The sign is tacked onto the cashier counter of a small Haitian restaurant in Boston. It is weathered and yellowed from five summers’ worth of sun and heat. “Proud to be American-owned and English-operated.” Why is the sign there? What is it trying to communicate and to whom? What of the surrounding global and local contexts of race, immigration, language, and nationhood that are wrapped up in this sign?

To anyone familiar with Brazilian educator Paolo Freire, likely most of the readers of this journal, these questions are the familiar beats of critical literacy. Most in the field of literacy education can draft and answer these types of questions adroitly. Although these perspectives push us, as consumers of texts, to interrogate texts, the spirit of critical literacy also demands that we constantly question our larger environments, observe patterns and shifts between contexts and texts, and actively produce alternative realities.

In the past few months and years, the United States has witnessed the election of its first African American president and the proposal of two bills in the state of Arizona that have incited firestorms of accusations of ethnic and racial backlash, one bill that requires law enforcement officers to question the documentation of anyone suspected of being an immigrant and another that bans ethnic studies courses in public schools. Looking at each of these recent events individually yields important insights, but only by also reading across them, and the restaurant sign, can we see underneath to a much more alarming pattern that swirls with xenophobia, racism, and protectionism.

In this column, we analyze within and across not just the recent developments in Arizona but also the historied 4th, 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution to demonstrate the kind of cross-text analysis that is necessary in an age of “racism without racists” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). For a more comprehensive critical literacy, we propose three significant shifts to the single-text analysis that has come to mark critical literacy practices.

First, we must not ask questions of texts as if they contain singular messages. Texts must be read, interrogated, and interrupted as composites of information and ideologies, all with potential material effects. Second, we must critically examine multiple texts, as they are in constant dynamic with each other. Last, analysis is not enough. We must also find textual and material examples of alternative policies alongside our deconstructions of policies. We apply the first two of these necessary changes to recent legislation in Arizona and then to the federal amendments that mapped the designation of humanity and rights for African Americans.

Critical Literacy
for Xenophobia:
A Wake-Up Call
Lisa Patel Stevens
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Adolescent Literacy Policy
Critical Literacy Xenophobia: Laws of Exclusion in Arizona

In the spring of 2010, Arizona caught the nation’s attention as it passed State Bill 1070 (Arizona State Legislature, 2010a), which permitted law enforcement officers to, in effect, curtail due process and question the immigration status of anyone they have detained for some infraction. As this measure incited a firestorm of protests over racial profiling, on its heels came Arizona House Bill 2281 (Arizona State Legislature, 2010b), which sought to prohibit courses and classes that “promote the overthrow of the United States government, promote resentment toward a race or class of people, are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group, and advocate ethnic solidarity instead of treatment of pupils as individuals.”

This introductory language of HB 2281, along with SB 1070, caught the most media attention as various stakeholders debated racial profiling, the value of ethnic studies courses, immigration law and reform, and what constitutes American culture, to name just a few issues. In a television interview on CNN (available online at ac360.blogs.cnn.com/2010/05/13/must-see-ac360-az-ethnic-studies-discussion/?iref=allsearch) that went viral on social media networks, Arizona schools superintendent Tom Horne and sociologist Michael Eric Dyson debated the location of racism, overt and institutionalized, in ethnic studies courses and the ban on these courses.

Horne and Dyson offer an excellent snapshot of what engaged comprehension, analysis, and critique of a text can look like, but unvoiced in their debate are the loopholes in HB 2281 (Arizona State Legislature, 2010b) for state-sanctioned ethnic separation or the connection of this bill to the just passed SB 1070 (Arizona State Legislature, 2010a). In this and other media accounts, debates, and protests over HB 2281, the emphasis is on the ban of ethnic studies courses, but this bill contains more than prohibitions. Beyond its initial introduction, the bill goes on to designate that the ban should “not be construed to restrict or prohibit...the grouping of pupils according to academic performance, including capability in the English language, that may result in a disparate impact by ethnicity” (Arizona State Legislature, 2010b, §15-112). In this binding legal document, the term disparate impact by ethnicity permits schools and districts to continue classifying and treating students from the same ethnic group if this is deemed in accord with their academic performance, even if this practice causes harm to some ethnic groups.

Without a doubt, this provision enables schools, on behalf of the state, to separate immigrant students for English language performance reasons. Most notably, though, the government provides schools with the sanctioned ability to sequester students from the same ethnic group, even if the curricular and pedagogical context of the grouping has deleterious effects. In the more examined introduction, the government of Arizona simultaneously prohibits ethnic studies classes to speak to pupils about ethnic solidarity, presumably nonwhite ethnic solidarity.

The conjoining of these two provisions creates a much sharper knife with which the state can incise the channels for institutionalized racism to systematically sequester, undereducate, miseducate, and bankrupt entire populations of children, particularly children who come from homes where standard English is not the mother tongue. Across these two bills, lawmakers in Arizona have used texts to name individualism as an ideology that must be taught in schools, have identified the ability of schools to group students by ethnicity even if that grouping has negative effects, have made economic sanction the consequence of defiant educational practice, and have made the suspicion of being an immigrant enough cause for scrutiny and detainment. It would be a fatal mistake to analyze these texts (or snippets or media soundbite paraphrases of them) as separate examples of school policies on curriculum, the role of market ideologies in education, or the role of law enforcement in immigration enforcement. All of these issues and ideologies are intertwined within and across these recent pieces of legislation. Further, it would be a fatal mistake to see these texts as only reflective of the politics of Arizona or the immigration contexts of contemporary times.

Historical Echoes of Laws of Exclusion: The Black Codes of the Antebellum South

Both SB 1070 (Arizona State Legislature, 2010a) and HB 2281 (Arizona State Legislature, 2010b) are
intimately connected to current and historical debates on the rights of citizens. At the same time, both should be understood as laws of exclusion. Similar to the Black Codes of the antebellum South, SB 1070 and HB 2281 are steeped in the politics of containment or elimination. Because the Black Codes were enforced to regulate the capacity of African Americans to engage in rights afforded to the larger White citizenry, SB 1070 and HB 2281 should be considered in the same vein regarding Latino/a residents in Arizona. If we connect the regulatory sentiment in both pieces of legislation, we could make a tangible connection to violations of the 4th (prohibiting unlawful search and seizure), 13th (ending slavery), 14th (advocating due process), and 15th (granting voting rights) Amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

Parallels are important here in that we are often blinded by the rhetorical assumptions that “freedom” in the United States is granted to its citizenry. One would need only a short refresher in American legislative politics to discover that the rights of many “citizens” are still subjected to congressional scrutiny. For example, although it is rarely discussed in popular media outlets, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 is reviewed every 25 years. Although some may see this merely as a procedural exercise, the fact that the legal rights of some groups are considered subject to review and not permanent, inalienable rights speaks to a continued subjugation of certain racial and ethnic groups in the United States.

Returning to the idea of SB 1070 (Arizona State Legislature, 2010a) and HB 2281 (Arizona State Legislature, 2010b) as mitigating texts, both make the attempt to justify absurdity. Regarding SB 1070, the state would find itself hard-pressed if every law enforcement official had probable cause toward anyone with an accent or particular types of shoes. In relationship to HB 2281, the state will be hard-pressed to prove that portions of ethnic studies classes in Arizona high schools “promote the overthrow of the United States government” or “are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group” (Arizona State Legislature, 2010b, §15-112).

For these reasons, we should be clear as to how SB 1070 (Arizona State Legislature, 2010a) and HB 2281 (Arizona State Legislature, 2010b) are continuations of past racist policies aimed at the reifying of the White nation state. Although this rhetoric may appear harsh upon first sight, it should not be if we delve critically into what these bills are intended to do. In fact, more important than the aim of these pieces of legislative precedent is our commitment to expose, re-create, and challenge such infringements on our humanity.

Particularly when educational policy is an explicit stage where schools are increasingly privatized, mimicking markets where the rich grow more advantaged and the poor are sidelined, sequestered, and scrutinized, identification of these trends is not enough. Scholars like Michael Apple, Patricia Hill Collins, and Allan Luke have been pointing out the ways that policies about literacy have worked hegemonically to ensure the perpetuation of the iniquitous status quo. Even if we take up the call to engage with critical literacy more comprehensively within and across texts, this is necessary but insufficient (Freebody & Luke, 1990).

In the face of state-sanctioned xenophobia and policies that provide pathways for institutionalized discrimination, some literacy educators engage directly with these texts and work with their students to interrupt the rollout of discrimination.

Deconstruction Is Necessary but Insufficient

What critical literacy has not offered in depth is an idea of how to reconstruct while we are deconstructing. In the face of state-sanctioned xenophobia and policies that provide pathways for institutionalized discrimination, some literacy educators engage directly with these texts and work with their students to interrupt the rollout of discrimination. This is where policy analysis must turn its attention.

Policy analysis must include policies that are on the ground, in practice, from educators who are working with youth not only to analyze critically the texts of their contexts and to hone their analysis of ideological literacy with state-sanctioned texts but also to produce texts that convey stories with different ideologies about individuals, institutions, and society. These are the action-based policies that we should be
promoting, nurturing, and learning from. In the next piece in this policy analysis column, educator Patrick Camangian provides a different map of policy, one that strives for ideological literacy and pedagogies of caring.

References


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