Literacy and Educational Fundamentalism:
An Interview with Allan Luke

Hourig and Xiao Lan Christensen interviewing Dr. Allan Luke at McGill University, Montreal, February 2004.

XL: In your recent article "Literacy and the 'Other'" (Luke 2003), you have used the term "educational fundamentalism". Would you elaborate on this term and explain how it manifests itself in the literacy debate? You have also mentioned in your article that multilingualism is often categorized as 'other'; can you also elaborate on this issue? In your opinion, is there a link between educational fundamentalism and labelling multilingual subjects as 'other'?

AL: It's a good question. Let's begin by saying that literacy crises and these whole cycles of 'blame the school, blame the teacher, blame falling standards of literacy' arise in times of economic, cultural and social disruption. Literacy was in crisis even at its inception. In the fourth century BCE, Socratic dialogue was under threat and Plato was upset by the emergence of the alphabet. Eighteen centuries later, the emergence of the printing press led to another crisis. It threw the clergy, the scriptoria and those who controlled texts and the archive into chaos by introducing the idea that everyone can and should read. In the last fifty years, television, new technologies and shifts in the economy have contributed to a continual discourse of crisis. These are variations on what Habermas (1975) referred to a crisis of moral, economic and cultural "legitimation". And always teachers, education systems and, indirectly and directly, literacy standards and practices become social shock absorbers for large scale social, cultural and economic change.

Without catching 'millenial fever', I would argue that the changes in social, institutional and community composition and structure are indeed profound. The social facts of multilingualism and multiculturalism, core changes in post war and post-colonial demography, shifts in the distribution of work and material wealth are leading to new forms of poverty, new forms of community while at the same time exacerbating social division and placing institutions under stress. The volatility of many peoples' lives – under and re-employment, movement and relocation, changing job markets, shifting family structures – shows no signs of going away or reverting to some kind of postwar normalcy.

Hence: back-to-the-basics movements, signs of what I called "educational fundamentalism". I use the term cautiously, not just as a negative label for conservative and reactionary thought. That would be much too easy, particularly after September 11 and the popular affiliation of Muslim fundamentalism with political action and terrorism, and Christian fundamentalism with televangelism and American, right wing politics. But fundamentalism

is a more complex historical and institutional phenomena, involving a kind of textual and social 'literalism' that flattens out complexity and diversity.

We need to think of fundamentalism in the broader history of literacy. First of all, it refers to literalism in textual practices, specific secular reading positions and their affiliated pedagogies (Kapitzke 1995). Social anthropologist Jack Goody (Goody 1987) described the evolutionary shift from "religions of the word" to "religions of the book": leading to the contemporary situation where religions are differentiated by both the sacred books that they choose - from the *Bhagavad-Gita* to the *Quran* to the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament* - and by the reading practices and positions that they prescribe to communities of believers. In these ways, long before literacy ever became the secular domain of state schooling, it was, and remains for many, religious practice. Children learned to read in order to be fully inducted into dogma and spirituality. So Adventists read differently than Mormons, who read differently than Baptists and so forth. Until recently, Catholics worked with a different *lingua franca* for religious practice, and affiliated set of reading practices. Likewise Shi'ites differ from Sunni in both their interpretation of the *Quran* and their training regimes for induction into *Quranic* literacy. To take another example, Bar Mitzvahs are, in part, patriachial demonstrations of mastery of linguistic and textual practice.

The terms hermeneutics and exegesis, and much of the everyday literary practices that we teach children to do with texts, thus have deep religious roots. As David Olson's (1996) applications of "speech act" theory to reading suggest: literalism occurs when sacred books are taken to mean what they say, when they can be interpreted quite directly without either authoritative interpretive filters or complex theoretical schemes. Of course, entire religious wars have been fought over who has the right reading of holy text, so we should not underestimate the political implications of reading practices. But the legacy of religious fundamentalism is one approach to reading practices – literalism, an utter simplicity of reading practices, as against multiple interpretations, critical literacies, multiliteracies, reader response, and so forth.

In this light, phonics-based, "back to basics" movements call for a reduction of the complexity of literate practices. Implicit in the current policy debates are essentialist claims that: "literacy can be boiled down to basics. Just teach them to do the basics, and that is all they need to know". Educational fundamentalism, then, is a kind of reductionism in approaches to literacy and language learning, ostensibly scientific but with complex ideological and historical precedents and concomitants. The new educational fundamentalism claims that there is a core of basic skills, the acquisition of which is necessary *and* sufficient for literacy, learning and life.

A second take on fundamentalism is as an educational response to globalization, the flows and scapes of new economies, intercultural contact risk and new identities. In *Rise of Network Society,* Manuel Castells (1996), argues that one of the typical responses to new information technologies, new social networks, flows of discourse and capital is moral panic. Many are searching for spiritual, moral, and ethical anchors that will see them through what are risky, threatening and volatile conditions, both those 'broadcast' to people

through the media and their very real, lived material conditions. People are in a state of panic. We saw comparable events in the run up to the last millennium, when Canadians, Americans and Australians left farms for the cities, moved from extended families into these strange phenomena called cities and into urban industrial life, where whole new kinds of people came into existence, from unruly 'adolescents' to 'working women'. My own grandparents, migrants from the famines and upheavals of the Pearl River Delta in the 1890s moved to the Chinese diaspora of Seattle and Honolulu, getting religion in the process. It isn't coincidental that these times spawned Mormonism, Seventh Day Adventism, and religious fundamentalism of different kinds. So fundamentalism is a historical reaction to moral uncertainty, socio-economic change, demographic and cultural displacement.

Educational fundamentalism, then, is this kind of "back-to-the-basics" nostalgia, a hailing back to a pristine era in which everybody was a 1950's print-literate, a wistfulness for literalness in reading and literacy, lifestyle and values. We quite literally have teachers waiting for Britney to go away or waiting for multi-modality to give way to an era in which children would actually love the print version of Harry Potter as their first choice or would become Dick and Jane type readers in the 1950's and 1960's. So there is a kind of nostalgia, a "childhood lost and childhood regained" (Luke and Luke, 2001) mentality that is the core of a new educational fundamentalism.

How is this a sanction of monolingualism? Part of the nostalgia is for a postwar period, or for that matter, even a colonial era before the population started to variegate, to get strange, to fill up with colour and polyphony of migrant cultures. So there is a harkening back to an Edenic era, a pristine era of print-literacy, basic skills, disciplined children and a monolingual, normalised 'white' populace. I think it will be much too easy to forget that the calculus of colonialism was that one nation equalled one culture equalled one race and one language. So there is a nostalgia that is waiting for multilingualism, for rap and grunge to go away; waiting for a reversion to a normalized, monolingual, pre-digital, basic skills-driven childhood. It's an understandable but foolish position.

H: Can you comment on the impact of Digital Technologies on the way mainstream school systems deal with cultural and linguistic assimilation and /or pluralism? And how they serve to enhance or deny minority rights? How can Digital Technologies be utilized by diasporic communities and immigrant minorities to counter assimilation?

AL: I am not an "IT in education" person, but I can try to answer this from a literacy and social policy perspective. Canadian communications theory offers two schools of thought about new media. One is a technological determinist model, a variation on the "autonomous model of literacy" critiqued by Brian Street (1984). It assumes that there are intrinsic communicative, cognitive and social characteristics, enabled by different communications technologies, whether digital or traditional print or the oldest technology of them all: spoken language. Vygotsky refers to language as the 'tool of tools', so let's just take spoken language as a technology as well. The theoretical lineage runs from Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan to Jack Goody and David Olson, via Toronto. The view that literacy has intrinsic effects is taken up as well in the work of Michael Halliday and Gunther Kress,

who looks for what he calls "affordances" of particular modalities of representation. Gunther's current claim is that visual art and display enable different kinds and modes of expression than spoken language and written language.

As anybody with any linguistics training knows, the characteristic patterns of oral and written language are different. So, there is on one hand in the history of literacy and the literacy studies a notion of autonomous effects: that the new technologies enable particular kinds of cognitive patterns and social action. However, on the other hand, we also know that these communications technologies are ideological, that they are malleable and their uses and functions are actually shaped by particular social forces, class interests, cultural interests and power relations. Therefore we have two contending explanations of how communications technologies work. One, that they've got intrinsic effects, and the other that they are enlisted for particular hegemonic or constructive effects. Let's then look at the new IT and argue that they too are double-edged swords, they too cut both ways in relation to minority and diasporic communities. Consider the issue of cognitive and social affordances, and how technologies provide media for particular social and ideological patterns. On the one hand, they enable new mediated systems of domination, they enable McDonaldization, the extension of world language English; they enable Microsoft to make more money, that is, setting conditions for new political economies of text production. In previous eras, textbook publishers dominated educational practices, now it's Fox, Microsoft, Sony and, even, Ebay as modes of community pedagogy.

So there is an extension of cultural hegemonic domination, ideological interpolation, as a US-based Internet reaches out to the world. On the other hand, as Foucault always maintained, discourse is always localized in idiosyncratic ways - and the Internet was designed by the Rand Corp. to be uncontrollable, to be rhizomatic in social and communicative structure. On Native Net, Inuit peoples exchange strategies with Maori peoples over land claims; disabled people build communities that constraints of mobility, time and space did not allow them. We find people engaging in new forms of identity politics, new modes of symbolic violence, new social relations, in new sexual, courtship and kinship relations. There are hosts of unpredictable effects of discourse and communications and of course new genres of expression, new blended modalities, and new lexicosyntactic patterns on email and SMS.

Work by Eva Lam (Northwestern) with Hong Kong kids, Cynthia Lewis and Bettina Fabos (Iowa) with Iowa adolescents, and Jim Albright, Chris Walsh and Kiran Pirohit (Teachers College) amongst New York Chinatown kids all show new textuality, identity and capital in formation. Amongst these kids, we begin to see the same kind of dialectical tensions of the communications technologies for diasporic communities - at once enabling new forms of patriarchy, new forms of hegemony, but also engaging new forms of community and new forms of identity politics, new forms of voice and designs of power. When we turn to the educational systems' interventions, there is compelling evidence of a digital divide - diasporic and migrant communities struggling to get access, and 'Matthew Effects' with the rich and the wired getting richer and more wired while the unwired and poor lose capital. This is the case in many parts of Asia and the North/West.

So the new modes of information are re-divided as readily as the means of production were under industrial economy.

There also are cases of enabling environments in which marginalised kids, switched off by schools and print pedagogy, are being re-engaged. In San Diego, Michael Cole's *Fifth Dimension* and Olga Vasquez's *La Clase Mágica,* or the *Plus Project* run for Aboriginal kids in Queensland by Peter Renshaw, Diane Mayer, Cushla Kapitzke and colleagues have shown that the IT can be used in a range of forms to set up zones of proximal development that re-engage language learners, re-engage bilingual and multilingual populations. I think it is instructive that *La Clase Mágica* was actually established in churches, in community centres, in community libraries and in boys' and girls' guides centres, outside of schools as an 'alterior' educational environment. They turn kids away from those centres. Kids that struggle during school actually show up in front of and want to talk with *El Maga,* to engage in dialogue on line and play *Where in The World is Carmen San Diego.* The *Plus Program* had to turn kids away. We had calls from university security guards complaining that Aboriginal kids with skateboards kept wanting to get in the university library on the weekend.

So technology actually does provide enabling zopeds that hook kids in whereas perhaps *Open Court*-style reading series don't. We are looking at these same dialectical tensions at the face-to-face level, heightened engagement is counterposed against digital divides and limited access. Finally, the third unresolved tension in the new technology education debate is the difficulty in actually mobilising teachers to use the technology. Singaporean data will bear us out in due course but no matter how extensively we wire the classrooms, teachers are actually struggling to know what to do instructionally with this technology. That is, it's the worst of didactic/print pedagogy reproduced through powerpoint. In second language learning we had the audiovisual method, thank you very much, and we knew what its strengths and limitations were over twenty years ago.

But while we're still struggling to know what to do with digital technology on any scale, the students are not mystified. The research move we're making in Singapore is to shift the research agenda from a focus on teachers to the study of the students' artefacts: hybrid artefacts, hybrid genres, code and register shifting, different lexicosyntactic forms and linguistic and multimodal creolisation. We've got this historically unprecedented moment where the kids actually know what to do with this technology and intuitively are sussing it out while teachers and educational systems and researchers struggle.

H: This is also shifting power relations within the classroom.

AL: We always talk about progressivism, constructivism and Freirianism being about negotiating the curriculum. But sociocultural pedagogies still are premised, unromantically, on the teacher as having some substantial and articulated epistemic authority. Teachers must know what they want to teach these kids, what knowledge counts and how to mobilise knowledge and people in purposive ways. Yet online and gaming environments create conditions where the kids often know more about the technology and more about how to

use it. These are leading to new and unprecedented shifts in power relations and in the exchange of capital, online and face-to-face.

XL: But in a highly organized society with a very strong Confucian influence in Singapore, the teachers might feel disempowered and very uncomfortable. How are they dealing with the situation where the students are much more powerful than they are?

AL: New technologies and shifting fields of knowledge have real potential to disrupt and threaten longstanding teacher-student authority relations. This is happening – but don't underestimate the powerful social order that is maintained in classrooms across Asia in states with strong central authority. It's the product of thousands of years of pedagogic and cultural traditions, social and political traditions pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial, that just don't 'go away' because of forces from the west. But don't underestimate the fact that throughout the world, we have age-bifurcated teaching work forces - in Singapore, like Canada and the US, in Australia. A lot of our young teachers are deemed as "deficit" by older teachers in the educational establishment, yet they are experientially closer to pop culture and technologically more fluid. There is a tendency in Ministries of Education to generate a discourse of 'deficit' not just around the kids, but to argue, "back in the old days we knew how to teach reading and these young teachers don't know how to do it". We just have to set up enabling conditions to allow teachers to use their contemporary cultural knowledge. So yes, in Singapore and elsewhere, new technologies and knowledges are disruptive of authority relations, but as much between generations of teachers as between students and teachers.

XL: You have argued that most advanced or "late capitalist" countries have implemented literacy policies as if issues of linguistic diversity, cultural identities and language rights are resolved. In fact, the US and UK policies have exacerbated social problems around migrant, diasporic communities and minority language groups. In the face of these issues, where do you start? How are you going to solve the problems?

AL: I wrote some early pieces in the field of language planning that were very sceptical because I thought the field was basically trying to ideologically control something which by definition was kind of "un-organizable" and had a life of its own: language shift, language retention, language change and so forth. At that time I would have argued against evidence-based social and educational policy, arguing that accountability systems intrinsically were the work of draconian neo-liberal bean counters. Having worked with governments in Australia and Asia, I now wish there was more systematic evidence-based language-in-education, and literacy-in-education policies than there are. As I argued in the *RRQ* article, there is a need for rich sociolinguistic and cultural analysis, for hermeneutic debates around a range of data including test scores but also that look at sociodemographic change, the spatial location of wealth and poverty, combinatory effects of different kinds of social, economic and cultural capital. We need to analyse the new life pathways and forms of risk and volatility. We have the multilevel statistical capacity to do such work. Basically I wish that governments would get serious about doing critical social science properly. We *should* be making more informed language and literacy education policies on the basis of knowledge of the complexity of linguistic and cultural landscapes of our communities.

Without this, you get unintentional effects. In fact the policies risk misdirection of resources and ultimate failure at sustainable longitudinal educational achievement effects, much less improved or altered life pathways. They often fail because they may set out to improve minority achievement or migrant achievement, but in fact wind up narrowing of instructional strategies and curriculum breadth. This may have medium-term deleterious effects to achievement, or distract educators and the community from system-wide pedagogy issues. We are already seeing that with the data in California on the fourth and fifth grade slump. My point is that without systematic social policies including the data linguists and ethnographers of communication can yield, what we're getting are reductionist policies that wind up with unintentional effects of linguistic homogenisation and a kind of curricular 'dumbing down' of knowledge across the board. Simply, I'm not against reading achievement test scores or explicit instruction in coding per se but to assume that these are the main or even sole foci of a language and literacy-in-education policy is dumb government and bad science.

H: Basically, it seems that there is this discourse that a homogenous linguistic and "cultural nationalism" can be established through literacy education. What are the challenges for educators and educational researchers to reframe the discourse in the age of cultural globalization?

AL: First of all, the tendency, the worst aspect of the whole *No Child Left Behind* phenomenon is this insidious deficit mentality that's been with us forever and ever and ever, it seems. We treat migrant populations and multilingual populations as exceptional cases, as anomalies. What I object to even more than the narrow instructional 'treatment' of such programs, is the fact that the research base that the policy was founded upon excluded studies of migrant second language learners as not conforming to the rigid standards of randomised control-group experimentation that were set to 'count' as scientific reading research.

Practically, most educational systems respond with "add-on" or "pull-out" remediation programs. So we in effect throw an educational fish, a token fish to the Aboriginal communities, to the Native North American communities, to linguistic minority communities by giving them a bit of a remediation or second language program, or a speech pathology program or more special education. Well there are very practical problems in schools that result from such approaches. First of all the "add-on" programs agglomerate and often they don't communicate with each other well. They may actually pull in contradictory directions. So we get the same child referred to a speech-pathologist and the ESL teacher and the special education teacher. We might get three separate diagnostics and three separate interventions; and the speech pathologist doesn't know much about second language acquisition; and the special-ed teacher doesn't know much about second language acquisition; and the second language teacher doesn't know anything about hearing disorders or learning disabilities. We often end up scratching at each other in staff meetings over resources and pulling these kids in different directions. So as we build these "add-on" augmenting diagnostic capacities, many schools wind up diffusing resources rather than coordinating and concentrating them.

A second issue that's begged by add-on and the deficit remediation approach is the need to treat basically multiculturalism and multilingualism as the new social and material realities. The challenge is to reform teacher education and mainstream curriculum, to build in fundamental revisions to mainstream pedagogy that accommodate linguistic diversity and cultural diversity as a matter of course. That's been a challenge with us for twenty years and we're still struggling with it - some systems better than the others. These are the social facts of diversity and they are penetrating into areas and spaces in social geographies which were previously insulated from them.

I think this is the systemic challenge to systems - changing mainstream pedagogy and drawing back from 'bolt on' approaches which are based on neo-deficit type models. This will be hard, because each of the remediation strategies is supported by powerful interest groups and lobbies. Reading recovery program advocates have always made the claim that you can engage in early intervention all you want, but if you are throwing the students back into the classrooms that don't capitalize on that intervention, skills acquired will atrophy. We know that language axiomatically is dependent upon functional operations and functional opportunities for use. So if students move from augmenting ESL programs into mainstream classes that don't give them profound and ongoing opportunities for language immersion and language use, any investment you have in the ESL program is lost.

H: It also works the other way round. The diasporic and minority communities have also faced the challenge of language functionality and relevance. So how do you deal with language maintenance in the face of these challenges then?

AL: I am really going to put my foot in it here, because I have not lived in Canada for 20 years. The heritage language debates, I am sure, are very complex. But certainly, one approach that we are taking in this dialogue over Chinese, Malay and Tamil first language retention in Singapore, is avoid the same trap of expecting the school to maintain the language. Schools cannot swim upstream. No matter how wonderful your language teaching methodology is, if functional domains of language use in everyday life are declining or shifting, the school will struggle to maintain the language. So it is in the public markets and hawker stalls of Asia that the language is maintained; it is in mah-jong games, in mosques and temples that these languages are maintained. Indeed, we are finding that spoken Tamil, Malay and Mandarin are quite vibrant. So ultimately, the responsibility is one that educators have to throw back to the community. What we do may be necessary, but in and of itself, it is rarely sufficient to maintain language proficiency.

Communities and community elders often take what my colleague Peter Freebody calls a "thermometer approach" to language acquisition, of, say more or less Mandarin or Tamil. There is a need to understand that curricula are instructional technologies and selective traditions. One of the axioms of language curriculum is as simple as: "you pay your money and you take your chances". Schools have a finite amount of time, human and discourse resources to teach Mandarin. If communities and governments decide they want business Mandarin for mercantile communication, the curricular technology can be tailored to do that. If they want all children to learn to read traditional literature in characters, we can do that; if they want children to master Han Pinyun, we can do that. But

they can't have it all. Well, you really need to make some hard and fast decisions about which script systems, which modalities, registers, genres, and texts. These are the same very issues we need to make around English curriculum. It is not thermometer model of more or less literacy. You pay your money, you take your chances. Functional literacy, literary studies, critical literacy – it is a matter of the balances to be struck between these things. These are normative, ideological decisions that governments, communities and teachers must make.

H: And it comes back to the problem of envisioning. The issue seems to be axiomatic, yet, we still keep going back to it, to redefine it. There are also the challenges of creating bridges between the government on one hand and communities, different organizations, institutions on the other.

AL: Some people have to put up their hands to be public intellectuals and transformative intellectuals, and actually act as intermediaries to build cultural touchstones and bridges; not between minority communities and the 'mainstream', but between communities and governments, between researchers and bureaucrats, between community elders and researchers. Part of our job is speak 'truth to power', as Foucault said. This means explaining complexity and diversity, pedagogy and practice in critical ways but also ways that allow community elders and bureaucrats, principals and teachers, parents and kids alike to move forward, to work with and rework the institutions of family and community language, schools, and educational programs. We are trained not just to do critique: education is by definition a normative activity, and our professional responsibility is to invent viable alternatives.

Part of our job is to interpret sociolinguistic and pedagogical complexity into 'doable' things and targets for systems, a tough challenge. In Singapore, we are going back to communities and government and explaining sociolinguistic complexity. In our case, that there may be four or five different kinds of Chinese language-learners entering the school: with all different combinations of Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Singlish, and English as first, second and third languages and dialects. From a language teaching and learning perspective then, there may be differential and optimal ways of teaching them as they enter school in year one.

Now we can reach a point where systems and bureaucrats begin to act like overloaded hard drives and sparks start flying. One Australian senior minister once explained to me, "In one term in office, we can usually do one very simple thing well, and if we try to do anything with more complexity, we get in trouble." But my point is that the problem here is not with 'deficit' students or language learners or communities – it's as much a story about the limits of system, bureaucratic and state capacity, which is a very, very real issue that gets displaced onto students.

H: This issue fascinates me, especially with diasporic communities that have ties with homeland communities. If the homeland community has a more "homogenous" population as well as a nationalist-political agenda, then reconciling the sociolinguistic and

pedagogical complexity with the goals and wishes of communities and government becomes much more complex and difficult.

AL: I think you ultimately can't really do it. It's like there's a moral and political responsibility to engage with complexity but that understanding is always by definition just a bit beyond any of our grasps. Cameron McCarthy (1990) argued that we live in a non-synchronous universe – with different communities actually at different historical moments. The great myth of the West is that there are singular, homogeneous 'Cultures' on some kind of single, grand continuum of development or evolution. There is no generic migrant, the 'Asian' is a relatively recent invention, and the hyphenated 'Asian-Australian' or something like that is even more problematic. What North/West governments and educators have to deal with is the non-synchrony and diversity within and between migrant communities. The H'mongs are not generic 'Asian-Americans' or rather 'Asian-Pacific Islanders' as the US census category reads. They have a particular history in southeastern asia as indigenous peoples; they have particular history of contact with capitalism, forced and voluntary political and economic migration. So the different discourses, resources and cultural histories that migrants bring – indigenous or already diasporic, colonially educated or informally educated, whether they're first, second or third generation mean that all these educational interventions must be tailored accordingly. That's why the self-annulling joke of 'cultural appropriateness' is that it too becomes a stereotype; you rush around trying to be culturally appropriate to indigenous people and then you get it all wrong, because you wind up operating from a set of stereotypes and not engaging withi diversity within, diversity across communities, cultures and spaces. The work of ethnographers like James Clifford (1997) tells us that cultures are not homogeneous. It's always about cultures with little 'c' and capital 'S; they are ridden with difference, diversity, strife, gender within them and within indigenous communities. Now to come back to your point, what that means is when we look all the way back to the work of Grosjean right through the work in Australia of Michael Clyne, Anne Pauwels and others, we find that first, second, third generations of migrants have different ways of reconstructing a cultural essentialist relationship to nation of origin, and that they selectively reconstruct 'the culture' for economic and sociopractical purposes. In this way, 19th and 20th century migrants to the west and north have always 'strategic essentialists' in one way or another, building different historically vexed, narrative relationships to roots, whether these are imaginary reconstructions or they have some degree of generational facticity. So I can't give you an answer to that one. I'd be walking into a total mine field. All you can say is that the language educators and the language 'engineers' of all kinds need to know those histories and migrant selective traditions - and know them with some degree of sociological imagination and historical sensitivity.

XL: You mentioned that you are introducing a new assessment methodology in Singapore and trying to include a broad set of data from ethnographic studies as well as test scores. I wondering how you are going to balance these two and what are the reactions from such a controlled test and exam-driven system.

AL: Singapore was already introducing 10% portfolio assessment in year twelve long before I got there in 2003 and there's a long-term plan to reduce the dependency on tests and exams. Most important, senior academics and educationists will readily admit that the

system's success is its Achilles heel: its overall reliance upon exams. This is the case in many Asian systems, with long indigenous and colonial histories of curricular examinations (not standardised tests). So we're looking at prototyping a range of alternative assessments from face-to-face reading diagnostics to project-based work, which is already underway, to portfolio-based assessments in integrated projects. There are two issues here. One is the variegation and enriching the range of assessments that are used for accountability purposes and for student assessment: a loosening of the sociological points of 'determination' in a tightly determined educational system because they might indeed have the effect of narrowing the intellectual scope, critical capacity and depth of the system, and leading to 'loss' of potentially valuable human, intellectual and cultural resources. Perhaps with all the moral panic in the North America, Canada and Australia on the need for more tests - it's only a strongly exam-driven system that has the historical latitude to move in the other direction. That's one of the intentions.

The other issue that I think you raised indirectly is how do you make educational and social policy with something more than exam and test scores? My view is that literacy education policy is a subset of language education policy, which is a subset of education policy, which in turn is a subset of an overall social and economic policy. If you don't see them as kind as overlapping or nested, you are doomed to fail. You're doomed to perpetuate what Harvey Graff called "literacy myths" (1979): for instance, that phonics will reduce poverty either naively or indirectly; that a better school in an indigenous community in and of itself will change life pathways. I'm a materialist. The purpose of education is to create enabling life pathways and mobilise combinations of capital for people to navigate through very complex rapidly changing and very risky linguistic fields, knowledge fields, social markets. We, as language educators, hold but one key to the kingdom - that is fluency with language and capacity with literacy in whatever language. This is a form of cultural capital that we can make material, embody and credential; we can verify and 'deem' the habitus as having been achieved. However, that in and of itself will not change your life pathway. It may be necessary but not sufficient. There have to be other enabling and combining forms of social capital; that is networks, access social institutions, access to kinship, vibrant family structures. There have to be available forms of economic capital; that is, convertible resources and jobs. You can't eat phonics. Critique won't necessarily lead you to work. Herbert Marcuse thought that there are primordial human needs, and any socially redressive policy and any socially ameliorative project really needs to deal with the need for housing, the need for shelter, the need for love, the need for food, the need for meaningful social relationships, the need for intellectual and aesthetic work, the need for meaningful labour. The great danger is that literacy educators overstate the capacity that we have to generate social change. At the same time, governments show again and again that they have this wonderful capacity to provide dysfunctional combinations of capital to communities. So we give people social welfare, at the same time, we are ripping apart their kinship systems. Then reactionary forces declare: "we gave them money and look they are just dole bludgers". Well, at the same time you were ripping apart their family structure, and you gave them no health infrastructure. Or you build a hospital in that community and say, "well we gave them medical care", at the same time school retention rates might be awful.

We can overestimate the power of literacy: "we gave them literacy, we gave them Open Court, we gave them Reading Recovery and it didn't change anything". You fall into victim blaming again, whether it's the teachers or the students or the researchers who get blamed for not having generated transformative effects. The paradox of Project Headstart, for example, was that you were hunkering in early childhood educational interventions in the African-American community in the 70s, at the same time that corporate America was disinvesting in African-American communities. My point is that if we take a materialist analysis and begin using Bourdieu, and recommit to an agenda of language education which is tied to redistributive social justice, we need to be very sanguine and humble about the relative power of language and literacy. We need to know that it is necessary but not sufficient.

Just as Peter Freebody and I have argued that there is nothing evil about basic skills and phonics; but they are necessary but not sufficient. Scott Paris at University of Michigan refers to basic skills having 'floor and threshold effects' that go unrecognised in claims about their cognitive and pedagogical efficacy. By the same token, we've seen critical literacy, consciousness raising programs that forgot to teach migrant women about how an alphabetic system works. Or phonics programs that forget to engage in the production of meaning through literature or through a range of genres. Or functional literacy programs that neglect to do anything that's about critique of the world. So the four-resources-model (Muspratt, Freebody & Luke, 1997) tried to view literacy a set of nested necessity and sufficiency conditions. We could also view literacy education as nested within social and economic policies.

The interesting thing is that in places like Singapore there seems to be a little bit better governmental capacity to orchestrate the elaboration and the articulation of educational policies and literacy campaigns with the provision of housing, healthcare, social services and so forth. It's in these Commonwealth and Western governments where we really struggle, where education ministries bid against health for limited taxpayer funds. Or we have difficulty coordinating with the private sector and the state sectors, the provision of enabling capital and empowering capital to communities in any kind of a systematic way, because we must contend with three layers of government.

H: Isn't it ironic though, that states like Cuba and Singapore labelled as "autocratic" seem to allocate their recourses better? What is going to happen in such places when they get into transition to a civic society as in Singapore or in a hypothetical situation when an organization like the World Bank becomes present in Cuba?

AL: Yes, it is. The transitions and the historical dialectics in Asia, in the Americas, in Africa, in the Middle East again are non-synchronous. We have countries in Asia that are trying to even conceive of how to engage with aspects of fast capitalism and western modernity differently, and what this might mean. Places like Singapore are moving towards the negotiation of a new, more open civic and intellectual space. Yet unlike parts of the West, in Singapore, Hong Kong or most of the regional Asian states, certainly unfettered free-market, 'deregulated' marketisation is not the preferred governmental or regional response, in education or other areas of social and economic policy. In other instances, we have

ostensibly 'open' countries which are still struggling to establish rule of law, basic economic provision, basic civic security, relations between secular and non-secular rule.

In educational terms, many communities are still dealing with point of decolonization situations. So we still have systems for whom Freirian approaches remain the salient and powerful pedagogies. We still have countries that are clearly in a postcolonial moment where the politics of voice, the recovery of the literary canon, and the regeneration of new intellectual traditions and political economies of writing and media remain key. We have countries like Singapore engaged in leapfrogging from strong state models, Confucian, Buddhist and Muslim pedagogical traditions into dealing with Britney at large, into dealing with not just western industrial modernity but accelerated postmodernity within a half generation. All the while while trying to maintain social cohesion and an official quadralingual/cultural social contract in the face of the new ethnic and geopolitical tensions faced by all. Sociologist Chua Beng Huat (2003) offers up a critical analysis of this.

In these places, and in small island economies particularly, globalization is operating almost as if it's on steroids, without the buffers of longstanding primary and secondary economies. So you're right, all of those issues are ones that place the dynamics of change in Singapore as quite different from what's happening in the West. What it means and the great challenge of this kind of non-synchronous universe is that, the educational answers for Singapore or the answer for Thailand or Malaysia are not to be found in the West. As Hilary Janks recently has been arguing, the answer for South Africa is not to rush into western constructivism or progressivism. It has to be some kind of a locally- developed emergent tradition which draws upon, mixes and blends, and makes a set of decisions. Everything from phonics to mathematical constructivism to multiple intelligence models are very much historical products of the West trying to deal with its own particular socio-demographic problems and the state of its own social institutions, coming apart, and coming together, and being reinvented. Enough of the psychological universalism that underpins most Anglo/American educational research. This is one of those historical moments where few generalisable answers for educational reform are forthcoming from the North and West.

XL: Where will multilingual literacies take us in the next ten years and what will be the main issues then?

AL: I don't know... The doom and gloom scenario described by Robert Phillipson and others is that of uncontested hegemony of world language English, McDonaldization of language and culture, and so on. But when you live outside of the North/West imperial centre you tend to see the world quite differently. In Asia we see a lot of localization, a lot of mixing and blending cultural and linguistic lamination, creolization, blending – whatever you want to call it. Of course hybridization has become the catch-all term that we use for any effect that we cannot understand at this historical moment. But the change of emergent sensibilities, reconstituted and new identities, emergent text forms, blended and multiple discourses, heteroglossic forms of expression, is accelerating. And while they're under stress, many residual cultural institutions are proving surprisingly resilient: not just religions

of the fundamentalist order I described earlier, but also extended family structures, community organisations, and even state structures.

None of us know where it's going to lead, but I think what education systems, teachers and others have to do is quit treating these changes as the enemy. To come back to our initial discussion of educational fundamentalism, none of these developments are going to go away. They need to be dealt with both critically and with a level of engagement. We as educators, as curriculum writers, as policy makers, as educational researchers need to refocus our research on something other than restorationist projects. In investigating new sociologies, new political economies, new psychologies even, we should begin to just describe exactly what these kids are doing when they're surfing and when they're watching four television channels at once; exactly what they're doing in the development of the multilingual webpages; exactly what the linguistic registers in SMS and these things are, maybe just for our own benefit as much as theirs. However, these issues are still treated as antithetical to proper education; they're still being treated as momentary aberrations. We need to actually begin a really rigorous analysis of how these residual and emergent traditions are combining to form new kinds of human subjects, new kinds of social problems, new kinds of poverty and new kinds of power.

Allan Luke is Professor of Education, Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice, National Institute of Education, Singapore. aluke@nie.edu.sg

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