, *"If I can take my children with me, if I won't feel 'burra' and if there are people of my age there, I want to go. When can I start going? W-where is it?"* Unfortunately, this program has not entered big cities yet. It is taking place in rural areas, areas such as the one from which Madalena came. Women like Madalena, third world women, besides their exclusion from sites of knowledge, also suffer from the stereotypes associated with third world women.

According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991), "the texts of non-Western women's lives written by feminists in the West tend to present portraits of the third-world woman as ... being 'third world'

(read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)...while subliminally portraying themselves as "educated, modern, as having control over their bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions." (p. 56)

I believe that American feminists must recognize stories such as Madalena's, stories of great determination and strength, and fight for rights that will erase these stereotypes by providing women with education, with literacy, with the tools for social and personal change. We (including first and third world women and men) must promote different "culture[s] and [their] relationship[s] to literacy learning...that examine how the social organization of learning influences learning outcomes...in how children learn to read and become literate." (Gutierrez, Asato, Pacheco, Moll, Olson, Horno, Ruiz, Garcia, & McCarthy, 2002).

The education of rural workers in the Northeast of Brazil and the education of English Language Learners living primarily in urban cities here in the United States may at first seem completely unrelated matters. In reality, both groups are lost in a strange world. When a Brazilian who is illiterate enters a big city, it is as Rosa Soares, a 61-year-old member of a circle said: "It is like I am blind and mute at the same time, not being able to understand what's around me" (trans. by author, Secretaria de Educação e Esportes, Governo do Estado de Pernambuco, 1997). That is exactly the feeling that English language learners who are illiterate or have had only limited education in their mother language feel.

I propose that local public schools look at Paulo Freire's theory in practice in Northeast Brazil, and come up with a better way to address a similar problem that can no longer be ignored—the illiteracy of adults (citizens or not) living in the Southeastern United States. "It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them" (Macedo & Araújo Freire, 1998, p. xi). Freire invites American educators "to re-create and rewrite [his] ideas" (Macedo & Araújo Freire, 1998, p. xi). Developing a pilot program with the characteristics described in this paper by offering those adults who are English Language Learners an education that is drawn from their real-life experiences would empower them as learners. Creating programs similar to the circles of education and culture in the Southeastern United States

would serve as a way for English Language Learners to make their lives better, and to promote social change.

Statistics and demographics show a substantial and growing immigrant population who need to be recognized and valued for their languages, cultures, and literacies—today and even more so in the future. In my opinion, the methods of Paulo Freire and of the researchers and theorists mentioned earlier would empower immigrant parents to take a more active role in their own children’s education. This would ultimately improve the overall education being offered to English Language Learners.

Stimulating cooperation between home and school requires time and effort, as well as human and financial resources. It is my strong belief that in today’s world, traditional assumptions defining parental involvement at school must be re-examined. Cooperation requires a commitment to providing participation opportunities to all families regardless of the parents’ native language, level of education, or experience with a school district’s policies and procedures. School staff requires support from administration, resources, and time to encourage the cooperation of their students’ families. Researchers as well as practitioners should focus on finding more practical ways for effective parental involvement, because ultimately students benefit, and everyone involved receives significant rewards.

“[I]f our goal, as literacy educators..., is to work for social change, then our work is never done. We must continue to interrogate relationships between literacy performances and power dynamics...with the understanding that justice lies in the perpetual interrogation.” (Blackburn, 2003, p. 488). Let’s continue questioning and interrogating these relationships between power, Discourses, literacies and cultures, and in doing so, let’s try to come up with ways in which the Madalenas in this world can have room to improvise with their identities, and acquire wider means for re-imagining who they are (Holland, 1998).

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Mariana Souto-Manning, Ph. D., Assistant Professor of Early Childhood and Language & Literacy Education at the University of South Carolina, has taught primary grades in U.S. public schools as well as preschool and English as a Foreign Language in Brazil. Her research interests include discourse analysis, democratic classrooms, critical theory, feminisms, and sociocultural theory. Her publications include an entry in the Encyclopedia Latina published by Grolier and publications with journals such as *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *Language in Society*, and *The School Community Journal*. She has presented at professional conferences throughout North America, Europe, South America, and Australia.