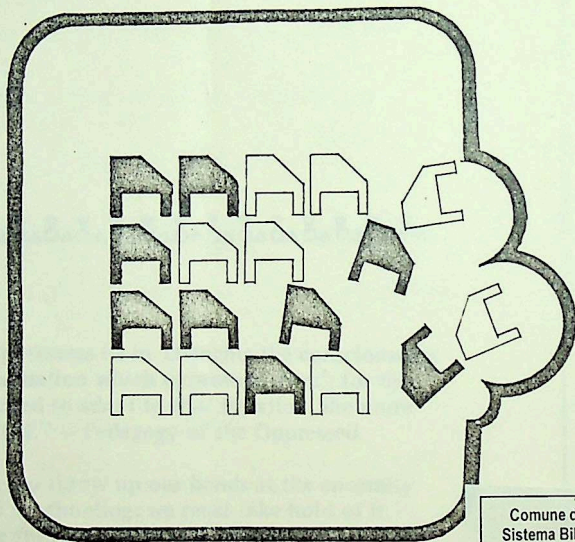


MR

School Mythology and The Education of Oppression



by Miriam Wasserman

THIS MAGAZINE IS ABOUT
SCHOOLS

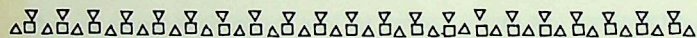
Volume 5, Number 3
Summer 1971

Comune di Padova
Sistema Bibliotecario

ALF - SLD

Sez. 6
Sottosez.
Serie 9
Sottos.
Unità 233
PUV 55

Miriam Wasserman has been a high school teacher and has served as a consultant to various tutorial and head-start programs in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. She is the author of *The School Fix NYC USA*.



“... the interests of the oppressors lie in ‘changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppressed them’; for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated.” — Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

“It does no good, however, to throw up our hands at the enormity of the task of reforming U.S. schooling; we must take hold of it where we can, for the time for failure is long since passed.” — Crisis in the Classroom.

“... it would indeed be naive to expect the oppressor elites to carry out a liberating education.” — Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

Books reviewed:

Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education*, Random House, 1970, 553 pp., \$10.

Louis Althusser, “Ideologie et Appareils Ideologiques d’Etat,” *La Pensée*, No. 151, June 1970.

Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Harvard Educational Review and Center for the Study of Development and Social Change, Monograph Series, No. 1, 1970, 55 pp., \$2.

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Herder and Herder, 1970, 186 pp., \$5.95.

We have to examine the social functions of the schools, the myths we employ to becloud those functions, and the way the myths and the functions together turn adults and children into teachers and pupils by inducing them to internalize oppression. We have to do this in order to understand why and how schools oppress, and also what a liberating and liberated education would be and what kind of people it would require and create.

An examination of a few of the many recent books about the school crisis provides a possible beginning.

The first thing is to demythicize the school crisis. It is not that schools are joyless and grim and teachers boring and unimaginative that constitutes the crisis of the schools. Nor that lower-class (black, ethnic, poor) children are academically less successful than their more well-to-do schoolmates. School was always a misery, and the teachers — themselves almost as miserable as their charges — always harsh or merely dull. And academic success has always eluded most of the poor. (The fact that formerly they dropped out of school and didn't learn to read whereas now they are counted among the school population statistics and don't learn to read is not of great significance, though it aggravates certain elements of the school crisis.

What constitutes the crisis of the schools is that the students, no longer accepting their oppressiveness as morally and intellectually legitimate, are turning off, cutting out, and fighting back. And, in the face of drugs, truancy, and rebellion, the schools are less and less able to perform their socially necessary functions.

The school crisis is a part of the crisis of society. At once a manifestation of and a contributor to the other parts of the crisis of society, the school crisis is causing considerable alarm among influential persons and institutions both inside and outside the strictly school world. While some reformers are surely genuinely concerned with the miseries of childhood — as, indeed, some humane adults have been in every generation — the extent of public attention to schools and schooling is rather a measure of their breakdown as a key oppressive instrument in the perpetuation of an oppressive society. The general strategy of the reform movement is to try to make the schools less oppressive without interfering in a gross way either with the oppressiveness of the larger society or with the schools' role in supporting that oppressiveness. By this strategy, the reformers seek to stem the growing tide of drugs, rebellion, and truancy, and to restore the schools' legitimacy as socializers of the various young for the adult roles prescribed by the interaction of society's needs and their own socioeconomic origins.

Concern about the children is being expressed at the highest levels. Next to the advocates of the children of the poor, the severest critics of public school systems in the past ten years have been liberal spokesmen from the professions and big business, who attack not only the schools' lamentable bureaucratic inefficiencies but also their anti-intellectualism and the crudeness of their tactics of oppression. And among the staunchest and most generous supporters of the school reform movement have been some of the nation's large foundations, which have devoted generous resources to research, development, and support of various school reform movements and proposals.

Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education constitutes a kind of synopsis of the reform movement, its strategies and confusions, its political and educational innocence, and its role as at once a purveyor and a victim of the various myths that have until now helped to perpetuate the schools' legitimacy as an educational institution.

The book was written by a member of the Board of Editors of *Fortune* magazine, Charles Silberman, and funded at \$300,000 by the Carnegie Corporation. The amount of the funding, which has been widely publicized, is an evidence of corporate concern with the school crisis. Its popularity, which might be surprising in the face of its length and dullness, is probably an evidence of at least part of the adult world's desperate need to be reassured that the myths about school which justify their lives are still good coin.

Crisis in the Classroom accepts either implicitly or explicitly most of these myths:

That public schools exist to give all children an equal opportunity to get ahead in the world.

That education is a process through which each child's unique inner potentiality is realized.

That our society has increasing need for men and women who have initiative, independence, and the ability to make their own decisions.

That the function of the public schools in respect to the poor and the outcast is to bring them into the mainstream of American economic and social life.

A corollary to these myths is that the reason whole classes of children do not get ahead in the world and the reason almost all schoolchildren tend to be fearful and conformist instead of daring and independent . . . that somehow school people don't know how to do their job properly.

In respect to capitalist society, the analogue to the myths about school is that its most virulent malfunctions are mere squeaks and creaks in a basically sound piece of machinery. Thus Silberman writes: ". . . economic growth reduces poverty but it also produces congestion, noise, and pollution of the environment. Technological change widens the individual's range of choice and makes economic growth possible; it also dislocates workers from their jobs and neighborhoods . . . The enormous widening of choice that contemporary society makes possible also appears as something of a mixed blessing, enhancing our sense of individuality, but contributing, too, to the pervasive sense of uneasiness and malaise." The spiritual crisis of American youth "stems more from the successes of American society than from its failure." Social injustice is not being eliminated fast enough: ". . . improvements . . . generated expectations for further improvements . . ." And so on. The war is not referred to.

Silberman's view of the relationship between a society which he thinks is failing a little bit and schools which he thinks are failing a lot is a perversion of reality. He writes: "We will not be able to create and maintain a humane society unless we create and maintain classrooms that are humane. But if we succeed in that endeavor — if we accomplish the remaking of American education — we will have gone a long way toward that larger task, toward the creation of a society in which we can answer the question 'Where art thou?' with pride rather than with dread." So does the classroom become the creator, and society the created; children and teachers the reformers, and leaders and masters the reformed.

To overcome the crisis of the schools, and at the same time eliminate some of the squeaks and creaks in the social machinery, Silberman identifies and proposes remedies for each of four grave school problems. They are: (1) the failure of black children to acquire academic expertise; (2) the "grim, repressive, joyless atmosphere" of elementary school; (3) the unfreedom and outmoded curriculum of high school; and (4) the improper education of educators. For each of the four problems, the book explicates some common going explanations and some previous remedies which have failed. More or less exonerating all the people involved (teachers, parents, administrators, etc.), the book proposes its own one-word explanation for each problem. The word is the same in each case: Mindlessness.

Silberman believes that mindlessness is unnecessary. "The 'necessity' that makes schooling so uniform over time and across cultures is simply the 'necessity' that stems from unexamined assumptions and unquestioned behavior." He believes that the problems that stem from mindlessness can be overcome and that this is proved by the fact that in one experimental program or another they were overcome. Much of the bulk of *Crisis in the Classroom* is composed of examples of experimental programs which are reported to have succeeded, or at least, like expanding, affluent, capitalist America, to have only a few bugs that still need to be ironed out.

There is a kind of innocence that suffuses the entire work, from its literary style and research techniques, through its examples, to its conclusions. The writing is at once passionless and sentimental, lacking even that devotion to humanity and spiritual outrage that mark the best of the exposé books by the indignant teacher-writers of the past five years. The researchers or the writer (apparently lacking the down-to-earth sense that most school inhabitants have of what goes on in a school) cite as examples of mindlessness a number of school rules which, though horribly oppressive, have perfectly sound justification within the terms of the school system. For example, that high school students are not allowed to wander around the corridors without a pass, go home for lunch, or go to the toilet without permission. But all school inmates know that the most benign hall disturbances involve the disruption of classes in progress and that hall stickups, locker rip-offs, and stairwell rapes are occasional, although naturally not well publicized, occurrences; that high school students who go out to lunch are unlikely to come back for the afternoon session; and that while most high school students eschew the filthy toilets as places to relieve their bladders and bowels, many go there for a quick illegal cigarette and a few for a fast pill or shooting up.

As a matter of fact, reading *Crisis in the Classroom*, one wonders if in all the three years and thousands of miles of visiting schools, Silberman and his staff ever went slumming in the students' restrooms, cafeterias, and locker rooms or sat about unobtrusively and anonymously in the corners of teachers' lounges and deans' offices. For it is in these places that people shed the pretenses and the myths and reveal in their actions and words what school means and what it does.

The same innocence which informs the research for the book also informs the reporting on experimental programs. Thus the book indiscriminately endorses programs with profoundly contradictory aims and tendencies, e.g., the achievement-oriented CAM Academy of Chicago and the relevance-oriented John Adams High School of Portland, Oregon. Again the author admiringly quotes one rolled-up-sleeves tough, accountability principal as saying, "I don't care what you do as long as the children are reading at the norm." And then reports of the new English primary schools, which are the prototypes of his solution to elementary school oppressiveness, "while I saw 'bad' informal schools — bad from the standpoint of their students' academic achievement — I saw none that were destructive, none in which the children did not appear to be happy and engaged." Now, whipping up children to reading "norms" and undertaking that they be "happy and engaged" are not compatible aims (which does not mean that happy and engaged children do not learn to read).

The innocence in respect to the programs called experimental or innovative lies not only in a willingness to accept more or less at face value the innovators' own progress reports. More than that it lies in a common acceptance by the innovators and the author of all the going school mythology and of the validity of the program at hand as an instrument in the service of one or another of those myths (equal opportunity for all, "right to read," fullest development of individual interests and talents, and so on). For those who perpetuate myths in their own defense are often the last to lose their innocence, the last to discover that the mythic fabric is rotting off their backs.

In respect to schools, there are myths folded into myths. There are the myths which people outside the schools tell to explain what the schools are supposed to be doing. And then there are the myths which people inside the schools tell to explain to students what society is supposed to be doing. Thus the myth that society uses to becloud the children's oppression is that they are engaged in the pursuit of a meaningful education whereby they will attain their maximum potential. Meanwhile, inside the schools the children themselves are treated to myths about the society that is mythicizing their oppression on the order that all men are equal before the law everyone has an equal chance to get ahead, etc. The two classes of myths are mutually reinforcing. But when one goes, the other goes.

The school crisis consists in their mutual disintegration. The students long ago demythicized the schools: they know they are not there to realize their inner potential, they are kept there by a combination of legal and economic coercion. Many of them have also demythicized society: they know that the policeman (court, welfare worker, etc.) isn't there to protect them, he's there to keep them in line. And some of them are beginning to synthesize

these perceptions: they are beginning to understand how the myths about society are folded into the myths about schools, that is, how the myths that are told about school and the ones that are told in school serve their masters and oppress them.

I had a fine illustration of this one day when I was called to serve as a teacher of a civics class in a mainly Latino high school. A group of four or five smart and also school-smart girl students explained to me the ideological function of the schools.

I asked them, "What do you learn in this class?"

"About government."

What about government?"

"You know, how it works. The Governor, and the President, and all things like that."

"How does it work, the government?"

"Not like it says here," referring to the thick red-white-and-blue-covered text they were carrying.

"What does it say, and how does it work differently?"

"You know, Reagan is cutting the welfare. And the cops. They hassle you. Anyway they hassle the men where we live. And all the taxes, and like that."

"And what does the book say?"

"You know, that all men are created equal, and they don't discriminate because of race, color, or — what?"

"Creed. And isn't it like that? Aren't all men equal?"

"No. Not for us it isn't. We're not equal." (I felt that they were saying that I might have been created equal but they weren't. And that they thought I might not understand about that.)

"Well, but you say that's not what it says in the book. But if Reagan is cutting welfare and the cops hassle poor people more than rich people, then why doesn't the book say that? Why does it say all men are created equal and all those other things about government?"

Everybody answered.

"You know, that's what they want us to think."

"The rich people want us to think like them so we'll be on their side."

"Brainwashing."

"Ideology and the Ideological Instruments of the State" by the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser is a theoretical development of the school function the Latino girls described as "brainwashing."

Police, army, tax collector, judge, prison, says Althusser, are among the repressive instruments of the state. Mass media, political parties, church, schools, and family are among the ideological instruments of the state. Although Althusser does not, we might define the difference by observing that the ideological instruments of the state induce us to internalize oppression. The more the ideological instruments of the state are successful, the less difficulty encountered by the repressive instruments. In neutral terms, the school as an ideological instrument serves to socialize children.

Whereas in an earlier period of capitalism, the children of the poor were socialized on the job, the reproduction of the labor force, Althusser says, now proceeds more and more outside the processes of production, with school and family serving as the major socializing agents. (In a few disappearing pockets of the economy — mainly tenant farming and migratory field work — American children continue to be socialized by the twin instruments of work-family rather than school-family.)

Poor and nonpoor families are alike expected to and usually do act as junior partners of the school. Here in the United States, however, the school's tactics in respect to its junior partner and the parents' tactics with their children are often differentiated by the parents' socioeconomic status. Nonpoor parents rely on the symbol "the grade" to evaluate their children's relationship to the school. If the grade does not meet their expectations, they may withdraw love, pocket money, vacations, etc., or, alternatively, bestow them in greater abundance where the grade does meet their expectations. Some poor parents do this, too. But they and the schools are likely to object less to poor academic performance than to bad behavior. Schools regularly call upon the parents of children who will not accept school routines or discipline and seek to frighten or shame them into taking harsh measures against their children. In the middle class, the life style — place of residence, times of vacation, modes of recreation — often revolves around the parents' perception of their children's school needs. Poor families lack the resources or flexibility to do this. The enlisting of the family in the service of the school has come in the last few years to extend down into the preschool years. A whole new strategy of early childhood education is to train poor mothers to deal with their infants and babies in ways that will make them more amenable to school manipulation a few years hence. Thus social-worker-educator-psychologists are running a game on the poor that is being run on the middle class by the hucksters of infant reading programs, educational toys, and so on.

But within three to six years after they get into the schools, most children (probably even including the infant readers) unmask the gamblers. A part of the crisis of the schools, as we observed, consists in their perception of the schools' ideological function and their refusal to perform their expected roles,

which refusal they signify in various destructive, or self-destructive, or political ways. Where their parents do not share their perception and refusal, the so-called generation gap occurs. Increasingly, however, as parents recognize, at first perhaps confusedly, that the schools oppress their children only in order to prepare them for the same life of oppression as they themselves live, they are withdrawing from the school-parent partnership. In this way they are aggravating the crisis.

The possibility that the students' dawning recognition of their subjection can be elevated into a new kind of education is suggested by the works of Paulo Freire, a sometime colleague of Ivan Illich's at the Centro Intercultural de Documentación in Cuernavaca.

Cultural Action for Freedom and Pedagogy of the Oppressed describe the author's techniques of using literacy training among Brazilian and Chilean peasants and urban oppressed as a way of revolutionary consciousness-raising. Seeing education as the process by which man knows and transforms himself, and his world, these beautiful writings are a contribution to the literature of both educational and revolutionary theory. In respect to the former, they offer a critique of conventional educational methods and an explanation of pedagogical techniques that are consonant with and directed to revolutionary socialist change both in the classroom and outside it. In respect to the latter, they premise that education of the oppressed must accompany social revolution; and they elaborate a humanistic theory of consciousness-raising which is in opposition to elitist vanguard strategies.

While Freire's theories and techniques derive from his work with the oppressed of South America, they can well be applied to our understanding of schooling and our work as radical teachers here. His pedagogical method, which will feel familiar to nursery school educators and followers of Sylvia Ashton-Warner, is to employ for literacy learning, material from the students' own lives as members of their particular oppressed groups. Learning to read begins with a "generative" word, from whose syllables other words can be generated. The word chosen is one which is deeply significant in the students' lives. For example, he uses *favela* in Brazil and *callampa* in Chile, each representing "the same social economic, and cultural reality of the vast numbers of slum dwellers in those countries." When decomposed into their syllables, or pieces, as the students term them, these words can be reassembled into new words. In the United States, the energetic and creative educator Caleb Gattegno, whose sense of what learning means seems to be similar to Freire's, does much the same thing in teaching reading to young children. Freire, however, carries the exploratory methodology of Gattegno, Ashton-Warner, and thousands of nursery-school and progressive educators to the next and crucial step of *conscientización*, "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality."

Learning to read by means of socially significant generative words is a revolutionary method not only because it "works," the criterion by which oppressor educators choose a pedagogy to develop in their students marketable (i.e., exploitable) skills. It is also revolutionary because it is the first step among the illiterate oppressed to self-liberation.

From two widely separated nations of the Third World, testimony has been offered of adult literacy learning as liberating.

A report from a community-development, adult-literacy project in Tanzania says, "Becoming literate as an adult in this African society is a spiritual experience in some ways related to the emergence and growth of personality. People are uplifted by it and are made aware of their power to alter their environment by individual and group action."*

And from Chile:

"We asked one of the adult students, finishing the first level of literacy classes, why he hadn't learned to read and write before the agrarian reform.

"Before the agrarian reform, my friend," he said, "I didn't even think. Neither did my friends."

"Why?" we asked.

"Because it wasn't possible. We lived under orders. We only had to carry out orders. We had nothing to say."

Both nations are somehow socialist at least in intent. What is being described is a situation in which a man who was treated, and treated himself, as a thing experiences a sense of himself as a man with the power to change himself and his world. The internal change occurs along with the social change: the situation changes and it changes the man; the man changes himself and he changes the situation. The entire process is accompanied by a feeling of elation.

The elation that accompanies learning to read by the generative word, learning to read as an act of will and for the purpose of changing oneself and controlling one's destiny, is a feeling tone that does not prevail in the classrooms of the nation. They are, indeed, as Silbermann laments, "grim, joyless, repressive" places. For in the oppressive classrooms of an oppressive society, the student learns to read not by an act of will but through an act of coercion, not to change himself and control his destiny but by alienating himself and in order to submit to his destiny. And he learns to read not his own word from his own world but another's word from a mythical world. ("See Jan run." "Policemen are our friends. . . . Sometimes they scold people, but only when the people do something wrong." "A asa e da ave; the wing is of the bird.") The children of the oppressed who are silent in the face of this alien language depicting a mythical world are called by the schools "inarticulate" and "culturally deprived." But Freire calls the "inarticulateness of the culturally deprived" the "cultural silence of the oppressed." And he says that they are silent because their word has been stolen. This is so in the sense that the conditions and the internalizing of their oppression make it impossible for them to explore and express their oppression.

* Alexander MacDonald, *Tanzania: Young Nation in a Hurry*, Hawthorn, 1966.

From learning to read by means of the generative word, which is the first step in the individual's re-creation of himself and his world, Freire's educational strategy moves to learning to solve problems by means of the generative theme. The problems are those which center about their own oppression. "I conceive the fundamental theme of our epoch," Freire writes, "to be that of *domination* — which implies its opposite, the theme of *liberation*, as the object to be achieved." But the generative theme must be the learners' own, derived with the teacher's help from their own lives, and solved, with the teacher's help, in their own words.

A footnote quotes from Malraux's *Anti-Memoirs* on this matter: "In a long conversation with Malraux, Mao-Tse-Tung declared, 'You know I've proclaimed for a long time: we must teach the masses clearly what we have received from them confusedly.'" Or, in Freire's and his students' words, "we must make words speak."

An example is given of a generative theme developed by the students quite differently from the way the group leader had thought to develop it. The students are shown a picture of a drunken man walking on the street and three young men conversing on a corner. The group leader had intended to discuss aspects of alcoholism. But the group members responded to the picture by saying that "the only one there who is productive and useful to his country is the souse who is returning home after working all day for low wages and who is worried about his family because he can't take care of their needs. He is the only worker. He is a decent worker and a souse like us." For the learners to have been able to proclaim their honest feelings about drunkenness and to articulate their view of its relation to their oppression, the "teacher" had to abdicate his intention to expound (and probably moralize) on the aspects and evils of alcoholism. (The application to drug-abuse programs for American schoolchildren is apparent.)

The analogue to the generative theme in education for freedom is problem-solving in education for oppression.

As American school people use the terms "inarticulateness" and "cultural deprivation" to describe the silence of oppressed children in the face of a mythical world encoded in alien dialects, they use the expression "deficiency in cognitive ability" to describe the children's refusal to solve the alien problems that constitute the core of our school curriculum. (Some theorists, like Arthur Jensen, ascribe the cognitive deficiency to genetic inferiority. But the liberal theorists, outraged at this explanation, ascribe it to deficient language development.) Seeking to overcome the passivity in the face of oppression that is created by that oppression, U.S. school people are experimenting with ways of stimulating problem-solving ability among the children of the poor (sometimes called "slow" or "basic" learners).

The following example shows how the process of "stealing the word of the oppressed" is carried on by means of a simulation of problem-solving. The material is from a teacher's manual to a history of the United States for "slow learners," published by a leading textbook publisher and sponsored by a leading university. The intention of the method proposed in the manual is

to develop the students' "willingness to answer questions," "to participate in discussions," and "to obtain permission to speak or to ask a question." The method also seeks to enhance the students' self-concept by enabling them to say, "I'm not so dumb." "I am able to learn on my own." "I can make decisions myself." The chapter under consideration is entitled "Slavery in America." The manual directs the teacher as follows:

"Parts 2 and 4 present both economic and social reasons to explain why people in the North and South held different attitudes toward slavery. By not saying 'white people,' the formulation excludes blacks including by implication those in the class, from the category 'people.' Black people in the North and the South did not hold different attitudes toward slavery. Unlike most material for basic learners, these lessons neither draw conclusions nor make generalizations. They merely present a problem. Based on the evidence offered, students make their own decisions about the fairness of slavery and the treatment of slaves. Because of contemporary racial tensions involving personal commitment to black nationalism or to white backlash movements, many students may find it difficult to examine slavery analytically. In such cases, although the materials and teaching strategies employed in the chapter encourage rational inquiry rather than irrational appeal, the teacher must also stress the value of objective historical investigation.

"Lead students to realize that they do not yet have enough evidence to know definitely if slaves were treated differently (i.e., some kindly and some cruelly). They should recognize however, that the two readings indicate that people had different views about how slaves were treated.

"Students should conclude that both are eyewitness accounts and fairly reliable, but that neither gives enough evidence on which to base a decision about the general severity of slavery."*

The genuine problems of oppression — in this case, How does slavery turn humans into commodities? How could or did the enslaved rebel? How do elements of nineteenth-century slavery endure in twentieth-century America? How can those still enslaved liberate themselves? etc. — are hidden by a spurious problem — were slaves treated well or badly? (This book, by the way is not exceptional. This is the conventional manner of structuring the "problem" of slavery in American history textbooks.) Having structured the problem fallaciously, the teacher (the textbook) then attempts to manipulate the students into believing that by their own thinking they will arrive at the solution. But the problem is a nonproblem, for which there is ready in the teacher's mind (implanted there by life long training and specifically reinforced by the textbook) the response that there is only a nonanswer ("objective historical investigation," "we don't have enough evidence," etc.). Those

* *The Americans: A History of the United States. Teacher's Manual*, by the staff of the Social Studies Curriculum Center, Carnegie-Mellon University, American Heritage Publishing Co., Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969.

students who have learned to play the school game will know how to formulate the nonanswer and will be rewarded by being informed that they have "made some decisions for themselves, they are not so dumb." So does the oppressor steal the word of the oppressed.

In a peculiar and ironic way, this particular lesson is one that the school reformers might consider to belong to the tactic of reform called relevance. Only at the hands of the oppressor-educators, the relevant theme of oppression and liberation is washed out in a flood of secondary myths about scholarship, two sides to every questions, and so on. And the students' emerging affirmation "We are oppressed" is turned into the oppressors' affirmation "We don't treat you so badly."

By contrast, a true pedagogy of the oppressed encodes and clarifies the words and themes of the oppressed and turns them back to the students for decoding and further clarification in a process of continuous dialogue between teacher and students. This is what Freire calls *conscientização*. The dialogue is accompanied by praxis: acting and reacting on the world to overcome the oppression that is being revealed — remaking one's world as one remakes oneself and one's fellow men.

Conscientização and revolutionary praxis together constitute a standard by which to evaluate conventional school pedagogy and also education in non-capitalist countries and revolutionary propaganda.

Freire calls conventional school pedagogy the "banking concept of education." "In the banking concept of education," he says, "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing." The banking concept of education, by alienating men from their own decision-making and learning, treats them as objects; this pedagogy is appropriate for schools in a social system which treats men as objects and alienates them from their decision-making and their work. The schools therefore are not mindless, as Silberman proposes, but adapted to their function. And the joy, relevance, creativity, flexibility, freedom, humanity that the school reformers so earnestly seek to instill in the schools — while they may relieve some of their present dreariness — are not at all the same as the genuine elation of learning for liberation, just as nonproblem-solving manipulateness is not at all the same as genuine dialogue and praxis.

In the very process of exposing and overcoming an oppressive education that turns men into oppressors and oppressed, we have to create a liberating education that will enable us to overcome oppressive institutions and the oppression within ourselves. Freire's pedagogy of dialogue and praxis can also be a guide for revolutionary consciousness-raising and socialist education.

"It is absolutely essential," Freire writes, "that the oppressed participate in the revolutionary process with an increasingly critical awareness of their role as subjects of the transformation." Again: "Scientific revolutionary humanism cannot, in the name of revolution, treat the oppressed as objects to be analyzed and . . . presented with prescriptions for behavior. To do this would be to fall into one of the myths of the oppressor ideology: the

absolutizing of ignorance. The myth implies the ignorance of someone else . . . Those who steal the words of others develop a deep doubt in the abilities of the others. Each time they say their word without hearing the word of those whom they have forbidden to speak, they grow more accustomed to power and acquire a taste for guiding, ordering, and commanding. They can no longer live without having someone to give orders to.”

Oppression is perpetuated not only by the institutions of society but also by our internalizing of the institutions via its myths. Merely the destruction of the institutions will not be sufficient to overcome the myths. Cuba's schools and China's cultural revolution evidence this. In the Movement, elitism is more than a strategy: it is the tough remaining core of the myths of the oppressor ideology. Among Movement-related teachers, the habits and attitudes of oppressor education persist.

The internalization of oppression — the capitalist cancer of the spirit — undermines the will and the ability to re-create our world. The world of oppression is not only all around us but inside us. We are beginning to understand how oppressive schools serve an oppressive society by implanting in children elements of the oppressor and the oppressed. It will not be enough to overcome the external relations of oppression. We will have to find new forms of education that will enable us to re-create ourselves in children who will refuse to be either oppressors or oppressed.

To find these forms we have need not only of a revolutionary educator like Freire, but also of the liberal school reformers like Silberman, Holt, and others. For in seeking to reform schools and education, they all cause us to question our practices as adults and teachers and to question the myths that we employ to explain them. The myths are a part of the apparatus of oppression. We have to face them and understand them in order to divest ourselves of them.

As we do this, we must engage in dialogue with our students about their and our oppression. Their emerging consciousness of how school mythology perpetuates their oppression is in many instances in advance of ours. If we can take for ourselves and give back to them clearly what we receive from them confusedly, they and we will learn from the dialogue. The area of praxis — the schools — is common to us both. Not the reformers but the actors will at some time need to re-create the schools. And this will only be done by redefining and remaking themselves and the process of education in which they are engaged.

Miriam Wasserman has been a high school teacher in New York City and has served as a consultant to various tutorial and Head Start programs in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. She is the author of The School Fix NYC USA.

the

rabbit

by Joan Klyhn

We're studying the Eskimo; reading stories about Eskimo life, talking about Eskimo life (pretty much as it was before the white man interfered with the traditional processes). We've read myths, are visiting the Eskimo exhibit at the Museum of Natural history several times, and watching some of the excellent films available at the Public Library*.

The kids are concerned about killing. The Eskimo seems to be constantly hunting and killing. His stories are about hunting; his crafts involve working with skins, making weapons out of animal parts. Even toys are made from bone, teeth or skin and some are models of weapons.

Last year we'd studied skin and bones. We'd dissected parts of animals but we hadn't used these, except for eating. The kids are vague about what can be gotten out of the body of an animal; they're even vague about the meat they eat and how it is gotten.



* Some titles: Kenojuak, Eskimo Artist. Land of the Long Day. Kumak, sleepy hunter. Nanook of the North. The Living Stone. How to build an igloo.