



## **Creating Illiteracy: Why Johnny Can't (Only) Read; New Literacies versus Old Policies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although the United States federal government has attempted to extinguish the gaps among various populations (socioeconomic, racial, etc.) through educational policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act, such policies may in fact create further divisions among these groups within American society. I base my argument on inadequacies in the formation of the policy, such as the procedures used by the NRP contributing to formation of NCLB, the outdated and narrow conceptions of literacy used by both the NRP and within NCLB, and the strict adherence to the NRP report and NCLB standards. In order to truly extinguish the gaps and create a democratic nation in which all citizens can contribute, I argue for transformation of federal education policies to reflect current definitions of literacy including New Literacies, which reflect the ongoing advancement of information communication technologies.

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According to a vast array of sources found among research, media editorials, and sensational news reports, a great number of American children and young adults are suffering from a reading crisis, and have been for over thirty years. Although statistics in education, especially in the field of reading, vary and are being produced at every moment we turn our heads, the tale appears to be looking up for *some* citizens of our nation. For example, one recent publication of data states that United States' fourth graders scored higher in tests of reading in 2007 than in all previous years. Furthermore, eighth graders also appear to have made minor improvements, though these improvements remain limited to a basic proficiency level. Of greatest significance is that although students within minority groups did show improvements, these "did not always result in the narrowing of the achievement gaps with white students" (U.S. Department of Education (USDE, 2007c). Furthermore, *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2007* reports significant gaps between students eligible for the National School Lunch program and those not eligible. On average, fourth grade students in the lower socioeconomic class scored 20.4 points lower than their peers, and eighth grade students in the lower socioeconomic class scored an average of 17.4 points lower than their peers (USDE, 2007c). For many of us, this message from the National Assessment of Educational



Progress (NAEP) is far from startling. We've seen the government's attempts to remedy these achievement gaps among ethnic and socioeconomic groups with far reaching and controversial policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act. This act was originally passed in 2001 and the current legislation under the direction of President Barack Obama is now seeking to reform it, with little more attention to literacy than revising assessment procedures.

It is in the wake of these reports that I present the following arguments within this article. First, the policies in education targeted at improving reading skills (of minority and low socioeconomic students, in particular) were formed using a narrow set of procedures. Second, the recommendations provided by these governmental policies do not correspond to the needs of the populations affected by them or the literacy demands of all citizens in present day society. Third, strict adherence to these policies creates further separation and gaps between socioeconomic and racial groups as they result in minimal proficiencies at best, which limit opportunities and democratic participation. Finally, in order to create citizens who have skills necessary to advance personal social, political, and economic positions as well as to participate in our democracy, federal policies must be transformed to reflect advances in various forms of literacy, including information communication technologies (ICTs), particularly standards in New Literacies with a focus in critical multiliteracies.

To best understand the need for transformation, we first need to look at one aspect of current federal policies (i.e., NCLB), the Reading First program. In short, Reading First is a means of providing guidance to states and districts regarding research based reading instruction and/or programs as well as to allocate funds to support these chosen programs. As stated by the U.S. Department of Education, "Reading First is designed to help the children who need it the most" (USDE 2007b). This assistance is provided through the distribution of funds by a formula that takes into account the number of children living in poverty in each state. Funds are then allocated to local education agencies through competitive subgrants provided by state education agencies. These state education agencies grant funds to assist the schools in greatest need to improve student achievement, provided that these funds contribute to establishing scientifically based reading programs backed by the NRP findings. And what influence has this multi-billion dollar program had on the Reading Crisis? Unfortunately, reports published in January of 2009 profess the absence of any statistically significant positive impact on reading comprehension test scores (Gamse, Jacob, Horst, Boulay, & Unlu, 2008). One can't help but wonder at the obvious discord between the aims of the Reading First program and the outcomes, including statistics presented earlier pointing to the lack of significant progress toward closing the gap between minorities and whites as well as other socioeconomic groups. What is the cause of this lack of progress, and what remedies should be considered?

Aside from this discord, let us consider the design and goals of Reading First to better understand the need to transform such a policy. The Reading First initiative was built on the work of the National Reading Panel (NRP). This panel of fifteen, some of whom were not contributors to the field of reading, joined together in 1998-1999 to



review research in some areas of reading. As a result of their review, five areas of reading instruction were highlighted as “essential components” of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (USDE, 2007). These five areas have been coined the Five Pillars of effective reading instruction and shape curriculum and research decisions all across the nation. Pillars aside, there are limitations of the current application of the NRP findings:

- The narrow focus on reading, rather than literacy (i.e., viewing, listening, speaking, reading, and writing)
- The elimination of massive quantities of information derived from qualitative methods
- The omission of topics of reading and/or literacy that had a limited number of studies
- The ten year old research that did not address New Literacy skills

Surprisingly, the proposal for reauthorization of NCLB presented in January of 2007 (USDE, 2007a) and President Barack Obama and Vice-President Joe Biden’s plans for education reform assert no attention to the above factors (Obama for America, 2009). Even more disturbing is that instructional programs strictly adhering to these policies often focus on the narrow scope of the state standardized assessments, which are directed by the state standards, and are greatly shaped by the NRP report. Furthermore, regardless of a particular philosophy or currently held belief regarding best practices for literacy instruction backed by a variety of research in the field, standardized assessment scores reign supreme in holding administrators and teachers accountable. Although the current administration has claimed forthcoming revision of assessment models, educators anxiously await the specifics of these plans. Having spent years contending with the pervasive use of one assessment score which neglects the outside influences affecting scores and the shortcomings of the NRP report, educators remain wary.

### **Which Comes First, Democracy or Literacy?**

As we consider transforming federal policies in literacy education, we need to consider the relationship that education has with a democratic society. John Dewey presented numerous theories and understandings of this relationship, though of greatest interest here is his idea of the reciprocal relationship between critical thinking and a democratic society. Briefly, Dewey noted that in order for a democratic society to function, there must be active, critical thinking. And, in order for critical thinking to occur, there must be a democratic society (Dewey, 1966). Dewey’s theories resonate with two proponents of New Literacies and more specifically critical multiliteracies, Michele Anstey and Geoff Bull (2006) explain the need for this burgeoning concept:

Multiliteracies means being cognitively and socially literate with paper, live and electronic texts. We must be aware that the texts that we access or are exposed to have been consciously constructed to shape particular information in particular ways, shaping our attitudes, values, and behaviors. Therefore, being multiliterate must also involve being critically literate, that is having the ability to analyze



texts, identify their origins and authenticity, and understand how they have been constructed in order to perceive their gaps, silences, and biases. (p. 23)

As applied to the current argument, citizens that do not have critical multiliteracy skills are unable or ill equipped to critically analyze and utilize the massive amount of information available to them through ICTs (i.e., the internet).

Furthermore, although the need for integration of ICTs through engaging in critical multiliteracies is clear, Street's cautionary words focusing on the process employed in the acquisition of literacy warrant attention (1995). Specifically, Street's notion of creating a dominant literacy, therefore controlling and limiting the multitude of ways ICTs can be used is relevant here. The insidious dismissal of local literacies engaged in beyond the walls of schools gives rise to the creation and reification of dominant literacies. The limited scope of research utilized by the NRP, which excludes the types of ethnographic studies revealing local literacies, further exacerbates this objectification of literacy and absence of critical thinking applied to speaking, listening, reading, writing, and viewing.

Consequently, citizens are not likely to actively participate in the construction and reconstruction of society through the use of critical multiliteracies. They are at risk of falling victim to those that are empowered with such skills. When we continuously focus our attentions on the minimal literacy skills produced by Reading First or exclusively focus on the Five Pillars of reading instruction, we are in effect disempowering many of our citizens, and eliminating opportunities for active participation in our democratic society locally and globally.

There is a wide acceptance of the idea that all citizens, regardless of race, socioeconomic class, disability, and language have a right to an education that affords opportunities for advancement and empowerment. Yet, the Internet, a tool that could provide more opportunity for these achievements than any other in the history of the world, is not even considered within education policies. In fact, the gaps both in achievement and in various aspects of participation in our democratic society are exacerbated by the lack of some students' exposure to such technology. Findings from the *Pew Internet & American Life Project* (2007) are helpful in illustrating this point. According to their report, although 48% of white (not Hispanic) Americans have access to broadband internet access from home, only 40% of African Americans, and 29% of Hispanics boast the same. In addition, only 30% of Americans with an average yearly income below thirty thousand have broadband internet access from home, as compared to 46% with a \$30-50K annual salary, 58% with a \$50-75K annual salary, and 76% with an annual salary over \$75K (Horrigan & Smith, 2007).

These findings, correlated with the NAEP report, further illustrate the gaps evident among ethnic and socioeconomic groups. They also underscore the argument for transforming federal policies to include skills in the use of ICTs. While many middle and upper socioeconomic class citizens stand ready to gain at least rudimentary critical multiliteracy skills by simple exposure and home use of ICTs, many other demographic groups will not be awarded such opportunities. One cannot help but lament the



government's naïveté, if the government truly wants all citizens to fully participate in either democracy and/or literacy.

### **The Need for Purpose to Empower**

An investigation into NCLB, Reading First, and the NRP also leads one to question their understanding of the purpose of reading, and more important, of literacy. Within the field of education, five aspects of literacy are closely intertwined: viewing, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As we study the development of children, we see advances in their communication skills through advances in each of these aspects of literacy. Yet, policies to educate these same children have attended to just one aspect of a complex interrelated collection of developing characteristics of the child. Attempting to isolate this aspect (reading) in hopes of creating proficiency is ineffective, yet pervasive. This is evident through the absence of meaningful and purposeful context driven instruction of interconnected processes of literacy development. As Papen asserts in her investigation of local and global dimensions of reading and writing, "Learning literacy is part and parcel of learning the skills necessary to carry out the task in question...learning literacy, in these instances, is a by-product not the main purpose", (p. 172-173). Unfortunately, reading is seen quite literally as a task in and of itself when approached through many curricula used in schools today.

Furthermore, parents, numerous educators, and countless researchers know that there is a reciprocal relationship between reading and writing development. For example, the authors of *The Beginnings of Writing* (Temple, Nathan, & Burris, 1988) state, "Research shows unequivocally that early writing helps children develop concepts about written language they need in order to read, and reading makes children familiar with language structures they need in order to write" (p. xi). This quotation is representative of many case studies and other published writing/reading research (Holdaway, 1979; Routman, 1988; Kroll & Wells, 1983; Jaggar & Smith-Burke, 1985; Bissex, 1980). Clearly, our attempts to support student progress in reading through only scientifically based research in reading casts aside this relationship. Instead, we focus on five pillars, most often in a disconnected manner. In essence, we are creating five free-standing pillars (a proficiency in the isolated areas of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) in hopes that students will show progress on federally mandated assessments. What is the point of five free-standing pillars, or progress in a series of mandated assessments? Children within Reading First programs might well ask that same question but would be left to their own for a plausible answer, which is especially worrisome based on the recent reports revealing the disconnect between alphabets and the pillar of comprehension (Gamse, Jacob, Horst, Boulay, & Unlu, 2008).

One way we could help children build the foundations of enduring literacy is through an application of Paulo Freire's ideas. He constructed much more than free-standing pillars as he investigated the relationship between literacy and empowerment. Freire's conception of literacy argues that a person could not be characterized as 'truly' literate unless he or she has learned something more than simply how to inscribe and



interpret symbols on a piece of paper (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Simply teaching students to read and comprehend at basic levels equates reading as an end in itself. Freire advocates for a broader definition and use of literacy that includes social, institutional, and cultural relationships. In his words, "Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world" (p. 29).

Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (2003), two New Literacies proponents, echo Freire's definition by stating, "Proper literacy enhances people's control over their lives and their capacity for dealing rationally with decisions by enabling them to identify, understand, and to act to transform, social relations and practices in which power is structured unequally" (p. 74). This contention is further supported through Kincheloe and Steinberg's (1997) call for critical multiculturalism, characterized by an understanding of the perspectives of those marginalized citizens of our society, thus replacing 'Truth' with multiple accounts and viewpoints. However, Yagelski (2000) leads educators to first reexamine our own attitudes toward literacy, literacy instruction, and the roles we have in facilitating students' construction of themselves through critical awareness in literacy practices. Therefore, transformations in classrooms through the work of individual teachers and students can and should reflect such critical awareness if literacy is to influence democracy and society.

These expanded views of literacy lead one to question how some appear to accept purposes of literacy as defined by the federal policies in education. Adhering to policies that require basic proficiencies within print text only do not take into account these expanded views of literacy. Society is inundated with influence from ICTs, for which our current policies are not preparing our citizens. Instead, reading is seen as the means to proficiency on standardized state assessments. The isolation of reading from literacy along with a loss of the understanding of its associated empowerment purposes within the context of our society stands to widen societal gaps and divisions.

We appear to be enabling and encouraging *illiteracy* by embracing a narrow view of what it means to be literate, focusing only on print text reading proficiencies. Advances in ICTs (the internet, in particular) continue to transform how we write, read, view, and listen. In order to succeed in our culture, work, and democracy, one must have some level of proficiency with multiple literacies, and these technologies in particular. We have no choice but to revise policies in education so as to enable all citizens to acquire New Literacy and specifically critical multiliteracy skills. Doing so will better ensure their participation in a democratic society.

### **Guiding Principles of Transforming Federal Policies in Education**

So what might we do in light of current circumstances? At least four principles come to mind. First, the policies in education must adhere to currently held definitions of literacy as supported by current research. This includes a shift from the formerly accepted psychological definitions of reading, proposing a particular set of skills within a single context, to a currently developing sociocultural definition of literacy. This would require that policies incorporate not only all five aspects of literacy (viewing, listening, speaking,



reading, and writing), but would also require that these aspects be considered within the social, institutional, and cultural contexts in which they serve purposeful means.

Second, new policies must prioritize New Literacies including critical multiliteracies in both instruction and further research endeavors. If the United States desires to retain and advance global economic and political power, our citizens must be prepared to actively participate in our democratic state, while utilizing, evaluating, and creating ICTs. As of December 2007, The Internet World Stats (2008) reports 20% of the world total population is using the Internet. And, the growth rate is approximately 265.6%. Therefore, some estimate that at least 50% of the world population will be users of the internet in less than four years. The compilation of statistics throughout this article, as compared with our current instructional practices, shows the glaring necessity for New Literacies and critical multiliteracies within our federal policies in education.

Finally, unlike many U.S. governmental policies, those that influence educational practices and research must be responsive to the concept of change as the new constant (Anstey & Bull, 2006). Not only is internet usage growing at an incredible rate, but the technologies used are constantly developing, which causes changes in necessary skills and therefore instruction. We can no longer focus exclusively on a particular set of skills applicable to print text, but must instead begin to educate our citizens to independently acquire skills to adapt to new technologies. There is no possible way that curriculum within schools can keep up with the pace of change, but there is also no possible way that our citizens can continue to actively participate in society without preparation in New Literacies.

Although admittedly scarce, the resources to impart such skills even at the most primary levels are becoming available. Evans (2000) supplies a multitude of practical ideas, such as incorporating multimedia (i.e. digital photos, slide show, etc.) in the creation and sharing of personal narratives. Following or in conjunction with sharing such stories, teachers might consider whole group discussions focused on critical analysis of the author's process of creating the story. Another valuable idea proposed in this pioneering work addresses the perseverance of popular culture, an influential factor in children's lives from the ages of Teletubbies and Bob the Builder to The Simpsons and Playstation. Using video clips and packaging materials, Evans (2000) advises extending discussions of intended audience to the creation of students' own slogans and logos using multimedia sources. Finally, the slight modification of a fairly traditional activity in which students view the film derived from a novel or other print text can provide opportunities for students to apply critical multiliteracies. Simply asking students to go beyond literal compare and contrast to critical considerations of interpretation on behalf of the film directors, producers, and/or writers results in students considering their own perspective as well as the formation of others' perspectives.

At the outset of this article, my goal was to present an argument for the transformation of federal policies in education. I argue that the transformations need to reflect the current pervasive existence of information communication technologies and their connection to literacy and democracy beginning in the elementary classroom. I stand by my convictions and advocate for continued discussion and investigation into



changes in understanding literacy and the roles of government and education in influencing democracy.

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