

# Chapter 20

## Literacy for Democracy

**Teresa Lucas**

*Florida International University, USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The world is more literate than ever, but does this literacy lead to a more thoughtful citizenry? The approach to teaching literacy skills governed by the necessity of choosing the “right” answers on multiple choice assessment instruments has the effect of producing literate and competent workers rather than the critical, creative, and ethical citizens required for functioning democratic societies. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 was celebrated as the victory of democratic ideals over authoritarian forms of government in many parts of the globe. However, events in the current century point to a trend towards autocracy. This chapter considers how events in the current century in the United States and Venezuela point to a trend towards autocracy and suggests how strengthening educational practices, especially those for engaging children in thoughtful literacy, can result in a return to democracy.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Literacy is the cornerstone of a democratic society. Preserving the principles of liberty, justice and equality depends on the ability of all citizens to access and comprehend information relevant to their well-being, to think critically about issues, and to participate thoughtfully in the democratic process. This chapter traces the history of the last 50 years during which anti-democratic forces in many countries have worked toward delegitimizing non-political public institutions essential for ensuring the functioning of government and the protection of the citizenry. Especially important in this endeavor is the weakening, controlling and even eliminating of public education, created by Horace Mann (1796-1859) in the United States as the “great equalizer of the conditions of man” (Eakin, 2000). For those with ambitions to govern by fiat, an informed, ethical, and active citizenry is dangerous. Literacy serves only as necessary for instrumental purposes related to following instructions and gaining employment. Literacy as a window to the world, avenue for thinking critically and engaging in debate about the role of government in ensuring the common good of all members of society is antithetical to those who would assume autocratic powers.

The chapter follows the weakening of democratic institutions in Venezuela and the United States as examples of a wider global trend and as context for examining the attacks on public education in the

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United States, with the consequent change in focus on promoting literacy for instrumental ends rather than for personal and social enrichment. The Western world that was lulled into a sense of complacency with the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1989. Historian Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the “end of history” with the victory of democratic ideals over authoritarian forms of government. Elections were held in many former Soviet Bloc countries. The 1980s saw autocratic regimes toppled in Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Haiti, Romania, and the Philippines. The world seemed poised to enter a new era of liberty for all (Fukuyama, 1992).

However, events in the current century point in another direction as autocratic regimes take hold in China, Russia, Poland, Hungary, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, among others. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 finally awakened democratic nations to the threat to their systems of government by forces that seek to undermine the principles on which democracy is based. That danger is perhaps most pronounced in the oldest and most powerful of the democratic community of nations. The insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, is a stark reminder of Benjamin Franklin’s warning, when asked at the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, if the United States would be a monarchy or a republic, to which Franklin responded: “A republic, if you can keep it.”

## **FROM DICTATORSHIP TO DEMOCRACY TO AUTOCRACY IN VENEZUELA**

Venezuela was my home for nearly 20 years from 1971 to 2000, giving me a first-hand view of the transformation of a country from a democracy to an autocracy in just a few years. The more gradual breakdown of democracy in the U.S. mirrors the process in Venezuela. The narration of the events in Venezuela is instructive for understanding the forces at work in the U.S. and hopefully for taking measures to guard against a total destruction of the democratic system.

Venezuela became independent from Spain in 1821, after which power passed from one dictator to another. In 1908, Juan Vicente Gomez assumed power and ruled with an iron hand until his death in 1935. His successors ruled until 1945 when a popular movement perpetrated a *coup d’etat*, leading to the country’s first election with universal suffrage. The political party whose leaders had led the coup, *Acción Democrática*, easily won the election. The experiment in democracy lasted only three years until 1948 when a military coup deposed the elected leaders, imprisoning some and sending others into exile. The military ruled with Marcos Perez Jimenez at the helm until another coup sent him into exile in 1958.

The leaders of *Acción Democrática* were released from prison and came back from exile to join with another political party to plan for the transition to democracy. Raul Betancourt was elected president in 1958. Peaceful transitions of power ensued. With an economy bolstered by the discovery and development of vast petroleum resources, the country was free and prosperous. But democratic institutions were new and inexperienced. Poverty continued to affect the majority of the population. When petroleum prices surged in the 1970s, the vast amount of money pouring into government coffers was difficult for politicians to resist. Widespread corruption weakened the already fragile new democracy.

The familiar tactic of the *coup d’etat* raised its head again in 1992 when a young army lieutenant, Hugo Chavez, rose up against the government. The coup failed, but Chavez promised to come back. After receiving a pardon from a prison sentence imposed on him, he returned in style, winning the 1998 presidential election.

Chavez was an army recruit from a lower middle-class family with no experience in politics. Given the rampant corruption in the previous administrations, his outsider status was a plus. He knew how

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