

## **Poor beyond words: Literacy and poverty in North American Social Policy**

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Public policy-making is not a rational arena, and certain notions become accepted as common wisdom despite the lack of any clear support for their accuracy. In this paper I discuss two related notions—the idea that “low literacy skills” lead to poverty and that addressing literacy skills alone can lead to amelioration of economic disadvantage. These notions have been challenged by many commentators (Gee, 1996; Graff, 1995; Quigley, 1997; Sandlin, in press). In this discussion I present a perspective on why these notions are accepted and how literacy can be conceived differently.

Before beginning the discussion it is useful to point out the need for caution regarding “low literacy skills.” Without re-hashing the various arguments around the meaning of literacy, it is important to emphasise that there are real conceptual problems with trying to arrange adults’ literacy activities along any single continuum. A more useful approach is to recognise that different individuals and groups have different literacy practices (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000), and that literacy skill level reflects the degree of congruence between an individual’s literacy practices and those of the test designers.

### Policy represents literacy

Previous work has suggested that political interest in literacy—and the political will to act on that interest—tends to come in waves (Quigley, 1997). We appear to be riding the crest of one such wave if the amount of paper dedicated to discussing literacy in North America is any guide. While this is not the place to develop an argument about why literacy has attracted such attention over the last ten years, it seems likely that one influence is the availability of allegedly high quality national and comparative data from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The implications of this survey have been significant and far-reaching within the international literacy community, and IALS has become a standard referent for literacy policy.

When examining policy it makes sense to look at two types of documents. One is legally binding policy documents, including legislation. The other is research reports or position documents which will be considered in the process of writing laws. Some of these will be sponsored by the legislative body and can quite reasonably be considered as part of the policy setting process. In this discussion I will consider both legislation and supporting documents from Canada and the United States.

Two major pieces of legislation bear upon adult literacy education in the United States. The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 is the policy under which federal money is distributed to the individual states, and covers the vast majority of adult literacy funding. The purpose of this Act is:

to provide workforce investment activities . . . that increase the employment, retention, and earnings of participants, and increase occupational skill attainment by participants, and . . . improve the quality of the workforce, reduce welfare dependency, and enhance the productivity and competitiveness of the Nation (WIA, 1998, sec. 106)

Title II is the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, intended to:

assist adults to become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency; assist adults who are parents to obtain the educational skills necessary to become full partners in the educational development of their children; and assist adults in the completion of a secondary school education (WIA, 1998, sec. 202)

Some adult education funding also comes through Even Start programs. The No Child Left Behind Act 2001 provides for this funding. The appropriate subpart begins:

It is the purpose of this subpart to help break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy by—(1) improving the educational opportunities of the Nation’s low-income families by integrating early childhood education, adult literacy or adult basic education, and parenting education into a unified family literacy program . . . (NCLB, 2001, sec. 1231)

The striking feature of these excerpts is the strength of the tie between literacy and economic performance, both individual and national. However, they go further than this, implying that literacy education is sufficient to improve individuals’ economic status. The first quote talks about reducing welfare dependency, the second of self-sufficiency, and the third of breaking the cycle of poverty. Yet the aim of these acts is entirely educational, apart from some economic development in the WIA.

The same assumption is clear in Canadian legislation. Bill C-363, which received its first reading in February 2003 includes within its preamble:

Whereas on a national level, illiteracy costs Canadian society ten billion dollars annually . . . Whereas the supply of unskilled labour is increasing, yet employment opportunities for these workers are decreasing . . . Whereas literacy serves to facilitate and perpetuate the economic stagnation of those whom it affects, which will in turn severely impede Canada’s position as an innovative and competitive world leader (Canada, 2003, preamble)

The vital assertion of each of these pieces of legislation is that an educational intervention (literacy education for adults) will lead directly to an economic effect (increased productivity). This extraordinary assertion is rooted in human capital theory, which argues that investment in human capital (education) brings returns to the individual in terms of wages and other economic benefits (Blundell, Dearden, Meghir, & Sianesi, 1999). Policymakers can be forgiven for accepting the premise of human capital theory given the extent to which it drives the position papers used to shape policy. For example, the Movement for Canadian Literacy, a charitable organization representing those interested in literacy, argues that:

Canada's future economic vitality is threatened by looming labour shortages . . . we cannot afford the loss of potential, innovation, and productivity that stems from allowing millions of less-literate Canadians to sit on the sidelines. The Canada of the future will need all hands on deck (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2002, p.1)

The same argument is common in US documents. The Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy (2002) published a paper advocating for adult literacy education, largely on the basis of civic participation. Yet even in this document the healthcare and productivity costs of illiteracy were emphasised. Repeatedly, whether in policy or in documents intended to shape policy, the claim is made that “illiteracy” costs money and that literacy education can reduce those costs—and in doing so, reduce poverty.

### The meaning of poverty

For this paper a broad approach to defining poverty is sufficient, and I will view poverty as the lack of the resources necessary for a reasonable standard of living. The exact definition of each of these terms can vary enormously, but the overall perspective is a reasonable summary of what more detailed analyses try to capture. It is important to differentiate between two aspects of poverty. Poverty can be considered as an international measure, such as when the US is compared to Mozambique. Of this kind of measure North America is doing very well indeed, reflecting a high current level of national productivity. The second aspect is the distribution of wealth and poverty. Poverty is not spread out equally within societies. For example, “in the inner cities of the United States white married couples have an incidence of poverty of 5.3% while Black or Hispanic single mother households have an incidence of more than 45%” (UN, 2001). The patterns of distribution of wealth and poverty are as important as its definition, and these patterns are notoriously difficult to identify and explain.

One critical factor in the distribution of poverty is the distribution of income from labour (Schiller, 1995). Wage or salary income makes the difference between poverty and “getting by” for most people (and families) in the North American economy. This apparently intuitive insight suggests that understanding the patterns of poverty requires examination of the patterns of employment prevalent in North America. The higher incidence of poverty among ethnic minorities and women is no coincidence—it relates directly to the limited employment opportunities (both quantity and quality) open to these groups. This relationship is vital to bear in mind when thinking about the effect of adult literacy education on economic status because it introduces the notion of social structure as an influence on economic status.

Discussions of poverty in North America tend to avoid social structure whenever possible, focussing instead on the imputed failings of those living in poverty. Many explanations centred on the deficits of individuals have been mooted over the years, including that those in poverty are undeserving, lazy, immoral, alcohol or drug dependent, undereducated, choosing to remain trapped in a culture of poverty, and so on (Bourdieu, 1976; Brodie, 1996; Butterwick, 1992; Sandlin, 2000; Schiller, 1995; St.Clair, 2000). While the argument implied in the literacy policies cited above is more humane than suggesting that people are poor because they are immoral, the locus of the explanation remains within the individual. Some caution may be required here, in that these policies do not provide a specific explanation for the literacy “shortcomings” of individuals, and some social explanations could well be consistent with their discourse. However the nature of the assumed causation is revealed by the assumption that individual intervention is the solution to the problem—after all, it were not an individual deficit, why would individual remediation be effective?

To conceive poverty as an individual trouble rather than a public issue (Mills, 1959) is to miss a great deal of the point. Poverty in North American society is structured, with some groups consistently faring worse than others. Overall, 11.7 percent of the population were living in poverty in 2001, a slight rise from the previous year but a fall over ten years. However, the distribution of poverty is not equitable. 7.8 percent of White non-Hispanic people live in poverty, compared with 21.4 percent of Hispanics and 22.7 percent of Blacks. This means that while one in every 12.5 White people is in poverty, almost one in every four Blacks is poor (IRP, 2002). Gender of head of household is another critical factor. While 4.9 percent of households with a male present are in poverty, the rate is 26.4 percent for female headed households. It is also interesting to note that changes in relative wealth and poverty can be misleading. For example, between the mid-1950s and 1993, women’s share of income grew from 60 percent to 71.5 percent, apparently a very significant move towards equity. Yet closer analysis reveals that 61 percent of this change is due to a decline in men’s earning power reflecting a less well paid workforce overall (Stevenson & Donovan, 1996).

The distributive patterns of poverty in North America go far beyond what can be explained by individual failings. There has to be some mechanism at work here, ensuring the continuation of these patterns. How do we explain this phenomenon, and what does it mean for literacy education?

### Literacy as capital

The link between literacy and earning (and hence poverty) is well established, reinforced once more in the International Adult Literacy Survey (Osberg, 2000). It is worth noting that the correlation of earnings and literacy scores is a great deal stronger for men than women, suggesting that other factors do mediate the correlation significantly. The assumption of causality in policy initiatives (that low testing literacy skills lead directly to low paid or no employment) is far less clearly supported. In this final section I will describe an alternative way to conceptualise the relationship.

French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu suggests that we must go beyond contemplation of capital in purely economic terms, and argues that one of the roles of the education system is to distribute social and cultural capital in an inequitable manner that reproduces current social structures

(Bourdieu, 1976, 1997). From Bourdieu's perspective literacy practices are a form of capital. This is strongly compatible with historic commentators upon poverty such as Engels (1984), who argued that poverty is a product of the industrial revolution, created and maintained by capitalist structures. Pulling these insights together it is possible to conceive the distribution of literacy practices as paralleling that of other forms of capital such as economic capital.

This re-alignment fundamentally changes the role of literacy practices. Rather than being locked in a causal relationship with poverty, literacy and economic deprivation are dimensions of a much larger phenomenon. In essence, social structures ensure that people living in poverty are poor in many ways, deprived of social, cultural, and economic capital. A clear implication is that literacy education alone will not materially change the situation of those people, since it is only one component of a system of oppression (Sandlin, in press). To be brutal, learning to read does not increase the number of jobs in your town, nor does it change the colour of your skin.

What then of policy? Following Bourdieu's line of thought, the claim that lower degrees of literacy engagement leads to poverty and that this can be reversed by an educational intervention is at best naïve, at worst mystifying. Current policy serves to perpetuate a flawed understanding of the significance of literacy practices that both overstates and under-represents their importance. Overstates it because it assumes that literacy practices can be the single point of engagement with people living in poverty, and that this will improve their lives on a broad basis. Under-represents it by failing to acknowledge the differential distribution of desirable literacy practices as part of an overall system of discrimination and subjugation. Overall, the effect is to obscure the role of education, and the concomitant cultural capital, in the perpetuation of social structure.

### Conclusion

Such a reconsideration of the role of literacy leads to a number of interesting implications. First, in order to address economic inequalities effectively literacy education must be part of a package of provision designed to address deprivation on a broad front. In essence, literacy education can be considered as part of welfare provision, in the sense that welfare exists to ameliorate the worst inequalities of a capitalist society.

Second, policy makers must realise that literacy (or any other form of) education can influence productivity only when there are opportunities for the newly acquired literacy practices to be "put to work." In other words, there has to be jobs, and they have to be the kind of jobs that require those specific literacy skills. If literacy skills are used only to pre-filter candidates for a job (as in the requirement of a high school graduation for a baker, for example) gaining a GED may help one person get the particular opening, but the net economic effect is negligible. There must be a demand for the literacy practices to balance the increased supply.

Third, this construction of literacy has the potential to make literacy education a radical activity (as it has been historically). Literacy education becomes an act of capital redistribution, an attempt to narrow the gap between what is available to the richest and poorest members of our society. The extension of social and cultural capital to marginalised groups can be seen from Bourdieu's viewpoint as equivalent to extension of economic capital. It emphasises once more that literacy is a poverty issue, and that education and economy are inextricably enmeshed.

However, there is also a paradox within the current state of adult literacy education. As mentioned earlier, literacy currently has a fairly high profile due to the assumed value of literacy education cast in human capital terms. Moving towards the approach I have described briefly here runs the risk of losing the constituency who support adult literacy education. Those of us who believe that adult literacy education is a critical component of a more just society can ensure its continuation only by presenting it as a contribution to the perpetuation of an unjust social system. Such is the effect of policy—it enshrines and perpetuates the unexamined assumptions of the status quo while leaving marginalised members of our society poor and beyond words.

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