Reading Education and Poverty: Questioning the Reading Success Equation

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At their core, most arguments about literacy education in the United States are predicated on the idea that learning to read will prevent or overcome poverty. For school-age Americans, reading is expected to bring academic success, which in turn will later enable the individual to become a productive worker and citizen. For adults, learning to read will open employment opportunities and promote increased civic engagement. Popular media report this idea, albeit typically in the language of crisis:

Experts say perhaps 3 million or 4 million Americans cannot read or write at all—between 20 and 30 million Americans lack so many basic educational skills that they cannot read, write, calculate, solve problems or communicate well enough to function effectively on the job or in their everyday lives. (Meisler, 1990, p. 18)

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Literacy educators add their voices. For example, Miles Myers (as cited in Woo, 1996), former Executive Director of the National Council of Teachers of English, wrote, “The point of public schools is to give children power in English so they can be productive workers. There isn’t any doubt about our goal” (p. 17). Literacy researchers use the idea as a rationale for their work:

We are concerned about the inequality of leaving children from outside the mainstream to figure out what they need to know without some direct instruction. Marginalized children need public education even more than do mainstream children. Mainstream children, if they don’t establish themselves through scholarship or hard work, can always get a job from “Uncle Frank.” If poor children fail to develop the reading and writing skills that they need to be productive members of mainstream society, there is, generally no “Uncle Frank” to give them a job. (Stahl, 1994, p. 137)

If literacy education is expected to eliminate poverty, then it must be tailored theoretically and practically to fit various conceptions of poverty and its causes (see Shannon, 1998, for an expanded discussion of this issue). By looking closely at policies proposed to meet that end, we can gain new insights into the rationales for the theories and practices of literacy education and new ways to judge their adequacy and their ability to serve the majority of Americans in what has been characterized as a postindustrial society. In this article, we place the literacy success equation within some historical and political contexts and then use critical policy analysis to offer an alternative goal for literacy education.

Critical Policy Analysis

The mediating role for policy in the relationship of poverty and literacy education is most often based on functionalist social theory (see Barnes, 1988; Merton, 1967; Parsons, 1959). Functionalism is drawn from an analogy that society is like the human body, with its internal elements working toward the goal of adaptation for survival. The natural state of society is assumed to be homostastic—the status quo. If something threatens society’s survival (e.g., poverty and associated problems), then an element (literacy education) must be adjusted to bring a return to the previous balance. Because any society must continually face and solve such problems, policies are needed to direct social elements to reduce the hardships of the immediate threat and to facilitate the return to balance.
Most policy research concerned with literacy education begins and ends with functionalist assumptions. That is, after a policy has been recommended or implemented to adjust literacy education to ameliorate a social concern, policy analysts study its process, content, and consequences to judge its adequacy according to the policy’s projected outcomes (see, e.g., Allington & Waimisley, 1995; Calfee & Drum, 1979; McGill-Franzen, 1987). Although policy studies on literacy education offer useful insights into particular policies and how they might be changed, most current studies seem comfortable with the idea that schooling is a functional element designed to maintain the social status quo. This functionalism turns policy analyses into a (sometimes complex) mechanical endeavor and denies the possibility that the social, economic, and political status quo creates poverty and limits the possibilities of literacy in society (Prunty, 1985).

Yet, policy analysis need not be mechanical because policy may be more a matter of the “authoritative allocation of values” (Easton, 1953, p. xii) than a natural, rational deliberative process. Policies begin with their makers’ images of an ideal society, and they are intended to be operational prescriptive statements to realize that ideal. Ideas are based on values, and values do not float independently from social contexts. Therefore, policies have histories and social attachments. Critical policy analysis is the study of the histories and social attachments of policy ideals through a series of questions such as, Whose values are being served by particular policies? What is the social ideal in this vision of society? How have these values and ideas been institutionalized? As Prunty (1985) stated, “The authoritative allocation of values draws our attention to the centrality of power and control in the concept of policy” (p. 136). Critical analyses, then, require not only an examination of a policy’s effectiveness on its own terms, but an investigation of the values embedded within it; of the images used to make the policy seem necessary and compelling; and of real, expected, and unanticipated social consequences of the policy (C. Marshall, 1997). And of course, critical policy analysis is not value neutral; it is anchored in the vision of a moral order in which justice, equality, and individual freedom are uncompromised by the avarice of a few. The critical analyst would endorse political, social and economic arrangements where persons are never treated as a means to an end, but treated as ends in their own right. (Prunty, 1985, p. 136)

This declaration puts critical policy analysis within projects to promote public democracy (Sehr, 1997). Public democracy is an ideal that places popular participation in public life as the essential ingredient in democratic government (Mouffe, 1990). Fundamental to this participation are the creation and maintenance of “publics,” which serve as forums in which individuals and groups can meet to discuss their desires, needs, and prospective actions (Mills, 1959). This process of communication and deliberation over collective goals makes a democracy public. In a sense, then, critical policy analysis evaluates policy to determine its possibilities in service of public democracy. And that is where we hope our argument takes us.

Toward that end, we examine conservative, neo-conservative, neo-liberal, and liberal efforts to define poverty, to name its causes, and to project various types of reading as its solution (see Table 1). As noted...
in the table, each of the political groups begin their definitions of poverty with an absolute definition of poverty—one that establishes a sharp line between those who are classified as poor and those who are not. Poor families live below the official U.S. poverty line, which was established in 1963 based on the cost of the food to meet the minimum daily caloric intake in the United States. Although the percentage classified as poor has changed during the last 35 years, the basic formula for calculating the line has not. It has been raised only to accommodate the official inflation rates (Sherman, 1994).

Although some may eschew political labels as too narrow or confining, reading with political labels in mind will help us to name and understand both differences and similarities that may not be immediately evident (Cans, 1995). These labels are not meant to be a revelation of truth but rather products of convenience that help us to read between and beyond the written lines. Despite their differences, each position is ultimately based on the reading success equation.

A Conservative Position

Some conservatives locate causes of poverty within the individuals who are poor (Gilder, 1981; Sowell, 1993). In The Bell Curve, Herrnstein and Murray (1994) explained poverty as a consequence of individual’s low cognitive ability. People with limited intelligence, they argued, are not able to compete for well-paying jobs because they are not capable of fulfilling required responsibilities. Rather, they must accept jobs with lower pay that require more physical than mental labor. Herrnstein and Murray reported that in the current economy, wages correlate highly with the mental demands of a job. Within their statistical analyses of demographic and survey data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Labor Market Experience of Youth, they concluded that intelligence (as measured by IQ scores) contributes more toward economic success than race, class, sex, or home environment. According to Herrnstein and Murray, the poor are poor for genetic reasons, and there is little short of genetic engineering (which they disavow) that can fix poverty.

Inequality of endowments, including intelligence, is a reality. Trying to pretend the inequality does not really exist has led to disaster. Trying to eradicate inequality with artificially manufactured outcomes has led to disaster. It is time for America once again to try living with inequality, as life is lived: understanding that each human being has strengths and weaknesses, qualities we admire and qualities we do not admire, competencies and incompetencies, assets, and debts; that the success of each

human life is not measured externally but internally; that of all the rewards we can confer on each other, the most precious is a place as a valued fellow citizen. (pp. 551-552)

Herrnstein and Murray’s argument is profoundly conservative as they attempt to naturalize social, economic, and political inequalities (Hodgson, 1996). “The artificial manufactured outcomes” to which they refer are the 1960s social programs that attempt to ameliorate the consequences of racism, sexism, and poverty. Those programs, including compensatory literacy programs, are waste of time at best (Jendry’s, 1993) and lead to irresponsible behaviors at worst (Murray, 1984). Affirmative Action, pay equity, and even equal opportunity employment are inappropriate because these policies are based on social groups, not individuals, and they are unnecessary because they attempt to measure life’s worth economically. According to these conservatives, welfare, housing, and job programs are bad social policy because they foster dependence among poor individuals (Mead, 1996). Compensatory education, universal academic standards, and 100% graduation rates are misguided educational policies because “for many people, there is nothing they can learn that will repay the cost of teaching” (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994, p. 520).

To bring about economic success and maintain homostateous under these assumptions, literacy education has two jobs: to train individuals to read according to their ascribed station in the economic order and to help them learn to appreciate their lot in life. Tracked education is designed to deliver the first goal by separating the cognitive elite from the rest and then further subdividing the lower group into those intended for service or physical labor. Calls for gifted education and functional literacy programs often are directed by this brand of conservative logic (see Kincheloe, 1995; Sapon-Shevin, 1995, for this critique). For example, Bloom’s (1987) effort to open the American mind is an argument to produce leaders through rigorous public school and university education, one unsullied by popular culture. Certain conservatives suggest that if the public schools are not willing to provide this leadership or to educate the intellectually capable, then government vouchers should be available for the children’s parents to find willing schools among the private sector (Moe & Chubb, 1992). Accordingly, these conservatives argue that less money should be devoted to the education of the intellectually unable because success in raising their intellectual talents has proved elusive (Jensen, 1969). “American education must come to terms with the reality that in a universal education system, many students will not reach the level of education that most people view as basic” (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994, p. 436). Reading instruction in the lower tracks is to teach the poor to follow the rules:
As of the end of the twentieth century, the United States is run by rules that are congenial to people with high IQs and that make life more difficult for everyone else. This is true in the areas of criminal justice, marriage and divorce, welfare and tax policy, and business law, among others. It is true of rules that have been intended to help ordinary people—rules that govern schooling, medical practice, the labeling of goods, to pick some examples. ... Our policy recommendation is to stop it and strip away the nonsense, so that everyone can understand them. (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994, pp. 541–542)

The second role for reading instruction is to assist in the redefinition of success in America. Herrnstein and Murray (1994) maintained that at the heart of their calls for policy reform is a quest for human dignity: “Most adults need something to do with their lives other than going to work, and that something consists of being stitched into a fabric of family and community” (p. 539). Yet according to Herrnstein and Murray, the federal government has removed most of the “stuff of life” out of neighborhoods. They named control over caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, and housing the homeless as three areas in which federal policy has reduced the number of ways in which individuals can be valued among their neighbors. In their vision of the ideal America, a sense of dignity develops from service to others—finding a valued place in the community. Individuals should evaluate their success not by income but by the number of “people who would miss you if you were gone” (p. 535). Dignity comes from finding a valued place in the world. Literacy education plays a part in this redefinition through the content of the stories being told and read at home and at school.

A Neo-Conservative Perspective

Other conservatives—neo-conservatives—suggest that the flawed moral character of the poor keeps them from economic success and poses a threat to the social status quo (J. Q. Wilson, 1993). Criminals, the poor, teenage mothers, and the like suffer a moral poverty that prevents them from controlling their impulses and empathizing with others (Klein, 1993). Rather than ascribe this flaw to genetics, neo-conservatives suggest that bad environments, poor incentives, and inadequate punishments encourage the development of poor moral and social habits. From this vantage point, each individual (poor and nonpoor alike) is fully responsible for and is in complete control of his or her social class standing and behavior. By the choices made and the actions taken, individuals determine their economic destiny.

The essential first step is to acknowledge that at root, in almost every area of important public concern, we are seeking to induce persons to act virtuously, whether as school children, applicants for public assistance, would-be lawbreakers, or voters and public officials. Not only is such conduct desirable in its own right, it appears now to be necessary if large improvements are to be made in those matters we consider problems: schooling, welfare, crime, and public finance. By virtue, I mean habits of moderate action; more specifically, acting with due restraint on one’s impulses, due regard for the rights of others, and reasonable concern for distant consequences. (J. Q. Wilson, 1995, p. 22)

Neo-conservatives see the world as a struggle between good and evil, and they worry that evil might be winning (Bennett, 1996). They seek community—its claim on individual autonomy and its responsibility to inculcate virtue among all members, but particularly within the young. They believe that ideas matter, that principles direct individuals and, therefore, social life. Together these principles direct them to work for programs to help the poor and others through locally controlled educational programs based on generally accepted ideas of virtue that will prepare them to live the good life both in private and as a citizen in the public sphere. For neo-conservatives, this means that social order is based on personal moral conduct and that social problems are problems of individual moral lapses or an absence of moral capital among individuals (Magnet, 1993). Crime is caused by criminals’ lack of self-discipline, compassion, and honesty. Drug addiction results from the absence of self-discipline, courage, and faith. The poor need a better sense of self-discipline, responsibility, work, and perseverance. To acquire these needed virtues, criminals, drug addicts, the poor, and the young must have access to environments in which they can observe demonstrations of self-discipline, courage, perseverance, and so forth; discuss these examples; and learn to make good choices (Gerson, 1996).

As former Secretary of Education William Bennett (1988) explained, moral literacy education is a way to create needed environments through a combination of basic skills and moral tales. In his early writings on the subject, Bennett presented what works in teaching: phonics instruction, vocabulary development, memorization, and direct instruction. These methods are intended to deliver specified content—the explicit goals of schooling—and to teach students implicitly how to act, think, and believe. These latter goals of teaching—deferring gratification, perseverance, and hard work—are as important as the explicit goals. In The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories, and other texts, Bennett (1994) applied his methods to stories that he believed capture the moral values of Western
Civilization. The stories in each book are intended to demonstrate what virtues look like, why they are practiced, and how they work. Bennett (1994) suggested that moral literacy is more about basic life choices:

The reader scanning this book may notice that it does not discuss issues like nuclear war, abortion, creationism, or euthanasia. But the fact is that the formation of character in young people is educationally a different task from, and a prior task to, the discussion of the great, difficult ethical controversies of the day. First things first. And planting the ideas of virtue, of good traits in the young, comes first. This is a book of basics. The tough issues can, if teachers and parents wish, be taken up later. And I would add, a person who is morally literate will be immeasurably better equipped than a morally illiterate person to reach a reasoned and ethically defensible position on these tough issues. (pp. 12–13)

According to neo-conservatives, then, every American should become morally literate and strive not only to be self-disciplined, responsible, honest, loyal, and faithful, but to work and persevere. They implore us to read life and all texts that we encounter through these moral lenses. In return for these efforts, neo-conservatives promise a safer, easier, and quieter future because a morally literate work force will be able to take advantage of the opportunities the economy affords all of us. Poverty, racism, and sexism end when everyone acts virtuously. The struggle then is not to negotiate political, cultural, or economic justice. Rather, it is to find ways to promote moral literacy among the most vulnerable in society—one person at a time.

A Neo-Liberal View

Not all Americans accept conservative or neo-conservative assumptions that an individual’s flaws are responsible for poverty. Neo-liberals argue that restricted opportunities to prosper have limited poor people’s abilities to succeed economically (Reich, 1991). Neo-liberals maintain that governmental and private institutions have not kept pace with the changing economy and that many Americans have not been able to develop their skills sufficiently to capitalize on the emerging opportunities for high-skill and high-wage jobs (M. Smith & Scoll, 1995). The poor are poor not because they lack intelligence or moral character. Rather they are poor because the economy has passed them by as mental labor is more rewarded than physical labor and American institutions have not helped them catch up. Only those who can afford to improve their skills privately have prospered:

The key to both productivity and competitiveness is the skills for our people and our capacity to use highly educated and trained people to maximum advantage in the workplace. In fact, however, the guiding principle on which our educational and industrial systems have been built is profoundly different; this guiding principle, for long highly successful, is now outmoded, and harmful, and the time has come to change it. (R. Marshall & Tucker, 1992, p. xvi)

According to neo-liberals, ending poverty means providing all American families with the wherewithal to work their way above the official line. To induce the poor and all Americans to improve their work skills, neo-liberals propose a modest social safety net of cash and in-kind assistance and greatly expanded human capital development programs (M. Smith & Scoll, 1995). Accordingly, industry receives governmental incentives to reorganize their management toward more quality control, and educational programs (from preschool to postsecondary) receive incentives to raise their curricular standards and outcomes to better prepare American citizens (Resnick & Wirt, 1996). The goal of both incentive packages is to create a productive match between industrial needs and educational supply. In the process, the poor will become fully prepared to accept the high-skill and high-wage employment opportunities available to them and cross the poverty line once and forever by themselves. Neo-liberals offer a logic in which all boats rise on a swelling economic tide.

The school reform movement of the 1990s can be read as a neo-liberal attempt to increase the work force skills of Americans to enable the economy to grow its way out of its current problems (Noble, 1994). The driving forces for these educational reforms since the National Governors’ Conference on Education 1988 to the America Reads Initiative include a relatively small group of business leaders (from Xerox, Ford Motor, Dow Chemical, Kodak, Apple Corp., etc.), a handful of government officials (Governors or former Governors James Hunt, Thomas Kemer, Bill Clinton), and associated fellows of the Carnegie Corporation (former Secretary of Labor, Ray Marshall; Ira Magaziner, Director of the Center for Education and the Economy, Marc Tucker; Hillary Rodham Clinton). To “triumph in the global economy,” they seek academic standards that will prepare everyone to enter a flexible work force as independent entrepreneurs who can retool themselves to meet the swiftly shifting demands of the marketplace (Kearns, 1993). To realize this ideal, this group of neo-liberals seeks to create and harness a national commitment from all citizens to use economic prosperity as the primary criteria to set national goals (Fowler, 1995). The statements from the press and the statements of Miles Myers used in the
introduction offer a glimpse of how the rhetoric of literacy crisis and literacy education have been directed by this criteria.

The Clinton Administration's proposal of the America Reads Challenge is a poignant example of these neo-liberal values. According to Clinton, education is foremost among Americans' opportunities to prepare themselves for work, one that offers "a chance to live out their dreams ... and to live up to their God-given potential" (Clinton, 1996). Without high academic standards, Clinton argued, "America cannot triumph in the global economy." Accordingly, he proposed loans, tax cuts, computers, and safe and rebuilt schools to seize this opportunity. Using reading as a foundation, he asked Americans to volunteer to ensure that all children have the ability to read a book on their own by the end of third grade. Those who cannot read cannot pursue the American Dream, and therefore they waste their potential and America's future. Moreover, they hamper American efforts to go "roaring and united into the 21st century" (Clinton, 1996). As Clinton's Secretary of Education, Richard Riley (1996), declared during his Third Annual State of American Education Address, "American education must reach for a new level of excellence because of the most basic reasons; our very prosperity as a nation—and the economic security and quality of each and every American family—depends on it."

A Liberal Perspective

Although some liberals also accept restricted opportunity as the cause for poverty, their position differs by degree from that of neo-liberals (Heilbroner, 1995). Rather than a general failure, these liberals argue that current practices of many public and private institutions restrict some Americans opportunities to succeed in life (Schiller, 1995). Although the current political climate has caused some liberals to complain publicly about long-term welfare recipients' unwillingness to work, most liberals act as if they still believe that the poor are poor because they have not had and do not have adequate access to good schools, jobs, and income. According to these liberals, the "system" denies the poor equal chances to participate in the material conditions from which middle- and upper-class citizens build their lives. The role of liberal government is to remove the targeted restrictions to ensure that the poor have equal opportunity with all others (Blank, 1997).

The New Deal of the 1930s and the War on Poverty in the 1960s were governmental interventions to protect the poor from discrimination. Social security, minimum wages, aid to families with dependent children, and Affirmative Action were attempts by the federal government to help the poor, minorities, and women to overcome personal and social biases against them (Peterson, 1995). Accordingly, neo-liberal general solutions to poverty cannot possibly alleviate the problems of the poor because neo-liberal policies actually mask the effects of these biases and at best maintain current social and political inequalities. W. J. Wilson (1997) commented on the conservative, neo-conservative, and even neo-liberal attacks on past governmental efforts:

This retreat from public policy as a way to alleviate problems of social inequality will have profound negative consequences for the future of disadvantaged groups such as the ghetto poor. High levels of joblessness, growing wage inequality, and the related social problems are complex and have their sources in fundamental economic, social, and cultural changes. They, therefore, require bold, comprehensive, and thoughtful solutions, not simplistic and pious statements about the need for greater personal responsibility. Progressives who are concerned about the current social conditions of the have-nots and the future generation of have-nots not only have to fight against the current public policy; they are morally obligated to offer alternative strategies designed to alleviate, not exacerbate, the plight of the poor, the jobless, and other disadvantaged citizens of America. (p. 209)

Addressing his liberal obligation, W. J. Wilson (1997) offered long-and short-term alternative solutions. Among the long-term ones—"those that will take years to have a positive impact upon the poor" (p. 208)—he applauded the neo-liberal interest in setting rigorous academic standards that will prepare all students for the jobs of the 21st century. However, he placed this interest within the current inequalities among schools across America. He argued that if national academic standards are to avoid becoming one more way in which to measure the failures of poor and working-class students, then schools that serve predominantly poor families will require additional support. Darling-Hammond (1994) asked, "Can the mere issuance of standards really propel improvements in schooling, or are there other structural issues to contend with—issues such as funding, teachers' knowledge and capacities, access to curricular resources, and dysfunctional school structures" (p. 480). Rotberg and Harvey (1993) wrote:

More often than not, the "best" teachers, including experienced teachers offered greater choice in school assignment because of their seniority, avoid high-poverty schools. As a result, low income and minority students have less contact with the best qualified and more experienced
teachers, the teachers most often likely to master the kinds of instructional strategies considered effective for students. (p. 52)

This suggests that the most effective methods to teach all subjects are already in place within schools serving middle- and upper-class students. Lack of access to the effective methods, they assumed, keeps the poor from academic and, later, job success (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990). And so begins the seemingly endless debate about which methods among those apparently successful with society’s “have” will work to improve the prospects of the “have-nots” (C. Smith, 1994). Head Start, Family Literacy, Even Start, and many other federal and state programs can be read as liberal attempts to duplicate the best methods of the middle and upper classes within the schools that serve the poor and to extend those practices to their homes.

An Alternative View

Despite the apparent differences among conservatives, neo-conservatives, neo-liberals, and liberals concerning definition and causes of poverty, all believe in the reading success equation. That is, they offer reading as a tool for school and, later, economic success. Each iteration follows a functionalist logic. Problems of poverty can be fixed by manipulating elements within the social system to create the conditions that will raise all Americans above the poverty line. Reading education is the element of choice. Ignoring the fact that most of the poor already work (see Hornbeck & Solomon, 1991), conservative, neo-conservative, neo-liberal, and liberal solutions to poverty are based on the assumption that there are jobs waiting for the newly intelligent, virtuous, skilled, and literate poor. Moreover, they all assume that these available jobs will pay sufficiently well to enable poor individuals and their families to remain above the official poverty line. According to this line of reasoning, the rationales for schooling and reading education are tied directly to the availability of good jobs. Reading education and schooling lose all functional value for the society and poor if a surplus of well-paying jobs are not available in the American economy. Without those jobs, why should people learn to read? Some studies of school dropouts suggest that some adolescents—particularly poor minority students—have already answered this question (Fine, 1991; McLeod, 1995).

Despite government rhetoric to the contrary, the U.S. economy is not producing enough good jobs to end poverty (Greider, 1997). Moreover, the majority of new jobs do not pay enough to enable the poor to crawl over the poverty line permanently. Even a former U.S. Secretary of Labor ac-

knowledges these points; Robert Reich had “a profound sense that economic forces are out of control—that neither hard work or general economic improvement will lead to higher incomes” (as cited in Freidman, 1995, p. 89). Others share Reich’s concern, as the titles of recent books suggest: When Work Disappears (W. J. Wilson, 1997), The End of Work (Rifkin, 1995), The Jobless Future (Arnowitz & DiFazio, 1994), and Chaos or Community? (Sklaz, 1995). Both the New York Times and the Philadelphia Inquirer have run lengthy feature series on the lack of good jobs and job security for workers well up into the middle classes (America: Who Stole the Dream?, Bartlett & Steele, 1996; The Downsizing of America, 1996). Although the stock market has tripled its point total during the last 2 decades, economic policies—President Reagan’s supply-side economics, Bush’s capital gains tax cuts, and Clinton’s expansion of the North American Fair Trade Agreement—have not improved the economic prospects for the majority of Americans and have actually hurt the poor. Princeton economist Rebecca Blank (1997) stated this succinctly:

In 1986, I had published an article with my colleague at Princeton, Alan Blinder, in which we documented the effect of economic growth on poverty. Using historical data through the early 1980s, we showed that when jobs expanded and unemployment fell, poverty also declined sharply. We predicted a steep decline in poverty over the 1980s, as the United States economy recovered from the severe recession at the beginning of that decade. I knew that economic growth reduced poverty. I didn’t have a clue why it hadn’t worked in 1988. The apparent problem has become worse over the years. In fact, in November 1994, when the government released its official statistics documenting income and poverty changes over the previous year, it showed a historically unprecedented result: in 1993, when the rate of aggregate economic growth (after inflation) was 3 percent—a very healthy growth rate—indeed—the proportion of Americans who were poor in that year actually rose at the same time as the aggregate economy was expanding. By the time statistics lyes one of the most discouraging facts for American social policy: an expanding economy no longer guarantees a decline in poverty. (p. 54)

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’s (1994) The American Workforce 1992–2005, over half of the total job growth will be in occupations that require only a high school education and pay close to minimum wages. In fact, the fastest growing type of employment is contingent work (temporary, contract, leased, or part time), jobs that are expected to outnumber permanent, full-time employees by the turn of the century. Contingent work typically pays less than 60% of comparable
full-time employment and often does not include benefits (Castro, 1993; Greenhouse, 1997).

The poor are not the only ones threatened by this economy. Most Americans who have jobs have found their incomes declining over the last 25 years ("Downward Spiral," 1998). Incomes of the poor have dropped.78% annually, the working class has lost .33% each year, and the middle class has "worked for the better part of two decades ... collected eight hundred and thirty-two weekly pay checks; the last one for an amount twenty-three dollars less than the first one" (Cassidy, 1995, p. 114). People of Color, women, and young adults have fared worse than their White, male, older peers (Sklar, 1995). But only a very few of the White males are doing well (Bok, 1993). The movement of manufacturing jobs to other countries, the downsizing of middle management, the loss of service work to technology, and the fact that re-employment is typically only at 60% of a former salary all suggest that working middle-class, and even some upper-middle-class, families have little more security for the future than the poor.

Simply put, well-paying jobs are not sufficiently available to form the assumed cornerstones of the bootstrap policies of the Reagan and Bush Administrations, the end-of-moral poverty programs of William Bennett and other neo-conservatives, and the workfare and re-employment initiatives of the Clinton Administration. Within these economic conditions, the assumed relationships between poverty and literacy education are questionable. The reading success equation does not add up and should not appear compelling to three fourths of the U.S. population. To accept conservative, neo-conservative, neo-liberal, or even liberal economic and educational policies, we follow functionalist logic that cannot produce their promised results. By doing so, we unwittingly continue an unjust status quo and contribute to the decline of the middle classes as well. When we track learners toward their "proper" place in society, offer carefully selected moral training for everyone, accept business practices as the measure of human worth, or argue endlessly over which methods will raise test scores the most, we fail to recognize that we cannot reach our goals any longer by continuing to tinker with current systems (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). We are no longer preparing our students for any future that we might choose for them or they might choose for themselves. Intelligence, morals, skills, and opportunities are certainly important, but we cannot rationalize our concern for them through promises of economic success for those who acquire them. We need new definitions of poverty, new theories about its causes, and new rationales for our work and our actions outside of work. We must seek ones that will help us see that the social, political, and economic status quo—the social structures—create poverty in America. As Aronowitz (1994) wrote, "If the job culture proves to have been a historically situated way of measuring value, then the ethical basis of contemporary life requires re-examination and within it, the goals and purpose of schools" (p. 141).

Radical Democrats have started this re-examination (Trend, 1996). They begin with a different definition of poverty because the official definition of poverty is set too low to support individuals and families and it blurs the structural relationship between Americans in different social classes (Pivens & Cloward, 1997). As Harvard economist John Galbraith (1992) explained:

What is not accepted, and indeed is little mentioned, is that the underclass is integrally a part of a larger economic process and, more importantly, that it serves the living standard and the comfort of the more favored community ... the economically fortunate, not excluding those who speak with greatest regret of the existence of the poor, are heavily dependent on its presence. (p. 17)

Rejecting functionalist solutions that have the American status quo as an acceptable end point, radical Democrats see the current economic practices (and government support for those practices) as the primary cause of poverty in America (Albelda & Folbre, 1996). The economy, although wildly productive, is not protective of basic human needs of food, shelter, and health.

Global and national economic practices and policies do not keep people's well-being clearly in mind, leaving most Americans insecure about their current economic status and their prospects for the future. Too many have lost substantial control over those basic needs because employment is no longer certain, well-paying jobs are scarce, and the social safety net is being withdrawn. Radical Democrats seek to separate security about good housing, health care, and livable income from employment; to recognize these needs as basic human rights; and to hold governments responsible for the equitable distribution of those rights among Americans (Aronowitz, 1996). Toward that end, they redefine poverty as insecurity concerning these new rights, swelling the ranks of the so-called poor to include those citizens currently classified as working and middle classes. Poverty, then, becomes a majority concern as the insecure majority compare their lives and rights against those afforded an increasingly secure minority.

What Future?

Now the big challenge and threat is the gap in health and wealth that separates rich and poor. ... Here is the greatest problem and danger facing the world of the third millennium. ... Our task in our own interest as well as theirs, is to help the poor become healthier and wealthier. (p. 426)

This is the challenge to literacy educators and researchers during the 21st century—to find strategic ways to help the poor. Our hope is that our critical policy analysis will spark discussion among educators and others to deliberate over other possible roles for literacy and rationales for literacy education, ones that might serve the 75% of the U.S. population who are fundamentally vulnerable to the global market economy. Literacy educators and researchers can no longer take refuge in the belief that their job is to teach students to read and hope for the best. The reading success equation has an insufficient proof for most American citizens. Rather, we must search for different, perhaps nonfunctionalist, rationales for our efforts because our social institutions can no longer shield most Americans from the harsh realities of the economy.

We think these different rationales should be embedded within projects to promote public democracy—that is, to retheorize literacy to help all citizens participate in public life. To address poverty acknowledging the radical democratic critique, we need literacy education that will help all citizens to develop their faculties of communication, deliberation, and judgment. We should take these steps not to make them rich but to allow all to participate fully in the civic life of their communities and their relationships to larger political and cultural bodies. The task is daunting, but not impossible. After all, the obstacles we face are all human artifacts, and therefore, they can be changed. At their core, these problems are about power as former Secretary of Labor Reich (1997) explained in his reconsideration of neo-liberalism:

I came to Washington thinking the answer was simply to provide the bottom half with access to the education and skills they need to qualify for better jobs. But it’s more than that. Without power, they can’t get the resources for good schools and affordable higher education or training. Powerless, they can’t even guarantee safe workplaces, maintain a livable minimum wage, or prevent sweatshops from reemerging. Without power, they can’t force highly profitable companies to share the profits with them. Powerless, they’re as expendable as old pieces of machinery. (p. 17)

How do we create literacy education expressly designed to serve the majority by redistributing power to the bottom two thirds of the American population? We think that is a question that literacy educators should address in the 21st century. At some level, we wish that we had a simple and complete answer to this question. Perhaps it would be easiest for all if we could simply tell others what we all should do to make poverty and our lack of control over our own well-being go away. We do not have such answers, and we see danger in quick grabs for solutions before a majority of Americans enter the public deliberations in substantial and meaningful ways (see Table 2).

Two topics we hope to encourage in these discussions about literacy education are the development of students’ sociological imaginations (Lemert, 1997; Mills, 1959; Shannon, 1995) and reinvigorated efforts to embrace literacy education with struggles for cultural recognition (Courts, 1997; Maccio, 1995; Shannon, 1994). Sociological imagination is the activity by which persons often learn eventually to create imaginative reconstructions of the larger social forces that affect their lives. This term, coined by C. Wright Mills, is the basic work of sociologists, but Mills did not intend that sociological imagination be restricted only to the more highly educated. On the contrary, it is meant for everyone. Teachers engage in the practice when they use what Berthoff (1987) called "re-search," the critical examinations of past experiences with an eye toward what can be done in and out of the classroom to promote social justice. Children also engage in sociological imaginations within conducive conditions (Shannon, 1998). As Lemert noted:

Without this sociological skill, people are left with the belief that the troubles in their lives are of their own doing, or perhaps, the result of

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Public Democratic Political Ideology on Poverty</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Radical Democrats</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What is poverty?</strong></td>
<td>Lack of control and security of circumstances of well-being. Subject to loss of jobs, health care, housing, and so forth, without much recourse or government support.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What is its cause?</strong></td>
<td>Imbalance of power favoring the wealthiest 20% of the American population. Inability of the poor to recognize their multiple identities and to form conditions to address mutual goals.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How is reading education involved in the solution?</strong></td>
<td>Reading education based on active engagement in civic life can help individuals participate in transformative struggles for recognition of difference and redistribution of cultural and economic capital.</td>
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some abstract fate; but in either case, they feel that these are matters with respect to which they should, and do, feel guilty. The sociological imagination refers to the ability of some to learn—often with good luck or coaching or perhaps formal schooling—to realize that, just as often, one’s personal “troubles” are in fact public issues. (p. 12)

Since the 1960s, most struggles over power have centered on issues of cultural difference. Current methods of mainstream multicultural pedagogy in which students sample the costumes, food, and holidays of “exotic” others does little to help us understand differences, why and how they exist, and how we can learn to work together with differences (Banks, 1997). The methods also do not help us rethink our identities or students to rethink their identities in ways that blur the lines between ourselves and others (McLaren, 1997). Yet, without sophisticated ways to think about ourselves and about relationships with others, we cannot hope to overcome the cultural boundaries that keep us apart and keep most of us with little social and political power. Cultural injustices are rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication (Goldberg, 1995). Schooling, particularly literacy education, should be able to engage these issues in ways that help individuals and groups to represent themselves, that make problematic socially constructed hierarchies among cultural practices, and that offer means to analyze how inequalities are established and maintained through forms of communication (Courts, 1997). If we are to help ourselves and others to become powerful civic participants, we must search for ways to use literacy to develop voices among silenced groups (e.g., Morgan, 1997; Walsh, 1991; Weis & Fine, 1993).

As we have tried to point out in this article, however, these struggles for recognition occur in a world of increasing maternal inequality. Although these inequalities have cultural manifestations and entailments, they are also rooted in the political and economic structures of society (Fraser, 1997). We are members of several cultural groups simultaneously—and one of those groups is economic class. As Gates (1998) stated, “Class is as important, often it’s more important in one’s daily life, than race, even within the black community.” (p. 32). Virtually every struggle against injustice implies demands for both cultural recognition and economic redistribution (Gooding-Williams, 1993). In our deliberations about new rationales for literacy education, we should ask ourselves how can we help “each of us reach around all of these identities” (Jordan, 1993, p. 18) to form projects that seek redistribution of political, cultural, and economic power in America. How do we develop literacy education that will make problematic all pretensions of fixed identities to affirm the multiple, fluid, and shifting identities we all possess and at the same time come together around specific matters that enable us to make issues of well-being (food, shelter, health care, and minimum income) into basic human rights? We hope that literacy researchers and educators can begin the discussion to address these questions soon.

References

