Developing democratic voices

There are political dimensions to literacy instruction. Shannon encourages teachers and students to use reading and writing to develop democratic voices.

When I began teaching primary grades in Rochester, New York, during the early 1970s, 20% of Rochester children lived below the poverty line, and the genius of capitalism and corporate executives was credited for the strong American economy. Last summer while visiting my mother, I read in the Rochester Times Union that now over 50% of the city's children live on less than US$12,700 for a family of four and that schools are to blame for America's slide toward Third World status. What's happened during the last 20 years to bring about these changes, and why are they literacy issues?

Although I was startled by Rochester's dramatic statistics, I was aware that poverty is a fact of American life. In fact, I became an educator because I believed that schools could do something about poverty—at least for the next generation. But now I am told that poverty for this and the next generation is getting worse and educators, including me, are to blame.

The first part of what I'm told is true. According to the U.S. Bureau of Census, the national poverty rate has increased by 7% for all Americans and has grown by nearly 10% for children during the last 2 decades. The rate of increase accelerated dramatically during the last decade, and contrary to popular opinion, poverty is not limited to urban areas or ethnic minorities. For example, out of 100 poor children in America, 28 live in suburban areas, 27 in rural areas, and 45 in cities; 41 are European Americans, 35 are African Americans, 21 are Latin Americans, and 3
are Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, or Alaskan Natives. The fastest growing group among the poor are children under the age of 6 (Children’s Defense Fund, 1991). Clearly, the ranks of the poor are growing and are growing younger.

However, educators are not the cause of any decline or rise of poverty in the United States. Government officials, chief executive officers (CEOs), and media pundits use a curious logic to link the two. This logic and the human suffering that it attempts to hide are literacy issues because they require critical reading to expose the illusion they project. Writing to set the record straight, and action to demonstrate that schools could be places where teachers and students develop democratic voices in order to struggle against the realities of poverty in America. This literacy involves a language of critique to demystify the complexities of modern living and a language of hope to reinject human agency into schools.

I recognize that this concern expands the typical scope of literacy considered in The Reading Teacher. Most often, RT authors ask elementary school educators to reconsider the immediacy of teaching reading and writing in classrooms or schools. This is understandable given that teachers face seemingly overwhelming opportunities and constraints as they carry out their daily work. Yet clearly the illusion that schooling is an economic anchor influences, if not directly affects, the immediate circumstances of schooling in profound ways. For example, extended school days, “smartened up” textbooks, intensified curricula, and new calls for national standards and assessments are direct consequences of the promotion and power of these advocates and their illusion. Teachers who ignore this connection between classroom and social life are likely to be at a disadvantage when trying to participate in the restructuring of schools.

Reading the illusion

A decade ago, the A Nation at Risk report used a war metaphor to describe schooling’s negation of “our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation” (National Commission on Educational Excellence, 1985, p. 1). Just 2 years ago, the government’s America 2000 proposal suggested that national standards and tests in all subjects are the means to regain our competitive edge (Commission on Work Force Skills, 1990). Although the title and language for America 2000 may change during the Clinton administration, the purpose and emphasis should remain the same since Hillary and Bill Clinton were involved in the articulation of America 2000 through their association with the Center for Education and the Economy. In these and many other reports, government officials, CEOs, and media pundits assume a causal link between what’s happening in schools, which they characterize as being in a downward slide, and what’s happening to the American economy, which everyone considers (at least in the fall of 1993) as being in a free fall. I use the phrase “assumed a causal link” because no one seems able to offer convincing data for the supposed connection except for an occasional anecdote about some workers who seem to have difficulty learning to work differently when new conditions are forced upon them (Noble, 1992a).

Such evidence is offered as proof that schools have not prepared the American worker well enough to enable American business and industry to compete with the Japanese, Germans, and Swedes. According to this logic, the lack of adaptability among the workforce has depressed corporate profits, caused businesses and plants to close, and created poverty among working-class families. However, one need look no further than the success of the Toyota, Honda, and Nissan automobile factories in the United States, which employ American-educated workers, to render this logic suspect. Although these companies fall short as workers’ paradises, their workers have adapted to new working conditions and relations, plant profits are as high as their plants in other countries, and employees’ families are doing well economically.

These examples, and there are others (see Weisman, 1991), suggest that it is not school policy and practices but rather American governmental and corporate mismanagement and poor policy that have caused economic decline and growing poverty. Relying on Phillips’ (1990) and Bartlett and Steele’s
(1992) analyses, I’ll offer a critical reading of tax policy to illustrate how the rich get richer while the poor get poorer.

We are rapidly approaching a two-class society within the United States—the rich and the rest. Although we can still divide annual salary and wages into three categories: the poor (39% of all 1990 tax filers earned below US$15,000), the middle class (57% earned between US$15,000 and $75,000) and the rich (4% filed above US$75,000), these economic categories no longer explain very much because the rich now receive as much in salary and wages as the bottom 50% of the taxpayers (all the poor and half of the middle class). By contrast in 1959, the top 4% of the filers made as much through salary and wages as the bottom 35%. Put another way, while the total income of the middle class increased on average of 4% a year during the 1980s, the income of the rich increased between 69 and 218% annually, depending on whether their salaries were closer to $75,000 or the $1,000,000 mark.

This redistribution of wealth from the poor and middle class to the rich didn’t just happen by accident. It is the result of governmental policy. For example, the 1986 tax putting approximately $86,000 at their disposal. Those among the rich making over a million dollars a year in salary received a 31% cut leaving them with $280,000 more in after-tax income. At best, the poor received a 9% tax cut and pocketed an extra $50 a year.

Corporations have also enjoyed tax cuts during the last decade. The cuts were not always direct, but they were substantial. For example, the loosening of regulations concerning loan interest deductions for corporations allowed corporations to reduce their tax bill by nearly 60% ($159.7 to $67.5 billion) during the 1980s. During the 1950s, corporations paid nearly 40% of U.S. taxes; now they pay only 17%.

During the 1980s, these same government officials, CEOs, and media pundits, who now criticize education, considered these tax breaks for the rich and corporations necessary in order to stimulate investment in the economy and to create jobs. Yet most of the jobs that were created are low paying. For example, 78% of the jobs created by the government, retail businesses, or service industries since the 1950s pay less than $6 an hour, which means poverty for a family unless coupled with another income. Over half of these jobs employ workers for less than 40 hours a week, allowing employers to escape paying benefits. During the last decade, manufacturing jobs which pay middle class wages have declined by 10%. In my home town, the Eastman Kodak Co. cut one third of its workforce (20,000 jobs) during the 1980s, and Xerox reduced its payroll by over 5,000 employees. Ironically, Kodak’s CEO Kay Whitmore and Xerox’s former CEO David Kearns, who oversaw these reductions, sat on the board of the New American Schools Development Corporation which President Bush established to distribute money for “break the mold schools” to improve America’s competitiveness, stimulate the economy, and create new jobs. Multinational corporations moved many manufacturing jobs to other countries. For example, 1,800 factories and 500,000 jobs have moved to Mexico where they pay workers $1 an hour and are not subject to environmental and labor safety standards.

Where did all the money from these tax cuts go? The rich have used some of their tax

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reform legislation was supposed to equalize the tax burden across classes and ensure that everyone would pay some taxes. In fact, it was a windfall for the wealthy, who received two or three times the percentage tax cut as the poor or the middle class. While the average teacher with a salary in the mid-$30,000 range received an 11% tax cut, putting approximately $467 annually in his or her bank account, CEOs with average salaries in the $750,000 range received a 34% tax cut.
savings to buy tax-free bonds. This means that government debt repayments are transfers of tax money to the rich, who in turn pay no taxes on this guaranteed return on their investment. At present, the federal government spends nearly as much on such debt relief ($184 billion) as it does on K-12 education ($199 billion). Corporations spent some on CEOs’ salaries, which have more than tripled during the last decade to average over $750,000, nearly double the average of their counterparts in Japan, Germany, and Sweden. However, more of it went to initiate or defend against corporate takeovers during the 1980s, when corporations acquired substantial debt in order to extend or maintain their holdings without any effort to improve productivity or to create jobs (Pollin, 1992). In fact, the typical pattern for takeovers and buyouts was to sell assets of the acquired business, to fire employees, and to raid employee pension funds in order to service the new debt acquired from the entire process.

These are the net results of government tax policy: Individual wealth has been transferred from the poor and the middle class to the rich, the size of the middle class has decreased during the last decade, corporations are encouraged to acquire debt in order to decrease tax payments, most new jobs cannot support families above the poverty line, and workers’ health and retirement are subject to corporate whim. In short, because of government and corporate policy, process, and product (which had little or nothing directly to do with American schools), the rich got richer, while the poor got poorer, and the American economy was sacrificed in the process.

As a substitute for an economic policy that would address these issues, government officials, CEOs, and media pundits have initiated and maintained a campaign of misinformation about American schools (see The Nation 1992 special issue on schools). Their claims that today’s youth are not as smart as their predecessors, that SAT scores have decreased greatly, that student performance on standardized tests are low, that school funding doesn’t matter, that American schools are too expensive, that schools don’t graduate enough mathematicians, scientists, and engineers to enable us to compete economically with other countries, and that American schools pale in international competitions are all inaccurate, if not deliberate distortions (Berliner, 1992).

Perhaps the most telling example of misinformation is the claim that schools do not produce workers with the skills employers desire. Two recent surveys of work force skill requirements conducted by the Michigan Education Department and my old school district (Rochester, NY) suggest that employees’ departure (no drugs, respectful behavior, following directions, etc.) is the most important and sought-after quality and that disciplined knowledge (mathematics, natural science, and foreign language, etc.) is the least important (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1991). In fact, less than 10% of U.S. corporations are organized according to the high technology and high performance structures that schools are now expected to emulate and that require the sophisticated skills schools are now supposed to produce in all students (Commission on Work Force Skills, 1990).

Despite repeated demonstrations to the contrary, government officials from the Clinton administration and the two preceding it call for higher national standards and tests in all subject areas and more businesslike schools as the answers to what ails the schools and the economy. To attract agreement from educators and to begin their project, they offer grant funding to anyone, any school, or any professional organization that will allow their school to be restructured or will sit down and write national standards and tests (Noble, 1992b). Perennially starved for funds, many schools have taken this bait, and the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association have engaged in a joint venture to develop English/Language Arts standards. Some appear willing to admit that schools have caused economic decline, perhaps in the hope that they can redirect the government’s focus on technology, nationalization, and business principles.

Enough is enough. If teachers and local communities hope to retain some control over their teaching, classrooms, and curricula, then they must stop their silence and simple reactions to top-down initiatives and start to address the issues facing America. Schools and literacy programs do need reform,
because they perpetuate an unequal political and economic status quo, but they do not need to follow the governmental or corporate policies or practices that got us into this fix in the first place. Clearly, we do not need new national standards or tests in schools to meet the expressed demands of 95% of employers. By anyone’s account, traditional reading instruction in American elementary school requires students to follow untold numbers of verbal and written directions, to work independently and respectfully, and to be punctual and attentive at all times.

Rather we need reform in schools and literacy education that will enable us to take the blindfolds off so we can read what’s really happening in America and around the world and that will untie our hands so we can write a new more just and equitable future for ourselves and others. We need to create the conditions under which we can develop democratic voices at all levels of schooling so that together we can engage in an active public life. But how can we develop democratic voices when the government and business, and apparently professional organizations as well, are working actively against us? We can start by defining what we mean by these terms separately and collectively and by looking for examples of educators already engaged in such projects.

Writing a human essence

Democratic does not refer to party politics. Both Democrats and Republicans are responsible for the political and economic mess we’re in—they voted for it. For me, democratic refers to meaningful participation in the decision making that affects our lives. In theory, citizens in a democracy control the government equally and collectively. However, the redistribution of wealth in the United States is an example of how this theory does not fit reality. The rich exert undue influence over governmental decisions, which affect all our lives.

This is not a conspiracy theory; it’s a political fact. To be specific, is it a coincidence that Dan Rostenkowski, Chairman of the House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee (the one responsible for writing all tax legislation) received over $1.7 million in honoraria during the 1980s from businesses and organizations with a direct interest in tax legislation (Bartlett & Steele, 1992)? Is it mere chance that the Bush/Quayle reelection committee received $1.3 million in 1991 from five food companies at the same time that the government pulled back on nutrition guidelines and delayed nutritional labeling for a year (“Who bought,” 1993)?

Of course, economic class is not the only factor that separates individuals and social groups from democratic participation. Conflicts surrounding race, gender, age, and sexual orientation also distribute power unequally. However, naming is not sufficient for being democratic; we must also theorize our understanding of bias and privilege in order to explain why we desire democracy, but cannot find it in our lives. We must push past our traditional civics lessons in order to discover the historic struggles that were necessary to wrestle even the right to vote away from the few and to see the struggles still ahead in order to make those votes count for something for the 96% of the U.S. population left behind during the 1980s.

Using these theories, we can expand our reading of texts and the symbols embedded in social practices and institutions in order to uncover how they are organized to protect privilege and to undermine democracy. Moreover, we can use these theories to write text and other social actions to promote equality and political and economic justice. Such literate work is underway concerning medicine (Illich, 1982), media news (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), law (Unger, 1985), popular arts (Giroux & Simon, 1989), cognitive psychology and technology (Noble, 1991), and schooling (Apple, 1982). I have attempted to bring such theories to reading instruction in order to name and challenge the inequalities of instructional practices (e.g., Shannon, 1985), to develop theories to explain why reading programs are organized around these inequalities (e.g., Shannon, 1989), and to make teacher and student decision making the center of literacy programs (e.g., Shannon, 1992).

Basal readers are of limited value in literacy programs designed to promote democracy. With prepared skills hierarchies, directive language in scripted lessons, set lesson and
story sequences, prescribed and collated tests, basals are decidedly antidemocratic in their makeup for teachers (Goodman, Shannon, Freeman, & Murphy, 1988) and for students (Bloom & Nieto, 1989). Since changes in the science, the literature, and the layout of basals simply make the 70-year-old logic of basals more attractive, nothing short of scrapping the teachers’ manuals and all that’s in them could make basals a useful tool in a democratic classroom. Only then will teachers and students be free to make meaningful decisions about their literacy and learning.

To develop means literally to unfold potential for the attainment of perfection that is appropriate to a species or is possible for an individual. Although educators are interested in intellectual, social, and moral development, we must also give attention to political potential if we intend to be democratic. Toward that end, educators might find chess players’ use of the term helpful. In chess, to develop a piece is to bring it from its original position to one offering greater play of force, that is, to increase its relative power. Of course, chess pieces are tools in a game and students are not tools nor are life and education a game. For me, the metaphor is useful because it speaks directly to the power of our location: original positions—which I called political and economic illiteracy, and positions of potential power—which I described as being democratic. In order to realize that potential, this change in position must be accompanied by a change in consciousness, attitude, and proclivity to act.

To develop democratically means to move ourselves and our students from our original position of seeing ourselves as objects, who believe that economics, politics, and schooling happen to us, to a new position of seeing ourselves as subjects, who have the right, ability, and responsibility to participate in the decision making that affects our lives. Alone and together, subjects move from the dormancy of the straight rows in classrooms and the margins of society to active centers, offering us greater chances to be democratic and to work toward equality and justice.

Interest in developing democratic subjects limits the utility of direct instruction (Kameenui & Shannon, 1988). Within direct instruction, everything becomes objective, that is, out of the meaningful control of teachers and students. Knowledge of content and process is objectified for the purpose of teachers’ and students’ systematic consumption. Teachers are directed not only to serve an often-fixed meal, but also to ensure satisfactory digestion. Students are considered to be underfed, if not empty; they must clean their plates before being served the next item on the menu. (And of course, teachers are students during preservice and inservice teacher education and staff development programs.) Even when teachers can choose which menu to serve during direct instruction or whether to bring dessert before the appetizer or when students can swallow without chewing, neither teachers nor students can decide whose garden this knowledge came from, what it means to consume such knowledge, who cooks and who cleans, or when they’ve consumed enough.

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Despite later efforts to instruct students to be independent, a steady diet of direct instruction makes teachers and students dependent consumers, not organic producers of knowledge. At best, students and teachers are left with only what they have been taught during direct instruction, secure that deference to producers of knowledge will serve them well and with little desire to fend for themselves. At worst, teachers and students believe that this is the way it should be. These may be the best and the worst of times.

Voice is the tool with which we make ourselves known, name our experience, and participate in decisions that affect our lives. Most literacy educators associate voice with writing. A writer’s voice is considered an extension of his or her ego, which drives his or her interest in writing and revision. Accordingly, I want my thoughts and needs known and invested with the traditional
authority of text, so I write and revise. When I “find my voice” while writing, I have taken control over the topic, genre, and audience for my written work. Within this view, voice becomes the hub of an individual’s language use connecting ownership, choice, authenticity, and intellectual autonomy. We rejoice in the emergence of a student’s voice because we have increased the possibility of coming to know that student and we can now begin a student-centered literacy program for him or her.

However, we must be careful when thinking about voice in this way. A voice does not constitute a person, nor can a person be reduced to a single voice. Individuals have as many voices as they have group memberships, and they use these multiple voices (sometimes in contradictory ways) in a variety of social relations and settings when they believe the time and place to be correct. They acquire these voices through immersion in the daily life of socially significant groups which initiate them into approximiate dress, values, and behaviors as well as the language of group membership. First voices come from family and neighbors. Because even these voices are complex amalgams of different ethnic groups, classes, races, religions, and cultures, our first voices are not singular whole constructions. Rather, they, as well as the ones we add later, should be understood as historical, fragmented, and social artifacts.

Teachers must remember that students do not speak only for themselves; rather social groups also speak to one another through individual students. Conflict within and among voices in a classroom is a fact of life because we are not a homogeneous society with one set of values, mores, and interests. And we are better for our diversity. How teachers (and all of society) choose to handle these conflicts and our diversity makes all the difference in how we will live together in and out of schools. To assert privilege for one type of voice among all others in a classroom promotes and maintains a hierarchy among social groups based on nationality, gender, race, economic class, and ethnicity. Unless teachers and students are allowed and willing to listen to each other, to explore the variety and historical and social origins of their differences, and to use their multiplicity of voices in any classroom, there is little hope for democratic development in our society.

Voice, then, is a social, not a personal, matter for individuals. This is why constructivist approaches to literacy education (e.g., apprenticeships, process teaching, whole language), as most often theorized or practiced, are not adequate for developing democratic voices. Although most advocates of these positions encourage individuals’ movement from object to subject status in terms of language use, they do not address explicitly the political nature of voice nor do they develop students’ intellectual tools sufficiently to enable them to analyze historical and social origins of the values, attitudes, and opinions in what they say, write, or do.

Without this political understanding of voice and these intellectual tools, individuals and the social groups they represent must accept all that others have put in their heads and remain political objects unable to participate in meaningful decision making. Although many of the values and practices in students’ and our voices should be affirmed, others are decidedly antidemocratic and problematic if we seek equality and justice. As political and economic illiterates, we are living proof of this. When we listen to the traditional teachers’ and students’ voices that tell us to shy away from politics, we are our own worst enemies.

**Action to develop democratic voices**

At present, few American institutions take the ideal of developing democratic voices as their mission; perhaps this is why the misinformation about schooling and poverty seems to convince so many of us. As with any ideal, developing democratic voices must be made concrete on a simplified level in order to prepare us for the larger possibilities of that ideal. Classrooms at any level of schooling offer the possibility for these concrete actions. When developing democratic voices, teachers and students place their experiences at the center of the curriculum and ask, “How do we wish to live together?” This question enables all to study the linguistic, historic, scientific, social, artistic, economic, technical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and political factors that affect their
daily lives. Such a curriculum makes both teacher and students subjects in their education, subjects who are able to make decisions that affect their lives at school and who can explore their diversity and similarities as they consider common interests and possible actions based on commitment to justice, social equality, and expanded possibilities of difference.

We have many examples to guide us in our efforts. From teachers in Quincy, Massachusetts, during the 1870s, to those in Dewey’s Lab School in Chicago at the turn of the century, to Marietta Johnson’s Organic School in Alabama beginning in 1907, to Caroline Pratt’s City/Country School in New York City, which started in 1913 and later became the Bank Street School, to Elsie Clapp’s Arthurdale School in Kentucky during the Depression, to Myles Horton’s Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, which just celebrated its 60th anniversary, to Septima Clark’s Citizenship Schools across the deep South in the late 1950s and early 1960s, America has a remarkable tradition of teachers and students developing democratic voices (Shannon, 1990).

More recently, Audrey Sturk in Nova Scotia helped her students and the elderly in their community to come to a common understanding through students’ exploration of what it means to be old in rural King’s County (Sturk, 1992). In northern Minnesota, John Schmidt organized his primary classroom according to a student-written Bill of Rights for Learners so that his students would take a stake in the well-being of the school and develop an understanding of individual and collective rights (Schmidt, 1990). Linda Christensen, who teaches middle school English in Portland, Oregon, used poetry to help her students hear the voices of those who have struggled for equality and justice throughout history (Christensen, 1991). In Calexico, California, Elena Castro recorded and displayed the “collective knowledge” of her Hispanic first graders on long sheets of butcher paper so that they would understand their valuable contributions to their education (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1990) And, Sandra Laving in McDowell County, North Carolina, has her multi-aged primary grade students planning and making the decisions about academic work while they run a working restaurant and flower shop from their classroom (Shannon & Clark, 1993).

Teacher groups such as Rethinking Schools in Milwaukee, The Boston Women’s Teachers’ Group, The Foxfire Groups across the country, the North Dakota Study Group, The Network of Educators on the Americas, and The National Coalition of Education Activists are organized to help teachers, parents, and often students come together to consider how schools and their practice can be reorganized to become more democratic, even liberatory.

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Efforts to develop democratic voices have spilled over into teacher education programs. For example, Michael O’Laughlin (1992) and Janet Miller offer the Hofstra University Summer Institute for Teachers; Eleanor Kutz and Hephzibah Roskelly (1991) investigate what they call the unquiet pedagogy for English teachers in Boston; Jesse Goodman (1992) examined elementary schooling for critical democracy in Indiana; and I (Shannon, 1992) have explored the politics of literacy education at the Mount Saint Vincent University’s Summer Institute. At Penn State we have just started to reorganize our teacher education programs according to the following mission statement:

“Our faculty have chosen to revise and reconstruct the long tradition that connects the struggle to create a democratic society to the diverse practices of education and schooling. We plan to deepen and extend our commitments to social justice, equality and democracy by developing teachers and others who are prepared to address issues of multiculturalism, public service, and leadership in and out of schools.”
What connects these educators across time and space is their commitment to social forms of knowing and learning that enhance our chances to build a compassionate society, to level power relationships between and among students and teachers, and to explore the social realities and political possibilities of empowerment. What connects these educators are their abilities to overcome economic and political illiteracy in order to read the illusion that the government and businesses offer at the expense of schools in order to protect privilege in the United States and to write a more just and equal future first at school, and then hopefully in society. They have and are developing democratic voices.

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References