"What's my name?": A politics of literacy in the latter half of the 20th century in America

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One of my most vivid memories of youth is a championship boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Ernie Terrell that my father and I watched one Saturday afternoon on the Wide World of Sports. It was early in Ali's championship years, before he refused to fight in the Vietnam War but after he had knocked out Sonny Liston. Terrell was enormous, skilled, and brave enough to have taunted Ali before the fight by refusing to call him by his new Muslim name. Terrell referred to his opponent as Cassius Clay—Ali's given name, but one he now associated with slavery. As I remember, it was only a short time before Ali began to pummel Terrell. He wouldn't knock Terrell out though, and my father dismissed Ali as "a light puncher"—thinking he couldn't finish Terrell off. It was clear, however, that Ali was keeping Terrell on his feet with punches as he repeatedly asked Terrell, "What's my name?" And in retrospect it wasn't just Terrell who was being asked forcefully to recognize Ali's new name. Rather it was my father, me, and all of America being told to acknowledge that the old order was being challenged by new sets of ideas, goals, and people.

Ali's performance presented clearly his sociological imagination. That term, coined by C. Wright Mills (1959), suggests an ability to create possible reconstructions of larger social forces that affect our lives. Ali's efforts to reclaim the power to name oneself and the world indicate that this practice is not just for sociologists. Rather, anyone might employ sociological imagination in order to explore problems that beset her or him. Then it was a bout between two men in which each attempted to beat the other senseless and both employed psychology to upset the other; now the match seems more a metaphoric struggle between two publics. One demanded that the other recognize its existence in the world. Within the context of sociological imagination, the controversy over Ali's name was no longer a personal problem but rather a public struggle over recognition. Sociological imagination seemed a remarkable catalyst for social change:

Without this sociological skill, people are left with the belief that the troubles in their lives are their own doing or perhaps, the result of 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 (Lemert, 1998, p. 12).

My contention in this essay is that much of our discussion about literacy and literacy education in the United States during my lifetime has been a reaction to many groups' uses of their separate and collective sociological imaginations in efforts to be recognized (see Takaki, 1993). Ali's shouts of "what's my name?" were echoed through various means by many groups. They asked and sometimes demanded to be acknowledged as being present, as being capable makers of culture, and as being worthy of respect. Ali was and is admired worldwide not only for his pugilistic skills, but more for his ability to make these struggles for recognition visible to all. These struggles pushed across cultural and social fields in the United States, pressing upon traditional...
in institutional structures, behavioral patterns, values, and social theories, and caused all to respond to difference. Schooling, being one of the few public spaces left in the U.S., became a primary site for these struggles as marginalized groups asked school officials and educators metaphorically, "What's my name?"

In what follows, I attempt to lay out parameters of some American struggles for recognition. My efforts are meant to be illustrative rather than complete on this matter. My interests lie in an investigation of the ways in which literacy and literacy education during the second half of the 20th century can be understood as a direct (but not always conscious, perhaps) reaction to these struggles for recognition. Dialect, the canon, cognitive abilities, access, language, standards—all these issues are at least associated with struggles for recognition. Whether dragging their feet, running in circles, or offering a helping hand, literacy researchers' and educators' efforts to address these struggles constitute one way to discuss a politics of literacy in the 20th century and to think about that politics in the future.

In order to understand these issues, we must look behind the rhetoric that surrounds them to the political interests that drive them and that create opportunities for coalitions that promote or oppose them. Behind the rhetoric lies the agency of individuals and groups both past and present. Members of marginalized groups who participated and participate in the struggles for recognition, those who sought and seek to translate general concerns into educational matters, citizens who opposed and oppose that recognition and translation, legislators and educators who worked and work to impair or facilitate either or both, all provide the history on which the politics of literacy in the next millennium will be constructed. All acted or act according to explicit and implicit values about and visions of the social world they hope to inhabit, attempting ultimately to make their own history. But as Marx (1852/1963) wrote: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past" (p. 15). If we intend to speak of the future, then we must examine those circumstances of the past and present.

My attempt to characterize these circumstances is organized around a reminder of several voices of struggle in the U.S. during the last 50 years and an overview of five politically motivated reactions to those voices, complete with their corresponding visions of who and what should be authorized in school literacy programs. As historical conditions change toward the turn of the 20th century, the gap widens between rich and poor, and struggles of redistribution become visible again in and out of the United States, a new politics of literacy may be needed.

I close with a discussion of how some literacy researchers are looking in that direction.

**Struggles for recognition**

Shortly after World War II, decades, even centuries, of political struggles came to fruition around the world (Landes, 1998) First in India and Africa, and then across Asia and South and Latin Americas, the Caribbean, and even the southern United States, colonized groups successfully challenged the established European ordering of the world. In various ways, these challenges upset the world's cultural as well as political hierarchies, asserting that different explanations of the order of one's world were not necessarily inferior to Western arrangements. Rather they were just different and worthy of recognition and authority in their own right. With each success, the particular culture of the indigenous people was rushed into public view and celebrated by some or condemned by others as a different way of knowing and understanding life. In the wake of these challenges came the unmasking of the European idea that the social world is a discoverable whole with a single best logic and set of values (Lemert, 1996). Efforts to assert the right to be different resonated loudly within cultural as well as political arenas of American life.

Various strands of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s display how international ideas were used to express the need for formal recognition of people of color (Omi & Winant, 1986). First, Mohandas Gandhi's nonviolent methods framed many of the actions of the Southern Christian Leadership Council after the Brown v. the Board of Education decision in 1954, as well as the thoughts in the founding statement for the Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) written in May 1960:


By the mid-1960s these thoughts gave way in some circles to more forceful rhetoric. SNCC leaders mixed Frantz Fanon's (1961) discussions of the lingering psychological effects of colonization with W.E.B. DuBois's (1903) concerns for double consciousness and Marcus Garvey's (1924) black nationalism to theorize a need for black power to be understood in both black and white communities.
Racism has functioned as a type of white nationalism when dealing with black people. Who are black people, what are black people, what is their relationship to America and the world? It must be repeated that the whole myth of “Negro citizenship” perpetuated by the white elite, has confused the thinking of radical and progressive blacks and whites in this country. The broad masses of black people react to American society in the same manner as colonial peoples react to the West in Africa and Latin America, and had the same relationship, that of the colonized toward the colonizer (The SNCC Speaks For Itself, as quoted in Albert & Albert, 1984, p. 125).

In October 1966, the Black Panther Party paraphrased Ho Chi Minh’s use of the American Declaration of Independence in his writing about an independent Vietnam (see Minh, 1970) to announce the rights of revolutionary parties suffering under unjust neo-colonial authority to resort to armed resistance in their political platform:

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that government long established should not be changed for light or transient causes; and accordingly all experience has shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security (The Black Panther Party Platform, as quoted in Albert & Albert, 1984, p. 164).

The parallel, sometimes competing, variety of international influences speaks to the diversity within the African American movement for civil rights (Williams, 1997). Although the tactics differ markedly, the targets of each approach seem the same. The resolve of the SNCC turned quickly into the militancy of the Black Panthers, but the goal for all was finding an end to apartheid and racism in the U.S. throughout the naming and deconstruction of the institutional and cultural ways in which white dominance was and is maintained.

Racism and cultural domination were the targets of other marginalized groups as well. Some white college students were influenced by the Students for a Democratic Society’s negotiated Fort Dearborn Statement in 1962 (Flacks, 1988; Hayden, 1988):

We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit. When we were kids the United States was the wealthiest and strongest country in the world; the only one with the atom bomb, the least scarred by modern war, an initiator of the United Nations that we thought would distribute Western influence through the world. Freedom and equality for each individual, government of, by, and for the people—these American values we found good, principles by which we could live as men. Many of us began maturing in complacency. As we grew, however, our comfort was penetrated by events too troubling to dismiss (As quoted in Albert & Albert, 1984, p. 176).

Among the events too troubling to dismiss were racial injustice, the build-up of the military-industrial complex, and the systematic attempts to bring numbing conformity through education. During the 1960s, women’s issues were often left unnamed in the literature of struggles for recognition (Evans, 1980). According to Brown (1993) and Swedlow (1993), both the civil rights movement and the student movements did not feature women within their leadership or women’s issues on their agendas (King, 1987). In 1969, the Redstocking Manifesto expressed feminist concern about mainstream American society and the movements seeking recognition:

We cannot rely on existing ideologies, as they are all products of male supremacist culture. We question every generalization and accept none that are not confirmed by our experience. Our chief take at present is to develop female class consciousness through sharing experience and publicly exposing the sexist foundation of all our institutions. Consciousness-raising is not “therapy,” which implies the existence of individual solutions and falsely assumes that the male-female relationship is purely personal, but the only method by which we can ensure that our program for liberation is based on the concrete realities of our lives (As quoted in Shreeve, 1989, p. 14).

These demands for recognition of difference have evolved, merged, and splintered during the last 30 years and now mobilize groups under the banners of ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality (Aronowitz, 1996). This evolving political imagination centers on notions of identity, difference, cultural domination, and recognition that set the agendas for both theory and action in cultural and political arenas. The issues articulated in the early documents of these movements—fairness, representation, access, social structures, contradictions between rhetoric and practice, violent repression, hierarchies of values, normality, old solutions that are really problems, freedom—still permeate these social struggles and harness the energies of social scientists and workers (Calhoun, 1995). Within this ethos, literacy researchers and educators have produced a variety of responses to the ways in which the struggles for recognition have cut across schooling and language practices.
Responses to difference within literacy education

Struggles for the recognition of marginalized groups in schools translated their social agendas to classroom contexts (Bennet & LeCompte, 1990). To begin, most groups acknowledged the potential benefits of schooling, but they argued that those benefits, like all other social values, were not distributed equally among U.S. citizens. In fact, some maintained that schools were used primarily to reproduce the social status quo in the U.S. (e.g., Bowles & Gintus, 1976). Marginalized groups demanded access to schools, to the preferred curriculum, and to full participation during lessons. Once admitted to these privileged spots they asked for reasonable treatment, fair according to their needs (Banks, 1995). They sought to change the preferred curriculum so that they might find themselves within it and to expand the range of normal values, ideas, and behaviors to include cultural practices other than European.

A first step in that direction would acknowledge that marginalized groups had cultures, languages, and moral codes that were viable social practices, even for school classrooms (Nieto, 1992). Each group articulated these demands differently but forcefully. All hoped for changes in policy, if not the structures of schooling, and many sought freedom for themselves and their children within classrooms. That is, they hoped to participate in setting the options and practices available in literacy programs, and then to choose among those alternatives (Levine, 1996). Since these demands struck at the traditional values, texts, teaching practices, policies, and rationale of schooling and literacy education, all those interested in schools were forced to respond. Because the struggles for recognition in literacy programs sought to redistribute the benefits of schooling more equitably, potentially reordering power relations in the future, all responses were and are essentially political. Those responses can be grouped loosely by political stances.

Conservative

Conservatism has always been reactive, a response to political movements that conservatives fear and want to halt. Modern conservatism was born in opposition to the French Revolution and much of the Enlightenment (Hobsbawn, 1969). The basic tenets of conservatism are property, class, tradition, courts of law based on these notions, and spiritual hierarchies associated with organized religion. Any movement that proposes innovation is to be opposed on principle. In The Conservative Mind, Russell Kirk (1953) listed six canons of conservative thought: (a) belief that a divine intent rules society as well as conscience, (b) affection for the traditional life, (c) conviction that civilized society requires hierarchies and classes, (d) persuasion that property and freedom are inseparable, (e) faith in prescription, and (f) recognition that change and reform are not identical.

Previously, even in America, the structure of society had consisted of a hierarchy of personal and local allegiances—man to master, apprentice to preceptor, householder to parish or town, constituent to representative, son to father, communicant to church. This network of personal relationships and local decencies was brushed aside by items in that catalogue of progress which school children memorize (Kirk, 1953, p. 27).

After the 1960s, conservatives understood marginalized groups' struggles for recognition as attempts to brush aside all six canons of conservative thought and to provide brooms for all U.S. citizens through schooling. Conservative opposition took a four-pronged approach: (a) proposed changes to literacy curriculum were a form of secular humanism, (b) equal access to schooling and equal treatment in schools denied the natural difference among races and classes, (c) inclusion of non-Western cultural practices lowered cultural standards and limited communication, and (d) federal action to enforce social changes in schools violated statutes of local control of schools (Sowell, 1986). Echoing Murray's (1960) charge that schooling was the main agency of secular religion in the U.S., conservatives charged that struggles for recognition of marginalized groups pushed schooling even further from established formal religion and its traditional Christian moorings (LaHaye, 1983). Attempts by textbook publishers and educators to increase the representation of marginalized groups within textbooks and library texts were met with strident opposition from conservatives who engaged in local and national censorship battles within the courts (Dell'Antore, 1992). Vinz (1986) reported a National Institute of Education study that concluded that school textbooks are antireligious, antipatriotic, and antifamily, offering conservatives ammunition for an assault on multicultural curricula.

Indeed, conservatives do not wish to deny or ignore difference between themselves and marginalized groups. Rather, they maintain that their justifications for different treatments of the poor, racial minorities, and women are based on these natural differences. In The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life, Herrnstein and Murray (1994) offered a conservative defense of traditional class and racial hierarchies. Their argument was that endowments of intelligence differ among rich and poor and whites and blacks. Moreover, these endowments are largely genetic, and therefore, there is little that can be done about these differences. Efforts to melio-
rate them through compensatory schooling, affirmative action, and social welfare programs were and are wrong-headed because they will exclude some worthy people and include some undeserving. Although they argue that people should be treated as individuals and not group members, they base their book on group data and inform the public that group differences are to be expected.

Nothing seems more fearsome to many commentators than the possibility that ethnic and race differences have any genetic component at all. This belief is a fundamental error. Even if the differences between races were entire genetic (which they surely are not), it should make no practical difference in how individuals deal with each other. The real danger is that the elite wisdom on ethnic differences—that such differences cannot exist—will shift to opposite and equally unjustified extremes (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994, p. 270).

Herrnstein and Murray (1994) argued that the unequal natural endowments of intelligence drive traditional social life. These endowments accounted for the meritocracy within U.S. democracy that ensures individual freedom to participate in the economic and political life. Some enjoy plenty because they are smarter, others suffer because they are not. This is nature, and “the egalitarian ideal of contemporary political theory underestimates the importance of the differences that separate human beings. It fails to come to grips with human variation” (p. 532). In order to come to grips with these fundamental variations, many social programs should come to an abrupt end—welfare, affirmative action, even compensatory schooling. Welfare breeds dependency, affirmative action pushes members of marginalized groups beyond their levels of competence, and compensatory schooling retards the intelligent and frustrates the unintelligent. “For many people, there is nothing they can learn that will repay the cost of the teaching” (p. 520).

Conservatives argue that before the struggles for recognition forced the misguided utopian promises that education could improve on nature, schools served society well. They were places where individuals learned to sort themselves within the natural order. To restore natural order to schooling, programs designed to mollerate inequalities—Head Start, Title I, and Title IX—should be cut and the newly available funds should be used to extend the education of the gifted. According to conservatives, literacy education should be leveled hierarchically by difficulty from functional skills in reading and writing (phonics, grammar, and spelling taught in traditional ways, and a basic fact curriculum to aid communication) to sophisticated practices of literary and philosophical criticism. Such curricular adjustments would enable students and their parents to decide when to stop school attendance in order to fill an appropriate social role. While students are in school—especially the brighter ones who push on to the next level—they should not succumb to the demands to expand the curriculum in order to accommodate popular cultures.

The only serious solution is the one that is almost universally rejected: the good old Great Books approach, in which a liberal education means reading certain generally recognized classic texts, just reading them, letting them dictate what the questions are and the method of approaching them—not forcing them into categories we make up, not treating them as historical products, but trying to read them as their authors wished them to be read (Bloom, 1987, p. 344).

Neoconservative

The name, if not the notion, of neoconservatism came in reaction to the 1960s struggles for recognition. The Left in the U.S. split into at least two groups over the issue of integrating labor unions and the antiwar movement—one group embraced the new politics (which will be discussed later in this article) and the other became what Michael Harrington, then editor of Dissent, called neoconservatives. Kristol (1983) explained, “neoconservatism is a current of thought emerging out of the academic-intellectual world and provoked by disillusionment with contemporary liberalism” (p. 75). Typically, this dissatisfaction arose because the way of life of the left seemed to demand so many forms of false consciousness and, above all, a loathing for the American system” (Novak, 1986, p. 47). According to neoconservatives, the new left did not offer a coherent set of goals that could be fought for or negotiated, but rather the new left’s “politics of confrontation is not really about the satisfying of grievances but the destruction of authority itself” (Bell & Kristol, 1968, p. xi).

Although neoconservatives lack a manifesto or a platform, they share a unifying practice—a spirited defense of the status quo. That defense requires that they borrow ideas from both liberals and conservatives. Like liberals, neoconservatives engage capitalism as a central tenet of democracy, ensuring more than just the protection of property. Capitalism also is considered the guarantor of individual rights to accumulate property freely—thus, theoretically accounting for class mobility. Recognizing the current cultural realities of the U.S. population and the harsh nature of capitalism, neoconservatives favor a reduced, but operative, welfare state. They agree with conservatives that America needs a strong national defense against communism and religious and political terrorists. Moreover, they adopt conservative notions of the transcendent nature of European and
Christian values as the basis for civil society and personal character. Gerson (1996) explained:

While neoconservatism rejects the liberal notion that a society of separate individuals pursuing their interests and following their desires will somehow lead to the common good, neoconservatism insists on the liberal idea that involuntary characteristics such as race, rank, and station should never restrain an individual. Likewise, while neoconservatism rejects the traditional conservative emphasis on the authority of tradition and glorification of the past, it shares conservative concerns with order, continuity and community (p. 8).

Neoconservatives’ orientation toward the present and their willingness to entertain traditionally liberal and conservative thoughts simultaneously led conservative Russell Kirk to remark that “the neoconservatives are often clever, but seldom wise” (1988, p. 4).

Neoconservatives consider schooling to be an essential weapon in the defense of the status quo because “it involves above all the image of man into which we should like to see the child mature” (Kristol, 1958, p. 371). Neoconservatives wade forcefully into the conservative/liberal debate over the culture wars on the university campus, siding clearly with conservatives because they equate multiculturalism with a moral relativism and moral relativism with disaster (see Himmelfarb, 1994; Kimball, 1990). The absence of a clear moral code in schooling and society, they argue, jeopardizes the safety of property and civil order. As William Bennett explained, “Unless those exploring social pathologies of the last thirty years are reversed, they will lead to the decline and perhaps even to the fall of the American republic” (1994a, p. 8).

Those social pathologies are the programs and cultural practices promoted by the struggles for recognition during the 1960s. This imperative to stop the spread of moral relativism sets the neoconservative agenda in foreign and domestic affairs as well as in schools.

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 (Wilson, 1995, p. 22).

To induce virtuous action, neoconservatives recommend moral literacy—the ability to read alphabetic texts and live according to a proscribed set of virtues, to write virtuous texts and lives in order to bring Western notions of civility to public life, and to provide virtuous texts and acts for others to read and emulate. Although many neoconservatives are involved in projects to develop moral literacy, the most well known is William J. Bennett, former Secretary of Education during the Reagan administration, former drug czar during the Bush administration, and currently a distinguished fellow at the Heritage Foundation. Bennett’s first efforts on behalf of moral education were directed at schooling. As Secretary of Education, he set his agenda “to get clear answers to the fundamental questions about education: What should children know? And how can they learn it?” (1984, p. 2). Standing in the way of clear thinking on these matters was an “infusion of diversity in schools” and a “surfeit of confusion, bureaucratic thinking, and community apathy” (p. 3). Later, in First Lessons (1986), he wrote:

Although most teachers seek to reinforce good character in their students by teaching honesty, industry, loyalty, self-respect, and other virtues, their presentation of certain issues may yet be clouded by foolish “value-free” educational theories and by their perceptions of conflict among value systems represented in their students’ diverse backgrounds (p. 17).

In James Madison Elementary School, A Curriculum for American Schools (1988), he concluded that what was needed was a return to “time-tested principles of good education” (p. 9). Those principles included skill lessons in phonics, grammar, spelling, memorization of facts, and clear communication about the meaning of text. Each principle was important as much for the discipline of mind and body it instilled as for the knowledge the lessons should develop. After leaving government service, Bennett began to publish anthologies of moral tales to induce virtue and “continue the task of preserving the principles, the ideals, and notions of goodness and greatness we hold dear” (1994b, p. 12). Those tales are to be “drawn from the corpus of Western Civilization, that American school children, once upon a time, knew by heart” (p. 15).

Neoconservatives see the school and literacy education as the main battleground in the struggle to preserve the status quo. Equal access to schooling affords teachers the opportunities to induce virtue within all communities and cultures across the U.S. Accordingly, colleges of education and educational bureaucracies must be reformed in order to prepare teachers to overcome the moral relativism of everyday society so that they can provide children and their families with good moral models. Once reformed around the corpus of Western civilization, educators must employ the time-tested principles of good ed-
ucation to instill moral literacy as a common means of communication among all U.S. citizens. This education will keep order among cultural groups and allow each group to explore itself without risk to others.

Neoliberal

If neoconservatives are liberals who took a critical look at liberalism and decided to become conservatives, neoliberals are liberals who took the same look and decided to retain liberal goals but to abandon some of its strategies (Peters, 1983). Although neoliberals support individual liberty, justice, and fairness, they no longer automatically favor unions and big government or oppose the military and big business. "Indeed, in our search for solutions that work, we have come to distrust all automatic responses, liberal and conservative" (Peters, 1983, p. 21). The failure of those automatic responses to provide security, prosperity, and hope has left the U.S. (and the world) in economic and social crises (Rothenberg, 1984). According to neoliberals, international struggles for recognition created a world in which specialized markets desire products to fit specific needs. Economies based on large corporations engaging in mass production can no longer meet the challenges posed by this new world order (Reich, 1987). The transition of the U.S. economy from mass production to one that can quickly reorganize itself has unsettled traditional assumptions about work, government, and community. Neoliberals point toward rising crime rates, a shrinking middle class, and the abandonment of cities as some of the unfortunate social consequences caused by U.S. citizens' reluctance to change their assumptions and reorder their lives so that the U.S. can compete in a global economy.

A major tenet in neoliberal pragmatic economics is the readiness of the U.S. workforce to meet the demands of a global economy (Fowler, 1995). Neoliberals maintain that too few U.S. citizens are ready, willing, or able to retrain themselves periodically in order to supply the workers needed by business for flexible production. Rather, too many court disaster by continuing to live according to out-of-date assumptions about the world and their places in it (Smith & Scholl, 1995). To overcome this problem, neoliberals propose that everyone should continuously develop his or her workskills in order to obtain the high-skill/high-wage jobs that currently remain unfilled and presently will emerge in U.S. businesses (Smith, 1995). As Ray Marshall (former Secretary of Labor) and Mark Tucker (President of the Center for the Economy and Education) explained, the main obstacle to the development of human capital is schooling in the U.S.:

- In the first part of this century, we adopted the principles of mass-producing low-quality education to create a low-skill workforce for mass production industry. Building on this principle, our education and business systems became tightly linked, developing into a single system that brilliantly capitalized on our advantages and enabled us to create the most powerful economy and the largest middle class the world has ever seen. But most of the competitive advantages enjoyed at the beginning of the century had faded by mid-century, and advances in technology during and after the war slowly altered the structure of the domestic and world economy in ways that turned these principles of American business and school organization into liabilities rather than assets (Marshall & Tucker, 1992, p. 17).

Most of the school reform activity since the A Nation at Risk report reflects a neoliberal agenda (McCullum-Clark, 1995). Throughout the mid-1980s, neoliberals backed by philanthropic organizations negotiated and brokered consensus concerning the need for school reform and consequent changes in teacher education, culminating in the development of the America 2000 educational initiative and its evolution through the Clinton administration. Central to that policy was the development of national curriculum standards and examinations to increase the general readiness of workers in the U.S. for employment. Those standards were to include "specification of content—what students should know and be able to do—and the level of performance that students are expected to attain—how good is good enough" (National Council of Education Standards and Testing, 1991, p. 3). Secretary of Education Richard Riley and CEO of the Corporation for National Service Harris Wofford presented the centrality of literacy standards:

- Literacy can help give people the tools to make the most of their potential and prepare them for the 21st century, when a fully literate work force will be crucial to our strength as a nation. It is in the interests of all of us to do all we can to ensure the reading success of every young child by the end of the third grade. (Riley & Wofford, 1997)

Although the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards began work on developing assessment measures for national certification of English language arts teachers earlier (Penn & Petrosky, 1992), the work on national curricular standards did not begin until October 1993 when the U.S. Department of Education announced the award of a US$18 million grant to the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois (CSR), the International Reading Association (IRA), and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Miles Myers, then Executive Director of the NCTE, presented the neoliberal agenda of this group succinctly: "The standards documents may be used to launch a new kind of civil-rights movement focused on educational opportunity and, as a result, the present standards move-
ment may begin to have a federal and national character quite different from past standards movements" (Myers, 1994, p 151) "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" (Miles Myers, as quoted in Woo, 1996) Halfway through with the contract, the federal government withdrew its financial support for the CSR/IRA/NCTE standards project, citing that it was not making "expected progress" (Diegmuller, 1994, p 9) Embarrassed but unwilling to quit, the IRA and NCTE boards voted to fund the second half of the project by themselves. English language arts standards were published in March of 1996 to a less than rousing reception from the government and press "That report contains very vague and very general statements that don’t tell parents or students what is important to learn and don’t tell teachers what is important to teach and when" (Michael Cohen, Senior Advisor to the U.S. Education Secretary, as quoted in The New York Times, 1996, A12)

To help build a workforce according to neoliberal specifications, many state education departments have continued the work on English language arts standards. For example, New York State mandated that all high school graduates will take and pass Regents examinations in four core subjects Texas adopted a curriculum that specified instructional methods and threatened to withdraw funding from schools and colleges of education that did not comply. California banned curricula that it had mandated in 1987, forbade state funds to be used for teachers’ professional development that advocated the banned curriculum, and required that all school instruction be delivered in English only. Each of these actions has a neoliberal agenda to enable all citizens (even those who struggle for recognition) to develop their human capital in order to fulfill the nation’s economic destiny.

Liberal

Liberalism is a modern political philosophy, beginning during the Renaissance and Reformation and acquiring firmer roots during the Enlightenment (Hobsbawm, 1969) Although not easily reducible to a set of general propositions, liberalism springs from a vision of society as crucially composed of individuals and accepts their liberty as the primary social good (Hobbes, 1667; Locke, 1952; Mill, 1965) This liberty is often defined as free political institutions, religious practices, and intellectual and artistic expression (Hayek, 1960) Liberal government is primarily developed to preserve rather than inhibit those individual freedoms. During the 19th century, liberals sought limits on government actions in economic and social matters, believing that free markets and free trade of commodities and ideas would protect property and secure rights for all citizens. Changing economic and political patterns of the 20th century demanded a reappraisal of liberalism’s laissez-faire assumptions (Keynes, 1936) For example, the Great Depression required liberals to propose the New Deal, including the Social Security Act of 1935 (which offered federal income guarantees, aid to families with dependent children, and support for unemployment insurance as well as aid to banks and businesses), and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (which finally outlawed child labor in factories and sanctioned a 40-hour work week, as well as gave aid to banks and businesses)

In response to the struggles for recognition during the 1960s, U.S. liberals negotiated the Great Society—targeted laws, federal and state policies, and governmental agencies to establish, reafﬁrm, and then maintain these rights of all citizens (Rotty, 1998) For example, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (which ensured federal protection on site for minority voters), and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (which authorized remedial instructional help for the poor and equal opportunities for women in academics and athletics) were liberal attempts to include the disenfranchised in civic life without making any fundamental changes to the U.S. basic economic, political, or social systems.

In When Work Disappears, sociologist William Julius Wilson decried the havoc that 30 years of conservative, neoconservative, and neoliberal governments have wreaked on the liberal agenda of the middle third of the 20th century:

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 poor. High levels of joblessness, growing wage inequality, and consequent social problems 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" (1996, p 209)

Wilson offered short-term and long-term liberal alternatives to the illiberal social projects of the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations. Among the short-term ones, he listed continued welfare and job programs, expanded Medicare, and continuation of earned income credits. He applauded the neoliberal attention to educational standards as a long-term solution; however, he quotes Linda Darling-Hammond to point this attention in a more liberal direction. "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 curriculum resources, and dysfunctional school structures?" (1994, p 480) In a report read before a Senate
subcommittee on poverty and minority rights, Rotberg and Harvey explained how these liberal educational concerns overlap:

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 all students (1995, p 52).

Rotberg and Harvey's quotation marks around the word best mark the vigorous debate over the meaning of that word in its educational context. For liberals, the criterion for determining best has always been the same—science (House, 1978). In order to judge the relative merits of any endeavor the outcomes must be measured and compared, and the century-long liberal tradition of applying scientific methods to improve instructional practices in reading education continued unabated during the struggles for recognition (Shannon, 1989). The First-Grade Studies (Bond & Dykstra, 1967), mastery learning (Block & Burns, 1974), teacher effectiveness (Brophy & Good, 1984), and best practices studies (Allington, Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 1997) all sought to discover generalized best methods for teaching reading in order to make them available to all students.

Yet the struggles for recognition called this generalizing into question, suggesting that liberal science has overlooked issues of context, culture, and change in their efforts to determine best practices (Lather, 1991; McCarthy & Crichtow, 1993). By ignoring these essential elements, liberals have in fact perpetuated the cultural problems they sought to eliminate (Fraser, 1997). These social challenges have forced liberals to rethink most of their foundational assumptions—their ideas of laissez-faire capitalism, and even the definition of science—and to apply new ideas and methods to the pursuit of ensuring the educational rights of newly enfranchised citizens.

Often employing ethnographic, phenomenological, or other qualitative methods of research, many liberals explored learning to read and write from multiple vantage points (Beach, Green, Kamil, & Shanahan, 1992). Some found schoolwide and classroom barriers to the development of effective practices for all students. For example, Rist (1970) reported that tracking students in ability groups had more to do with teachers' cultural bias than with individual ability. Once assigned to lower ability groups, minority and poor students received differential treatment such as more controlling teacher feedback (e.g., Eder, 1981), fewer opportunities to read (e.g., Allington, 1977), and too difficult materials and tasks (e.g., Gambrell, Wilson, & Ganetz, 1981), all of which contributed to self-fulfilling prophesies about low school achievement among poor and minority students. Liberal recommendations to ensure fair treatment within classroom reading programs abound (see Barr, Kamil, Mosenthal, & Pearson, 1991; Pearson, Barr, Kamil, & Mosenthal, 1981).

Curricular materials and practices also received liberal scrutiny. Studies questioned the Western and patriarchal themes that permeated reading textbooks and the literature shared with students, seeking to expand the number of cultures and cultural practices sanctioned by the official knowledge of schooling (Sims-Bishop, 1982; Sleeter & Grant, 1991; Taxel, 1978). Accepted school standards of language, literacy, and thought were challenged as the logic and validity of alternatives were demonstrated and calls for instructional accommodation became more numerous (see Bloome, 1987). First among those accommodations was a demand to end the use of culturally biased mental and achievement tests in educational decision making (Ogbu, 1974). Liberal researchers asked teachers to learn about the multiple ways in which individuals and groups used language and literacy to meet their daily needs and to bring that new knowledge to bear on their teaching (see Banks & Banks, 1995). By using relevant topics and cultural practices, liberal educators could ease marginalized groups toward the academic mainstream, which they believe will eventually move them toward the social and economic mainstream. These adjustments in the materials and teaching of reading and writing were and are intended to distribute the benefits of schooling, and those of society, more equitably to all students regardless of race, class, or gender.

Radical democratic

Radical democrats begin with the premise that 20th-century attempts at democracy have failed (Trend, 1996). That is, self-labeled democratic nations have been unsuccessful in securing universal participation in civic life. In the United States, for example, only half of those eligible to vote do so in national elections; many individuals and groups feel alienated from civic life even at a local level; and wealth subverts efforts to engage the alienated Collectivist attempts to overcome the limits of liberal democracy, often through single-party systems, have been unable to protect individual rights of freedom to as they attempted to construct societies to ensure universal rights of freedom from want. Radical democrats argue that these failures are predictable based upon the inability of conservatives, liberals, and collectivists to take up issues of diversity productively (Marable, 1992): "What we share and what makes us fellow citizens in a liberal democratic regime is not a substantive idea of the good, but a set of
political principles specific to such a tradition: the principles of freedom and equality for all (Mouffe, 1993, p. 65) Although conservatives, neoconservatives, neoliberalists, and liberals claim their positions to be founded on principles of freedom and equality, their respective visions of the good force them to promote differing definitions of freedom and equality and to demand consensus about visions and definitions on their terms alone. To the contrary, radical democrats suggest that democratic politics require these adversarial relations among social actors as they advocate their interpretation and their preferred social identities:

It is the tension between consensus—on the values—and dissensus—on the interpretation—that makes possible the agonistic dynamics of pluralist democracy. This is why its survival depends on the possibility of forming collective political identities around clearly differentiated positions and the choice among real alternatives (Mouffe, 1995, p 107)

Many members of marginalized groups reject the identities that traditional U.S. ideologies afford them (Benhabib, 1992, Hooks, 1994) My opening example was offered to portray this point; conservatives (and neoconservatives) reject metaphorically Ali’s right to name himself Instead they offer him (and us) rather fixed identities, with limited possibilities for him (and us) to articulate what possible life choices might be brought into existence or to choose among those currently available These limits deter our interests in participating in civic life, whether local or at a distance, because either consciously or unconsciously we understand the limits of our freedom and the absence of equality within these ideological conditions Of course, our alienation leaves traditions, hierarchies, and power relations unchanged and little challenged, which, as I have explained, is the conservative agenda, their definition of the good Liberals (both old and new) might encourage Ali (and us) to call himself whatever he likes, just as long as he does (and we do) his (our) naming within unaltered social, economic, and political structures Despite outward appearances of difference (a more humane basis to those structures), the consequences of liberalism are much the same as conservatism, with more cultural freedom possible Perhaps this explains why some critics find so little difference in U.S. political positions and choices:

The liberal version of multiculturalism is premised on a one-sidedly, positive understanding of difference It celebrates difference uncritically while failing to interrogate its relation to inequality Like American pluralism, the tradition from which it descends, it proceeds—contrary to fact—as if United States society contained no class divisions or other deep-seated structural injustices, as if its political-economy were basically just, as if its various constituent groups were socially equal Thus, it treats difference as pertaining exclusively to culture. The result is to divorce questions of difference from material inequality, power differentials among groups, and systemic relations of dominance and subordination (Travers, 1996, p 206)

For democracy to work, radical democrats argue, individuals must recognize that their identities are multiple and fluid (Bachrach & Barlow, 1992) Ali is slave, Muslim, champion, conscientious objector, American patriot, world citizen, self-promoter, and selfless volunteer In fact, we are all members of many social groups that influence our thoughts, actions, and values in substantial ways, and we vary our hierarchical arrangements of those memberships according to circumstance and intentions Beyond that recognition, citizens must learn to use this power to force clear articulations of positions by forming coalitions to enact their shared concerns (Stone, 1994) Democracy, then, hinges on the development of individuals’ identities that are committed to the values of freedom and equality (blended with the values of their other group memberships) and to active participation in civic life Although this identity of democratic citizenship cannot be fully specified, it requires at least three elements: reflexive agency, the will to act, and the ability to make room for the adversary

Reflexive agency invites citizens to evaluate the world in terms of their intentions and values and, at the same time, to evaluate those intentions and to reflect upon those values In this way citizens take inventory of their identities, their values, their motives, and their actions, investigate the sources of those parts of themselves, and make choices about which ones they hope to enhance and which they hope to diminish

The will to act, which for many has been diverted from public life to private matters, must be redirected through individuals’ sociological imagination—recognition that their apparently private matters are really connected to public issues because their problems are shared by many As individuals become aware of the political possibilities of their multiple and fluid identities and the real opportunities to form larger, more effective coalitions for accomplishing goals shared across social groups, the will to act in civic life increases in likelihood Reflexive agency ensures that coalitions will not become fixed power blocks as basic and secondary assumptions for action are consistently scrutinized.

Because those identities are not fixed and future intersections of values cannot be predetermined, citizens begin to recognize the need to respect the positions of their adversaries—not to the point of agreement, certainly, but enough to recognize commitment to the shared principles of freedom and equality The limits on this re-
spect are set by individuals' and groups' commitment to those principles. Anyone rejecting freedom and equality outright stands outside the democratic process and, therefore, becomes the legitimate object of democratic scorn. "Adversaries will fight about the interpretation and the ranking of values, but their common allegiance to the values that constitute the liberal democratic form of life creates a bond of solidarity that expresses their belonging to the common "we"" (Mouffe, 1995, p. 107).

Radical democrats seek to identify and establish the social conditions that produce democratic citizenship. Similar to other ideological positions attempting to influence an individual's construction of his or her identity, schooling and literacy education figure prominently within radical democratic explorations. Radical democrats begin with critiques of the major works and ideas on education offered by conservatives (see Kimchieloe, Steinberg, & Gresson, 1996, concerning Herrnstein & Murray's The Bell Curve, 1994), neoconservatives (see Greer & Kohl, 1995, on Bennett's The Book of Virtues, 1994b), neoliberals (see Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996, on their consideration of economic management techniques), and liberals (see Aronowitz, 1988, for a critique of science as the dominant form of human knowledge). Fundamental to each of these critiques are the ways in which these seminal works and ideas direct educators to consider differences among students. Tracking, core curriculum, and didactic moral training seek to segment, erase, and contain difference in schools. Standardization of curriculum and assessment, mainstream multicultural education, and identification of best methods and their distribution from good to failing schools divorce issues of cultural difference from social relations and social structures. Even in the best of circumstances, then, contemporary schools' treatment of difference privileges freedom over equality.

We need, therefore, to create a new political culture in which we are encouraged to interrogate the received consensus of American values and to resist hegemonized approaches to ethnic diversity whose narrative telos is necessarily linked to a politics of premature and uncritical unity, consensus, and agreement, to the logic of liberal individualism, to political appeasement, to a stratified and hierarchically ordered polity. For a democracy of consensus is a democracy of neutrality in which undemocratic practices at the level of daily life go depressingly unquestioned and unchallenged (McLaren, 1997, p. 296).

During the 1990s, literacy researchers and educators have used the tenets of radical democracy in order to interrogate conservative and liberal literacy programs and research. Macedo (1994) challenged what it is that every U.S. citizen should know. Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) demonstrated who is attempting to close those citizens' minds. Coles (1998) defined the limits of neoliberal national literacy policies. Willis and Harris (1997) reminded liberals that the First-Grade Studies ignored cultural difference. Dudley-Marling and Murphy (1997) questioned the goal of Reading Recovery to return recovered children to traditional classroom settings. Edelsky (1994) tweaked whole language for its neglect of power relations in and out of schools. Delpit (1995) blasted progressive educators for not teaching other people's children the codes of power. Taylor (1997) argued that family literacy has many different paths and outcomes beside readiness to do well in traditional primary school grades.

In each case, the critics ask their peers to acknowledge the limits of current considerations of difference and the ways in which our socially constructed structures constrict democratic thoughts and actions within research and teaching. They implore literacy researchers and educators to take past and ongoing struggles for recognition more seriously and to use their sociological imaginations to envision different structures and practices—ones that are more likely to result in a better balance between freedom and equality for all U.S. citizens.

Several literacy researchers offer examples of how these steps might be taken. Judith Solsken (1993) described how her sociological imagination developed as her efforts to affirm liberal approaches to teaching were complicated by her recognition that the apparently personal tensions that young students experienced while learning to read and write were connected to larger public issues beyond the classroom and school. Observing 13 white middle-class children in kindergarten and following four through the end of second grade, Solsken connected children's individual behaviors in and out of the classroom with the ongoing negotiations of social relations surrounding issues of gender and class in the school, the community, and across the nation. Her study exposed the myth that middle-class communities are composed of homogeneous groups as children struggled with competing adult ambiguities about literacy—whether reading is a female or an ungendered activity, learning is work or play, and valuing should be set at home or school.

"Classroom pedagogical practices and changing social relations allowed new ways of managing old tensions and also introduced new tensions as well, but did not alter children's basic investments in literacy to any appreciable extent" (Solsken, 1993, p. 218). That is, despite the best of intentions among teachers and parents, young children must negotiate their identities as a family members, student, male or female, literate beings, and child within a storm of contradictory messages as they struggle to make a coherent whole of it all. Solsken sought
reflexive agency as the basis of literacy education right from the start. She concluded:

Only by reconceptualizing literacy in our research and teaching as an action through which people define themselves and construct their relations with other people can we fully understand what is happening in literacy instruction and make informed ethical choices about the social worlds we construct together inside and outside our families and schools (p. 219)

In a series of studies, Luis Moll and associates (Moll & Diaz, 1987; Moll et al., 1990; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzales, 1992) attempted to blur the boundaries between school and community within working-class Mexican neighborhoods in Tucson, Arizona. Rejecting "the prevailing and accepted perceptions of working-class families as somehow disorganized socially and deficient intellectually" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 134), the researchers designed a four-part study agenda: (a) an ethnographic analysis of household dynamics within the community, (b) an examination of ongoing instructional practices in the community school classrooms, (c) an after-school study group in which university-based and teacher research teams shared data, and (d) a curriculum development project based on the findings of the studies. Within the households and across the community, the researchers found a wealth of knowledge and pedagogies, which community members used to share and exchange resources in order to enhance individual households' chances of survival and relative prosperity. Within these networks, individuals assumed multiple identities as parents, teachers, workers, budget managers, mechanics, medics, gardeners, worshipers, etc. During the study, teachers learned to tap into these networks and the funds of knowledge they possess in order to extend school classrooms into the community and, moreover, to transform the language and literacy learning in the school. Such projects embed the struggles for recognition within the development of democratic citizenship, as former adversaries collaborate to enhance their own and students' feelings of agency and connection to civic life surrounding schools.

Patricia Enciso (1998) questioned literacy educators' role in the construction and maintenance of the already given self for preadolescent girls. She wrote, "I am committed to making visible those reading practices that can be girl-destroying, while I am also committed to finding new pedagogies that might make it possible for girls to 'author' their own reading and their own lives" (p. 43). Employing The Symbolic Representation Interview (SRI), a series of artistic and dialogic activities that seek to uncover how readers understand the ways in which texts position them and how they position themselves while reading favorite stories, Enciso interpreted how four girls negotiate their identities as good or bad girls in a patriarchal school environment, affirm their commitment to their social group, and construct meaning about text and life relationships posed for them in *Sweet Valley Twins: Best Friends* (Pascal, 1986). During the interview, the girls affirm and interrogate their certainties about themselves as they describe their associations with story characters and their real and fictional associations with others. As a result of this pedagogy, they open up new possibilities for themselves as readers and authors of themselves. "The SRI creates a sanctioned place that makes possible the redefinition of being and becoming a girl: such a place, and its related questions of positioning, must become part of a literature pedagogy if we want to go beyond simply espousing ideologies of emancipation and feminism" (p. 61).

The definitions of that space come in many forms. In a series of studies, Jabari Mahiri (1996, 1997, 1998; Mahiri & Sabbo, 1996) compares adolescent African Americans' voluntary efforts to describe and mediate their lives outside the classroom with the formal literacy curriculum of their schooling. Through interviews and textual analyses, Mahiri identified the considerable skill and complex themes that students demonstrate in their voluntary writing and their fear of and disrespect for in-class writing assignments. He observed that students use voluntary "writing not as mirrors but as lenses to view and reflect on their lives" (1997, p. 75).

In calling for relevant topics in the English classroom, Mahiri suggested that we acknowledge that students produce (not merely consume) knowledge and meaning when they willingly engage in reading and writing print and, perhaps, other media as well. That knowledge and meaning can become the center of the English curriculum—students demonstrate a dialectical relationship between reflexive agency and the will to act when analyzing their understandings of their lives through popular culture, probing the ways in which they position themselves and how they are positioned by others, and connecting their lives to social structures within and beyond their communities.

Mahiri saw the beginnings of the production of countertexts to the given representations of black youth culture within their voluntary writings. He concludes that under appropriate conditions students could be taught to deepen their analyses with help from teachers who also use their literacies in these ways.

If Linda Brodkey's (1996) report is representative, then few teachers use their literacies as Mahiri had hoped. Working with prospective adult literacy teachers, Brodkey arranged a correspondence between adults participating in her class and adults participating in an adult literacy class. In learning to read the letters exchanged,
Brodkey noticed that the teachers distanced and then alienated themselves from their correspondents because the topics raised seemed too different, too personal, and too difficult to address in public writing. Teachers' attempts to limit the letters to safe topics proved unsuccessful because their partners continued to display their reasons for learning to read and write in each exchange. That is, they hoped to come to grips with basic issues of their lives through print. Brodkey concluded:

The teachers in this study are energetic and inventive practitioners committed to universal education. In their writing, however, that commitment manifests itself in an approach to teaching and learning that many educators share in this country, a view that the classroom is a separate world of its own, in which teachers and students relate to one another undistracted by the classism, racism, and sexism that rage outside the classroom. What is ultimately challenged is the ideology that class and, by extension, race and gender differences are present in American society but absent from American classrooms (p. 104)

**Final words**

If we listen, we can hear the sounds of past struggles for recognition within the voices of the young and not so young in these studies. The African American adolescents continue to speak to the colonization of their communities as SNCC explained in their statements of the 1960s. Mahini implied that at least some of the violence in those communities echoes the Black Panther manifesto about oppression. The girls reading *Sweet Valley Twins* still find their needs largely unaddressed and misdirected within the patriarchal structures of school and reading instruction. Solsken's young children already demonstrate this tension of gendered systems at home and school. The communities of Tucson and the women in the adult education class ask the modern equivalent of "what's my name?" in their dealings with teachers. Some educators and researchers listen; others do not.

During our lifetimes, these voices have been louder or softer, but they have been ever present. They have negotiated laws and policies to protect against social and political discrimination, although as William Julius Wilson (1996) said, these laws and policies have been poorly enforced for the last 25 years. When my father and I watched Ali give notice that things were to change, we lived in the midst of shared relative economic prosperity that had not been seen before, nor has it been seen since. The poverty level was below 10% and falling, and more Americans seemed willing to consider both freedom and equality (Sklar, 1995). The majority of voters at that time had experienced the Great Depression and believed that governments should be responsible ultimately for the welfare of their citizens (Bellah, 1996). The remission of the need for struggles for redistribution of wealth during the 1960s afforded social space in which struggles for recognition could occupy central positions in progressive politics.

Now, the poverty level is 16% nationally and rising, with the official poverty line for family income drawn woefully too low (Blank, 1997). Within the tyranny of global capitalism, more and more U.S. workers are downsized to much less secure economic positions (Greider, 1997). The gap between rich and poor is widening to its greatest distance in our history. Ten percent of U.S. citizens own two thirds of the nation's wealth (Bartlett & Steele, 1996). Income levels of poor, working class, and nearly all middle class families have declined steadily since 1973, and this drop would be more steep if not for women entering the workforce in great numbers.

At the turn of the last century a similar economic reality was as readily apparent with at least one important difference. In the 1890s, the social and economic trajectory for the nation's have-nots was positive because capitalists needed better educated workers to fill the factories. In the 1990s, we experienced a downward turn to the prospects for nearly a third of U.S. citizens, who have been rendered unnecessary to business by technology (Bellah, 1999). Our current governments have employed a politics of subtractions, reducing the braces of federal and state safety nets when our need is greatest. The competition is fierce for jobs that pay a living wage—not for lack of skilled workers but for lack of good jobs—and there is little help from government if you lose that competition (and many must lose).

Positioned to see fellow citizens as threats to their families' security, many in the U.S. fail to use any sociological imagination and learn to fear all others who can be characterized as not like them. Perversely, the economic and social structures that create and feed on this anxiety contribute directly to the extraordinary accumulation of wealth among the rich. Downsizing or benefit concessions often translate into gains in a company's stock value.

This economic vulnerability has caused many to become less attuned to struggles for recognition (Lerner, 1999). The end of affirmative action, the demonization of single mothers, young black men, and immigrants, and the English-only movements suggest the influences of these struggles are less direct than they once were. As Putnam (1995) explained in his article, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," fewer U.S. citizens adventure into civil life beyond writing a check for membership in the Sierra Club, the National Organization for Women, or the world's largest association, the American Association of Retired People.
With insecurity about fundamental human needs, U.S. citizens seem less likely to associate with and attend to the needs of others. As a nation, we seem less willing to even hear their voices as they hang from fences in Wyoming, are dragged by cars in Texas, are sodomized with broom handles in New York City police stations, and are beaten and raped at home or on the street. Our capacities for empathetic understanding are nearly swallowed whole by our economic insecurities. Without strong advocates among the media and governments for the growing numbers of poor, and members of what Robert Reich (1997) called the anxious class, the prospects of freedom and equality within U.S. democracy seem bleak. These may seem to be issues beyond the scope of literacy education, but as Solosken, Moll, Enciso, Mahiri, Brodkay, and others attest, they cannot be separated from our work as literacy educators and researchers.

There have been changes in the conceptualizations and practices of literacy and literacy education during our times to be sure, and we should celebrate the political victories: where the canon has been expanded, where cultural differences are sought and examined, where boundaries among teachers, students, and community members are blurred—changes that seek a balance between freedom and equality. However, the recent movements toward federal and state government control of curriculum and assessment, and even instruction in some places, are steps backwards. As those who propose and pursue those controls seek to instantiate their definitions of freedom and equality for all, they work from traditional political ideological positions that cannot deal productively with difference or inequality. Our stances on these control—on dialect, canons, access, and others—are often traceable to conservatism, neoconservatism, neoliberalism, and liberalism as these ideologies play through our words and actions (Shannon, 1998).

Yet as we reflect upon our positions—their origins and intentions—we discover that these ideologies do not determine our identities as educators and researchers completely. They do not lock, and we are not locked, in fixed positions. We can still make history within the structures set in the past and present. We might begin by asking ourselves how these ideologies have influenced us, which elements we value and which we no longer value, and what other possibilities are available to us. Our multiple group memberships offer us the possibilities of challenging our current positions and creating new alliances and allegiances. We can choose to engage in civil life through our teaching and research, recognizing ongoing issues of recognition and reemerging struggles of redistribution as central to our efforts. Through our work, we can provide new spaces and new capabilities for all U.S. citizens to produce less violent equivalents to Ali’s declarative question “What’s my name?” in order to bring struggles for recognition and redistribution together.

A politics of literacy in the next millennium is much the same as that of the past and present. We will struggle to define and develop ways that literacy and literacy education can provide service to democratic projects that seek to extend freedom and equality into more aspects of our lives without privileging one too greatly over the other. Those efforts require us to engage in the identification and maintenance of structures that help individuals reconstruct democratic identities of reflexive agency, the will to act, and respect for adversaries and difference. The public nature of those politics—and they could be more public and open—creates spaces in which we can make visible the limits of current ideologies that attempt to close the open narratives of democracy and difference heard in the civil rights, student, and feminist movements of the 1960s, a resurgent labor movement of the 1990s, and extended in the voices of many youth in the U.S. today. Once these limits are visible, we must be prepared to push on those limits until we have transformed the structures of literacy education in ways directed by our sociological imaginations.

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Politics of literacy