

**Educational Disadvantage Through a Sociolinguistic Lens:**  
**A Critical Analysis of America Reads**

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*School is not a neutral objective arena;  
it is an institution which has the goal of changing people's values, skills, and knowledge bases.*  
-Shirley Brice Heath, 1983

*"Your schools have been operating on the theory that everyone is the same beneath the skin. I realize that you were thrust into a new situation too. You have tried, in your way, to do what you thought was best. I'm only asking that you look a little deeper- see me as I am: I'm one of you but yet, I'm still me. My way of communicating may be different from yours but it fills my adaptive and emotional needs as I perform it. Why should my 'at home' way of talking be 'wrong' and your standard version be 'right'?... Show me...that by adding a fluency in standard dialect, you are adding something to my language and not taking something away from me. Help me retain my identity and self-respect while learning to talk 'your' way."  
-an adolescent girl in Heath, 1983*

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1 Posing Some Questions**

Tina<sup>1</sup> had struggled all summer with distraction and frustration while we read together, despite an interest and determination to complete several books. One day, while she was reading Little Bear aloud, she repeatedly read *that* as “what,” as she had done all summer. Each time I would draw her attention back to the mistake, and ask her to read it again or sound it out. Tina stared into the corners of the room, called to her friends, asked me for a carrot, and said, “What. It’s what. It says what.” I told her to look at the page. I asked her what sound *th* made. I reminded her that she had figured the word out

on the previous page. I told her again to look at the page. Each time she would eventually read “that,” and we would finish the page. On one of the last pages Tina read a sentence that included *that*, and read “that” without hesitating, without noticing which word she had just read by herself for the first time. I gave her a glitter pencil and two carrots in celebration.

Tina’s accomplishment that day was greater than successfully reading the word *that*. She took a step in controlling her frustration and impatience. She also learned that when she cannot figure something out, she does not have to sit and think until she finds an acceptable answer, but that she can access information from the written page. She was proud of herself, and built confidence in herself and her reading ability.

This brief snapshot of a tutoring session exhibits the idiosyncrasies of working with children, but does not overtly present the theoretical issues involved in literacy and education. The unpredictability and creativity of students in their interactions with adults are necessary for maintaining the practicality of theory, although the theories involved in any given interaction must be more deeply investigated.

How we as a society, and how the educational institution at large and in the classroom, decide what cultural values and definitions to promote is a vitally loaded question. These decisions determine which students will likely succeed in school and which students will not. One default method of teaching cannot be assumed because there is no default way of being in the world for all students. Ignorance is not an excuse for discrimination.

There will always be an assignment that a student cannot do, a subject he or she cannot understand. The factors that contribute to educational success and failure besides these “deficiencies” in the students have been and ought to continue being be the objects of study and the impetus for reform. Through a brief pilot study of America Reads, I will

address the questions of how sociolinguistics can lend a complimentary perspective to the educational discipline, and how educational structures apart from public schools relate to effective reform.

This paper will focus primarily on linguistic culture because of the educational consequences of the fact that language is the medium of communication. Because language is the means of transmission for all subjects, language, and how children are taught to use language, also becomes the foundation of educational preparedness and the “means to a critical consciousness” (Freire, 1987).

## **1.2 Roadmap**

As an entrance into the complex issues of the sociolinguistic, educational, and political aspects of literacy, I will first locate myself in the discourse, particularly in relation to my experience as a student coordinator and tutor for the America Reads program. These issues are significant because of their effects in the lives of at-risk students in the educational system. Consequently, I will explore definitions of both non-linguistic and linguistic disadvantage, and demonstrate why traditional, broad categorizations of disadvantage are inadequate.

Just as narrow definitions of disadvantage disempower educational reform, so do narrow understandings of literacy. I will examine the multiplicities of literacy, cultural literacy, and critical literacy, in addition to the uses of literacies, which are known as literacy practices. From this sociolinguistically informed educational perspective, I will critically analyze the effects of cultural and critical literacies with my experience in an America Reads summer program.

### **1.3 Locating myself in the paper**

Though I could not have named it then, I first became interested in cultural literacy when I took a class on the structure of American Sign Language (ASL) that explored not just the language, but also multiple issues of deafness. A dialogue about Deaf culture, oralism, and education raised the question of how education would be structured if all children could not hear. It seemed to be a fundamental consideration in deciding how to best educate deaf children in a predominantly hearing world. Through other classes on education, disability, and marginalization my questions about what children bring to education and what is offered them by education were problematized more than they were answered. This thesis deepens the interrogation.

My own educational background does not personally address this inquiry because I was raised by educated parents with “mainstream” cultural values and practices.<sup>2</sup> Although I do not have personal experience of learning how to “do school,” as a foreign way of functioning in the world, I can attest to the complications within education-- of what and how students should be taught-- even without the racial, socioeconomic, regional, disability, and linguistic layers.

I have, however, considered the linguistic and cultural practices of the field of linguistics as I have been researching and writing a thesis with a dominant educational focus. Because my work falls under the wide umbrella of “applied linguistics,” I have excluded non-language oriented educational theory even as it critically informs the discourse of educational disadvantage. While I have learned to be somewhat “literate” in both fields through courses in each, I have also become somewhat “literate” in the finely balanced tension between the two, and the ways with which they compliment each other. This paper is written within that tension.

### **1.4 My Experience with America Reads**

During the summer of 2000 I had the privilege of working with the America Reads program through the Community Service Office of Bryn Mawr College and funded by the Federal Work Study program. Two years earlier Jennifer Nichols, then the director of America Reads at Bryn Mawr College, worked with the directors of a local community center to integrate the America Reads tutoring program into a summer day camp that had existed at the center for almost thirty years, in direct response to the America Reads Challenge of community involvement.

In 1996, President Clinton made the bold assertion, “We ought to commit to ourselves as a country to say by the year 2000, 8-year-olds in America will be able to pick up an appropriate book and say, ‘I read this all by myself,’” (Koralek and Collins, 1997) and the inspiration for the America Reads program was born. Federal funds began to be allocated toward what became known as the America Reads Challenge:

A national initiative that calls on all Americans- schools, preschool programs, libraries, religious institutions, universities, college students, the media, cultural organizations, business leaders, national service programs, and senior citizens- to ensure that every child can read well and independently by the end of third grade (Koralek and Collins, 1997).

At schools, local libraries, and community centers, college students in the Federal Work Study program tutor elementary and junior high school students in literacy related activities. The basic structure of the program addresses and at least partially meets the initiative. For instance, the America Reads summer program through Bryn Mawr College was integrated into a summer day camp at a local community center. For many children who cannot or do not receive individualized attention, specifically in language arts, at home or in the classroom because of limited time and resources, the relationship with the tutor and the literacy related activities both develop literacy skills needed for



success in school, but also provide some of the sociocultural and motivational bases of success. Both skills and attitude are needed for that success to last.

## **Chapter Two: Problematized Disadvantage**

### **2.1 Definitions of Disadvantage**

Within both the formal and informal discourses of education a population of students is usually labeled “at-risk.” Educators and analysts often assume an understanding of the definition of this description, however, and do not define “risk” further. This population is assumed to be “at risk of educational failure because of limited English proficiency, poverty, race, geographical location, or economic disadvantage” (At-Risk Institute, 2000). The risk is notably *because* of disadvantage. These categories, while significant in their effects in students’ life experiences in addition to educational studies, are broad— perhaps too broad to address the “risk” and focus effective reforms.

In their 1987 publication “Children In Need: Investment Strategies for the Educationally Disadvantaged,” the Research and Policy Committee of the Committee for Economic Development defined children in need through more specific and descriptive experiences and backgrounds that are common among disadvantaged students.

- They may come to school poorly prepared for classroom learning or not yet ready developmentally for formal education.
- Their parents may be indifferent to their educational needs.
- They may be the children of teenagers who are ill equipped for parenting.
- They may have undiagnosed learning disabilities, emotional problems, or physical handicaps.
- They may have language problems or come from non-English-speaking homes.
- They may experience racial or ethnic prejudice.
- They may have access only to schools of substandard quality (8).

Some of these elements are individualized, while some are more communal. Some exist in the student’s home communities, while some exist in the educational

system. All of them are interrelated, just as biophysiological processes and social interaction are interrelated in language acquisition and literacy. The list emphasizes that students are disadvantaged, that is, they are objects of disadvantage, though they are not necessarily victimized. The oppression they are under is not due to focused, malicious intent.

Many of these factors are intrinsically related, in both obvious and subtle ways. For instance, students may have learning disabilities that remain undiagnosed because the only school to which they have access may not have the special education resources that are required by law (Bradley, et al., 1997). That same student might not speak English well enough for the learning disability to evidence itself in the classroom apart from the language barrier (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). These objective factors are perhaps the least difficult to address and underlie more complicated, subjective factors such as dialect prejudice, which is harder to define, identify, and remedy. The more specific, subjective, and exploratory the factors in educational disadvantage are, the more effectively educators and communities at large can address them.

The complex and somewhat abstract aspects of an expanded definition of disadvantage fall under the theory of cultural capital. In borrowing the language of economics, Pierre Bourdieu coined the phrase “cultural capital” to mean the “knowledge, skills, and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications” (Bourdieu, 1994). Therefore, it is in some ways a body of knowledge about the values and traditions of a community in terms of such entities as religion, art, and literature. It is also an individual’s familiarity with the “mainstream” culture of whatever environment he or she may enter or inhabit, and his or her ease of conduct within that environment. Cultural capital reacts to, and interacts with, how stringently certain values are ascribed in that environment and how much deviation is allowed

without hindering an individual's prestige and stigma in that environment. The cultural capital with which students enter school affects their opportunities for academic success in all subject areas, even as they acquire increasing cultural capital through the social and intellectual spheres of their education.

This concept of cultural capital can be layered with the increasingly descriptive understandings of disadvantage, because many cultural assumptions are embedded within every element. For instance, in relation to the governmental definitions of disadvantage, in Samoa the majority of child rearing is the responsibility of older children or adolescents. (Meade, 1928) However, according to mainstream American culture teenagers- particularly single girls- are "ill equipped" for parenting. The description of a child as being developmentally "not yet ready" for child-rearing is based on certain cultural definitions of development and readiness.

Definitions of success in society, which are highly salient in terms of cultural capital, are also implicitly and explicitly taught in school through the role models that are presented to students in literature, career days, even the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and adult responses to students' dreams. The definitions of success are taught but also assumptions about who will succeed are taught through the materials and lessons offered to students. Students from neighborhoods who are surrounded by traditionally "successful" adults—according to mainstream definitions of success-- will expect to do the same, while students who are surrounded by traditionally unsuccessful adults may not. These attitudes compound the fact that basic performance in school largely determines students' futures because success in American society is largely based on success in school. Individuals with higher degrees are commonly known to earn more, on average, than individuals without higher degrees.

The attitudes toward the local institution(s) of education that are held by the student, his or her family, and his or her home community will either boost or hinder a student's chances of success. The expectations for success or assumptions of failure for a given student in the school(s) available to them by each of these parties also affects performance. Adults often use the cliché "If you think you will succeed or fail, you're right," to motivate children, but is in fact not true. A student who has little hope of success because of low expectations also has little reason to try. If a student does not try, he or she cannot succeed. The lives of disadvantaged students are burdened with many such vicious cycles.

These attitudes contribute to what has been termed the "culture of poverty," a concept that augments the simple factor of socioeconomics. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) from the New Deal redefined poverty to include not just a financial or economic perspective, but also a "distinct set of attitudes, behaviors, and personality traits," which were passed on to children as the "culture of poverty," a term coined by Lewis (1966). He found that this culture of poverty "perpetuated itself from generation to generation because of its effect on children. By the time slum children are six or seven, they have absorbed the values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities that may occur." (1966, in Shannon, 1998) The ESEA confronted the compounded definition of poverty as it was founded on the belief that "proper schooling could prevent poverty" (Tyack and Cuban, 1995 in Edmondson, 2000). Either this assumption is false, or public schools are inadequate because poverty still exists in the United States.

In addition to the overarching, complicated, and moderately abstract factors, the specific daily experiences of student life cannot be forgotten. Students recall unique

experiences with pre-school, interactions with individual teachers, memorable assignments and daily classroom activities more than the general sociopolitical environment of their childhoods. Shirley Brice Heath (1983) highlights a number of teachers, and the students' experiences with them in her ethnography Ways With Words. One such teacher is Mrs. Gardner, whose class began as "potential failures," a label likely used only among teachers and administrators, but not unfelt by the students. Their success in her class due to her progressive methods, which I will discuss further in section 4.1, boosted their confidence and expectations of both themselves and the school, which contributed to a continued period of success even after returning to a more traditional classroom. Unfortunately, however, many of them soon became discouraged and began to fall behind again without the instructional methods and support to which they had been privilege with Mrs. Gardner.<sup>3</sup> Such specific experiences in education cannot sustain their positive effects on students, however, without reinforcement throughout the educational system.

## **2.2 Linguistic Disadvantage**

Shirley Brice Heath, however, proceeds even further in the expansion of the definitions of disadvantage in her pivotal ethnography. In this work Heath explores two nonmainstream neighborhoods whose varied cultures dramatically and directly affect their children's success in the shared community school, as they contrast with a third, mainstream community whose children succeed in school.<sup>4</sup> She institutes a new perspective of educational preparedness and disadvantage that has changed the educational field. While she addresses many aspects of community life, Heath focuses on the linguistic cultural backgrounds of the students, and how other factors contribute to them. She examines the dialects spoken in the towns she studies, the amount and features

of parent-child interaction, and other factors traditionally associated with students' success or failure in literacy and school in general, such as those listed by the At-Risk Institute, particularly socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity. She clearly states, however, that "the language socialization process in all its complexity is more powerful than such single-factor explanations in accounting for academic success" (Heath, 1983).

In other words, advantage and disadvantage in the educational system are not based on- even as they are related to- the color of a student's skin, the amount of money that their parents or guardians earn or where they live, the formal structures of the dialect(s) spoken in the home, or how closely those dialects approximate that used in school. Instead, Heath emphasizes the linguistic *practices* in the home and their effects on the way children are integrated and integrate themselves into the literacy practices of society around him or her, and most specifically in the social and intellectual institutions of education.

Because of the multiplicities of disadvantage in the educational system, the fact that education is not simply a transfer of knowledge must be well understood (Freire, 1998). School, according to Heath, not only teaches students the basic academic subjects such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also the dominant culture of "mainstream" America,<sup>5</sup> which is socialized from the earliest stages of development in many homes across the country. Heath details the culture of school in terms of elements such as the purpose and management of time; expressions of politeness and formality; the linguistic composition of behavior requests; turn-taking; the function of authority, particularly in a one-many ratio; the availability, location, and treatment of materials; and the experiences of home vs. school "play" (Heath, 1983). Even as it is important to teach underprivileged kids the culture of school in order to give them better opportunities for privilege, educators must be careful not to have one culture be dictated as *the* right way of being in

the world because of the disadvantage such an attitude causes. Such a statement then begs the question of how the school culture to be transmitted is chosen or determined as the one that “should” be taught. I will raise these questions again in my analysis.

Students’ linguistic cultural capital does not lie in the quantity of language use in the home, but in the quality of language use. By quality I do not mean comparative, but compositional; the focus is not on which specific dialect is used in the home, but on the features and traditions of the use of the dialect, and the role language has in the lives of the speakers. Other aspects of cultural capital are also critically influential, such as community attitudes toward education. Due to the limitations of this thesis, however, I will explore them as background but not include a critical or detailed analysis.

Attitudes toward the learning process itself, and folk concepts about it, however, are less individualized determinants. These perceptions of development are realized in linguistic child-rearing styles. For example, the parents in Roadville, the predominantly white community in Heath’s study, believe that children need to be actively taught what they should know, while the parents in Tracton, the predominantly black community, believe that children will pick up what they need on their own (Heath, 1983).

Consequently, Roadville parents converse more directly with infants and toddlers, often in “baby talk,” both giving directions and asking questions. Conversations in Roadville that occur in the presence of an infant will often center on him or her, despite his or her inability to speak. Conversations in Tracton, on the other hand, swirl around and above infants and toddlers, who are rarely directly addressed, and almost never with baby talk.

Because of these differing approaches to the learning process, children from each area will have vastly differing degrees and types of success with the structures of school as an institution of both explicit and implicit learning, each in its own designated time and space in the curriculum and culture of the classroom. Students from Roadville will

enter school with a greater ability to respond to direct addresses and directions, which teachers commonly employ in classroom instruction. They matriculate with the expectation of listening to the teacher and responding accordingly. Students from Trackton, on the other hand, have a greater ability to pick up information from indirect dialogue. They will glean more from the conversations around the classroom in which they are not specific participants. (Heath, 1983)

While dialect and language differences create significant challenges in education, the more subtle differences in the daily uses of language, known as language practices, often remain ignored because they are subconscious. Miscommunications due to contrasting language practices cause frustration in addition to disappointed expectations between students and teachers. The disadvantage caused by a diversity of language practices will be explored and addressed further in Chapter Three.

### **2.3 The Conflation of Cultural Components is Detrimental to Educational Reform**

As mentioned by the At-Risk Institute, two of the most common and traditional indicators of disadvantage are socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity. These broad categories are reinforced in educational studies as dominant factors because they are uncomplicated and not individualized. They can also be easily integrated into the scantron forms of surveys and standardized tests. Heath argues, however, that “to categorize children and their families on the basis of either socio-economic class or race/ethnicity and then to link these categories to discrete language differences was to ignore the realities of the communicative patterns of the region” (Heath, 1983). This analysis can easily be applied to non-linguistic areas as well.

The categories of ethnicity and socioeconomic status are too broad for any effective analysis of educational performance, particularly if specific areas of educational



performance are under study. The conflation of multiple and diverse categories into a small number of broad categories weakens the effects found in educational studies, and raises barriers to explanations for trends within the data that are not statistically significant within the broader categories. Addressing anomalies and contradictions in data is likewise difficult if not impossible. The evaluation of educational studies should include measures to prevent the dehumanization of students that stems from the distance between academic analysis and the daily realities of classroom and community life. Clearly, not all students in a given racial and economic grouping will exhibit an identical performance in school. The diversity of human nature results in students' unique combinations of strengths, weaknesses, and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), which in turn result in a spectrum of achievement within any given environment. Differences not addressed by race or socioeconomic status play a significant role in the outcome of their educations, but remain hidden by the simplistic factors. These confluences should instead be broadened and made specific in order to complicate, enrich, and render comprehensible what is going on with language in schools, and to use that information to maximize all students' potential opportunities, as they are promised.

Educators during the period of racial integration following *Brown v. The Board of Education* were overtly faced with the implications of diverse cultural capital among their pupils, and consequently needed to revise their curriculum and pedagogy. In order to be effective and fair, it was essential that teachers in formerly all-white schools not simply dismiss the habits of their new African-American students, but try to understand the students' backgrounds.

With the passage of time between the dramatic cultural exploration of desegregation and today's classrooms, the focus on cultural capital and its effects has been depoliticized and has lost its necessary prominence in curricular and pedagogical

development. Additionally, the transition to a more standardized education based on evaluation by standardized tests in all subject areas has weakened the opportunities for a re-focus on cultural capital and the possible resulting reforms. These standardized tests are instituted for the ease of scoring and comparison between classes, schools, districts, and states. One of the many drawbacks to such tests is the growing discrepancy between philosophy and practicality in the growing mismatch between a teach-to-know ideology to a teach-to-test practice. Most citizens recognize that educational programs for linguistic minorities need to be reformed and not eliminated. However, funding and support are not readily available for investigation into the linguistic cultural backgrounds of students and appropriate responses to those findings in curriculum and resources. In a conversation with educator Jonathan Kozol, the principal of Camden High describes the paralysis of the situation. She notes that if her students were actually given an equal preschool opportunity, equal supplies, equal technology, equal class size, and equal quality of teaching, they might have a fair chance on later standardized tests. “Instead, they leave us as we are, separate and unequal, underfunded, with large classes, and with virtually no Head Start, and they think they can test our children into a mechanical proficiency” (Kozol, 1991). This politically charged axis of education binds teachers’ freedom and opportunities by prescribing curriculum geared toward standardized testing. Mrs. Gardner may not have been able to succeed as she did with non-traditional methods in one of today’s classrooms. Discouraging as it may be, the current situation is exacerbated by the fact that it is taking place under a growing attitude that assumes a failure of the public educational system. Cynicism also cripples reform.

## **Chapter Three: Expanded Definitions**

### **3.1 Definitions of Literacy**

Antecedent to and deeply intertwined with the discussion of educational disadvantage are the definitions of literacy and cultural literacy. According to the National Health Survey in the late 1970's, basic literacy is considered to be the fourth grade reading level (Winterowd, 1989). The guidebook for America Reads notes that fourth grade is the point at which the curriculum in public schools changes from learning-to-read and becomes reading-to-learn. (Koralek and Collins, 1997) Therefore, if a student is behind in reading in the fourth grade, he or she may not be given the remedial instruction that he or she needs, particularly in underfunded schools; the student will also fall behind in other subjects because the medium of instruction for all other subjects, the written word, is difficult at best, incomprehensible at worst.

Admittedly, literacy emerges gradually and continues to develop through adulthood. Reading levels do not stop at the fourth grade. As literacy develops, it ceases to represent a basic skill level in decoding written language, but develops into a richer spectrum of abilities in different styles and uses of reading and writing, including and includes different levels of complexity in vocabulary and syntax. One person may be described as literate when he or she can read at the fourth grade level, but another person may be described as literate for being well versed in classical literature. A spectrum of lexical items does not exist in correspondence with the spectrum of semantic values for the term "literacy."

Definitions of literacy also depend on the theoretical framework from which the observer comes. "Literacy is a relative term. Its meaning depends on individual needs

and values and the norms and expectations of the social group of which the individual is a part...Reading and writing are not so much skills as they are reflections of values and life-styles” (Winterowd, 1989). Different definitions will be created and used by different disciplines depending on the role literacy plays in that field of interest. Elementary school teachers, linguists and social workers, for example, will each have different understandings of literacy because of the different goals with which they work.

Anderson and Irvine (1993) unpack three primary perspectives of literacy in social context: functional, interpretivist, and critical. Functional literacy is the technical ability to decode print. Interpretivist literacy locates that ability within a construction of societal values. Critical literacy builds on interpretivist, but emphasizes “how current social constructions are the product of unequal social relations and conflicts of interest” (Anderson and Irvine, 1993). Each understanding of literacy has a place in the academic discourse; however, participants in that discourse must be aware of the possible plural perceptions. While the plurality of literacy must be taken into account in progressive educational reform, so also must the politics. The necessity of critical literacy will be discussed further in section 3.2.

Whatever one’s working definition of literacy is or should be, and how well it incorporates intellectual and cultural factors, it is tested through practice. As Freire states, “How your theory works and what it changes will best tell you what your theory is” (Freire, 1987). A traditionally academic perspective of literacy results in the exclusion of certain populations of students from the social and cultural opportunities afforded by the educational system, in addition to the intellectual. Heath, Freire, and others have therefore interrogated and complicated the definitions of literacy to include cultural aspects as well.

A complex perspective does not, unfortunately, entirely deproblematize the effects of literacy on education, however. The multiplicities of literacy could be construed as relativistic, and therefore weak or unable to be efficiently addressed. This is only a problem, however, for policy makers who are unwilling or unable to create complex solutions to complex problems.

One complication of a “flexible” definition of literacy is offered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

A person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community, and whose attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic make if possible for him to continue to use these skills toward his own and the community’s development. (Winterowd, 1989)

The difficulties with this perspective lie in the dependence of an individual’s literacy on his or her location within sociological constraints. A lower income, poorly educated adult in a racial minority would have very different experience of being considered literate than would an upper-middle class Caucasian with an advanced degree. The discrepancy between the two “literacies” could easily reinforce overt or covert discrimination.

The evaluation of student achievement also challenges an involved approach to literacy within the educational practices of standardized testing the multiplicities of literacy remain unaddressed to a degree.

Even though in our professional discourse it is now taken as a given that all writing is context-bound and is inherently cultural and social, the focus of much literacy instruction and of standardized testing remains on the individual student writer, who must demonstrate discreet, specified writing and reading skills out of context- or, more accurately, within the context of school-based assessment.” (Yagelski, 2000)

Critical pedagogy may integrate a diversity of cultural literacy; however, the prescribed means of evaluation continues to exclude it. Although the central purpose of education is

learning,<sup>6</sup> evaluation is needed to determine if learning is taking place, in terms of both the students' progression through school, and the lesson plans and units designed to facilitate learning. If the methods of evaluation remain prescriptive and universal, the potential of cultural sensitivity in curriculum or pedagogy cannot be maximized.

### **3.2 Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy unites literacy theory with critical theory.<sup>7</sup> Because literacy always exists within a sociocultural context, the effects of literacy on daily life politicize the ability to read and write. Literacy, like educational disadvantage, is constructed of thick cultural components in addition to certain intellectual capacities. "As an ideology, literacy had to be viewed as a social construction that is always implicated in organizing one's view of history, the present and the future; furthermore, the notion of literacy needed to be grounded in an ethical and political project that dignified and extended the possibilities for human life and freedom" (Freire, 1987). The implications of literacy and illiteracy do not affect only a student's performance in school. On the contrary, the effects continue and develop through the social, economic, political, and personal realms of an individual's life. For instance, if an individual cannot read, he or she is disabled in his or her ability to read menus, train schedules, employment applications, and newspapers. A tutor training exercise called "Pat Can't Read," which will be discussed in section 4.2, unpacks the effects of illiteracy in an individual's life. If the example student Pat cannot read at grade level in elementary school, Pat will fall behind and perhaps fail out of school. If Pat fails out of school, Pat may not be able to get a job. If Pat is unemployed, Pat will not be able to support a family. Illiteracy is not simply the inability to decode written language, but it is a social, economic, and political disability.

In the introduction to an anthology on critical literacy Lankshear and McLaren (1993) outline the politicization of literacy as it is based in and reconstructs cultural practices.

Literacies, and knowledge more generally, are identified as forms of discursive production which organize ways of thinking into ways of doing and being. As discourse, literacies shape social practices of which they are mutually constitutive. This makes literacy inherently political. (10)

Apart from the discourse of critical literacy, reading and writing may not seem inherently political on a surface level. Upon further analysis, however, the connections are clear. Thought drives language (Gleitman, 2000), and language is the cornerstone of basic literacy. It follows then that involvement with, access to and multiple uses of literacy are closely related to the control of thought, which is unquestionably political.

Because a thorough understanding of the roots of politicized literacy is the best tool to combat the injustices caused by illiteracy, Freire addresses the philosophical underpinnings critical literacy.

Literacy cannot be viewed as simply the development of skills aimed at acquiring the dominant standard language. This view sustains a notion of ideology that systematically negates rather than makes meaningful the cultural experiences of the subordinate linguistic groups who are, by and large, the objects of its policies. For the notion of literacy to become meaningful it has to be situated within a theory of cultural production and viewed as an integral part of the way in which people produce, transform, and reproduce meaning. (Freire, 1987)

As students are taught to read and write in schools, they are taught ways of thinking about the information in the world around them. Because literacy is inherently political, the institution of education, which is largely responsible for teaching students how to read and write, and use those abilities, is far from a neutral locus of knowledge transmission.<sup>8</sup>

Within curriculum and pedagogy that are informed by critical literacy, schools equip students to propagate justice by empowering their political voices.

Critical literacy, then, is learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations. The goal of critical literacy...is to challenge these unequal power relations.

(Anderson and Irvine, 1993)

Teachers can engage critical literacy in the classroom by overtly connecting literacy to political empowerment through assignments such as collecting newspaper articles, or creating a mock congress. Discourses of literacy are hollow if they do not lead to affecting justice for the disadvantaged by opening doors of social, economic, and political opportunity.

### **3.3 Definitions and Discussion of Literacy Practices**

Literacy practices are the ways with which individuals unconsciously use both spoken and written language in a cultural context, and the goals for which they use language. Reading a phone book to find the pizza delivery joint's phone number, writing thank you notes, the conventions of manners, bidialectical code-switching, and the ways with which individuals label their surroundings are a few examples of literacy practices (Heath 1983).

Literacy traditions are literacy practices that the speaker or writer is aware of. The literacy practices associated with ceremonies, performance art, storytelling, and public prayer fall in the category of literacy traditions (Heath, 1983).

Some students in Heath's study (1983) left toys in the school yard, where they belonged according to the use of that toy in their home play traditions. The teacher had quite a different definition of where the toys belonged according to her classroom organization. The classroom rule of leaving things where they belong was not broken from the student's cultural perspective, but it was broken from the teacher's perspective. The lexical entry *belong* took on multiple meanings that all needed to be understood.



The dichotomy of literacies based on the oral/narrative and written mediums of communication, however, should not be so divided for several reasons. Natural physical and psychological development dictate that oral literacy, the knowledge of and functional ability with spoken language, precedes written, although the former does not cease upon the development of the latter. They are intermeshed. Both are a combination of social and intellectual experiences.

In the “mainstream” town in Heath’s ethnography, certain steps were chronicled in students’ literacy development in the home and school.

- 1-give attention to books and information derived from books
- 2-acknowledge questions about books
- 3-respond to conversational allusions to the contents of books- they act as question answerers who have a knowledge of books
- 4- use their knowledge of what books do to legitimate their departures from “truth”
- 5- accept book-related activities as entertainment
- 6- announce their own factual and fictive narratives
- 7- listen and wait as an audience (Heath, 1983)

Certainly this paradigm is not comprehensive, as it does not contain what are usually considered basic literacy skills such as identifying letters of the alphabet in and outside of books, and decoding written words using those identifications. This progression was used in comparing pre-school literacy development Roadville and Trackton as it differed from the main town, and in analyzing the resulting educational failures of the students.

Some of these factors are highly culturally marked, such as the definitions of truth and the practices of storytelling. Some children are raised with conservative allowances on embellishment or exaggeration on “factual” events before a statement is considered false, while other children are expected to base their accounts very loosely on “what really happened.” The purposes for recounting earlier events vary from pure entertainment to moral instruction. These conceptions affect students’ rapport with a teacher, understanding of reading and history, for example, in addition to performance on

assignments that involve truth or story telling, whether or not creativity, imagination, or fantasy are explicitly elicited. If a student's cultural literacy practices in storytelling include factual accounts leading to a moral, he or she will have difficulty when directed to write a fairy tale as a homework assignment. If the teacher does not understand the contrasting understandings of storytelling, he or she may become frustrated with the student's unwillingness or inability to complete the assignment.

Many of these learned literacy practices have less to do with reading or writing as they have to do with the place literacy has as a mainstream cultural value. "Accepting book-related activities as entertainment" is a key step in a child's reading; however, even in "mainstream culture" a child who prefers reading alone to social activities is stigmatized.<sup>9</sup>

Another set of literacy practices consists of a sequencing of inquiry methods. Four prominent steps are labeling, what-questions/explanations, affective commentary, and reason-questions explanations. A reader may ask various questions while reading to a child that progress along this sequence. Very young children might be asked to point at the boy in the picture, demonstrating the understood connection between the verbal label and the picture. Utilizing the ability to label, readers will ask what-questions about the facts of the story up to that point: for example, "What did Johnny lose?" if the character has lost his mittens. By then asking children an affective question such as "How did Johnny feel when he lost his mittens?" the reader also asks the children to read or listen with a participant frame of reference, and not only an observer's perspective. The reader may also ask reason-questions: for example, "Why did Johnny lose his mittens?" The complexity of thought and understanding needed for each thinking skill is clearly greater than that of the previous skills.

As the reader elicits responses to these types of questions, related practices are enculturated for the child. Though the repetition of these types of questions, children will begin to predict the questions, and therefore pay attention to certain items of the written text, and pass over others. If the reader only asks one type of question, the child will learn to either look for basic facts, or for explanations and causal relationships in behavior. Children who are well versed in reason-explanations might be labeled remedial readers if they have little experience with what-questions because the literacy practices of schools follow the sequence of what-questions before reason-explanations (Heath, 1982). In addition to these inquiry methods, the appropriate interactional styles for orally displaying the knowledge of children's enculturated orientation to the environment of the text and reading is ingrained through repetition (Heath 1982). If a student invents an imaginative tale about Johnny and his adventurous mittens when the teacher expects a simple answer, the contrasting literacy practices at play will cause miscommunication and tension.

## **Chapter Four: Responses to the Issues**

### **4.1 Effect of Literacy Practices on Education**

“Reading cannot make us rich, it cannot guarantee power, but it can help us struggle for justice, equality, and freedom” (Shannon 1998). Teaching students how to read and write will not inherently bring about social or educational reforms; it will enable the fight for justice in the most basic way.

Following racial integration in the 1960’s many teachers initiated radical changes to their curriculum and pedagogy in order to address the cultural changes in their classrooms, and the effects those changes had upon students’ academics. Students matriculated with a wider range of basic intellectual development in addition to the wider range of cultural backgrounds. These educational experiments had the potential to be highly effective, and often were, like Mrs. Gardner’s first grade class of black “potential failures” mentioned earlier. She sculpted letters of the alphabet out of old tires and wood and scattered them around the school yard. She encouraged her students to look for letters of the alphabet in their home communities in signs, dishes, even telephone poles. Taking the class into the school auditorium twice a day, she projected a story from the class reader onto a large screen and read it repeatedly to and with the students. In doing so, she successfully introduced them to phonics by sounding out most words and sight word reading by outlining the shape of small “function” words such as auxiliary verbs

and conjunctions.<sup>10</sup> Mrs. Gardner's success was not only in raising all but one student to reading at or above grade level, but also in raising the students' confidence by setting high expectations for the students and enabling their success in fulfilling such high standards (Heath, 1983). She effectively addressed both the linguistic and non-linguistic factors in her students' backgrounds.

Heath herself participated in another classroom's reform. She worked with a fifth grade science teacher in introducing the class to the ethnographic approach to gathering data during a unit on botany and effective planting methods. The students were required to find out who in their community was known for gardening ability and interview him or her about his or her effective methods, using the local dialect. The results of these interviews would then be compared to "scientific" approaches, written in standard written English (SWE). Through a unit that integrated community involvement in learning, many levels of formality of language, the possibilities and limitations of language, and motivated student by piquing the students' interest and accessing their existing social networks, individualized uses and forms of both verbal and non-verbal language were introduced to the students in addition to ethnographic and scientific methods, vocabularies and concepts (Heath, 1983). Students from multiple cultural and educational backgrounds acquired the ability to recognize and use multiple literacies in addition to approaches to learning because of this non-traditional unit. Again, both linguistic and non-linguistic components were effectively addressed in both the curriculum and the pedagogy. Unfortunately, in the schools that most need curricular and pedagogical reforms, there is not enough funding for such involved and dramatic programming.

While Heath has been lauded for her enrichment of the educational understanding of language practices, her work has been challenged for its implications. If certain

students matriculate with diverse linguistic cultures, and are consequently disadvantaged, a simple and logical response is to explicitly teach them the linguistic culture of the school in order to empower those students in the educational system. This short-term solution, however, cannot thoroughly solve the complex issues at stake. Stuckey (1991) asks, “Could we not ask if the attempt to habituate nonmainstream children to alien systems of culture might ensure the maintenance of the existing social order? Can one break into justice by acquiring the habits that have promoted injustice?” She is not critiquing Heath’s theory itself, but challenging the implications of the theory, and inviting reform initiatives that have long-term educational and social justice in mind.

#### **4.2 America Reads**

In my own experience with the America Reads program, I found the theories of multiple layers of literacy, the diversity of literacy practices, and the politicization of literacy to be accurate and applicable. Because America Reads is a relatively recent initiative, a limited number of voices have performed critical analyses of the program and its effects. Long-term studies of the program and its effects are necessary to address the critiques that have been raised and affect any required reforms.

While America Reads is run through the US Department of Education, and may be affiliated with public schools, it is not directly related to the public school system. I include it as part of the institution of education because it is governmentally funded and involves most of the issues that are present in traditional classrooms although the structure is significantly different. The tutor plans individualized activities for each student that do not conform to any prescribed curriculum, and are not geared toward maximal performance on a certain standardized test. The freedom from requirements provides a flexibility that enables tutors and students to focus on specific strengths and

needs. On the other hand, the freedom from public school structure can also pose weaknesses because of a lack of resources for special needs such as physical, mental, and learning disabilities. Volunteer tutors cannot be experts in these specialized fields.

The effect of tutoring programs like America Reads on performance in school is clearly beneficial. The Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) conducted a study of the Book Buddies program as a model for America Reads (Meier and Invernizzi, 1999). The components of the program simulated a typical America Reads structure. On multiple forms of assessment students who had participated in the tutoring program significantly surpassed those who did not in the basic literacy skills of letter identification, word reading in isolation, and accurate reading in context. However, the tutoring did not raise all of the students to the appropriate reading level. The authors acknowledged the importance of quality classroom instruction and support structures as principle and early intervention programs like America Reads as secondary. Sustained benefits from these tutoring programs are possible only in conjunction with in-school reinforcement. The highest quality after-school program cannot entirely make up for an educational system that poorly serves its students.

As a tutor I pulled students from activities in the daily summer camp at the community center to read with them one-on-one and engage them in other literacy related activities that interested them. The campers were also divided into three age groups, which participated in an hour-long group literacy activity each day. Reading and writing took on new cultural meaning for the campers as possible forms of entertainment instead of activities associated only with school.

The campers fall into the category of disadvantaged according to the multi-layered view of disadvantage. All but five campers out of over fifty were African American and spoke a dialect of AAVE. We did not have official statistics or other information about

the campers' backgrounds. The camp was financially accessible to low-income families and provided both breakfast and lunch for all of the campers. The tutors learned through conversations with the campers that most of them were not read to at home. All but one of the counselors and junior counselors, likewise, came from the same community. Even though the campers had access to the public schools of the affluent area in which their neighborhood was located, they spoke of effectual racial segregation within the tracking system of the schools that reflected the geographical separation between the neighborhood around the community center and the predominantly white, affluent neighborhoods nearby.

Obvious linguistic differences existed between the linguistic practices of the tutors and the counselors and campers. Most of the campers and all of the staff spoke an African American Vernacular dialect, while the tutors spoke SWE. One of the tutors, an English major, commented on her discomfort with the campers' phrase-final use of prepositions, as in "Where's Tina at?" She did not express her discomfort with the campers, however, because she understood the linguistic difference, and the validity of the campers' dialect. As a linguist, I did not have the same response because grammaticality in linguistics and English do not follow the same rules. When the tutors checked out a variety of books from the library for the campers, we included texts with both standard and non-standard dialect features.

The tutors engaged cultural literacy theory as a matter of course, less for the theoretical importance than for the simple fact that engaging the campers' interest in literacy was often a challenge. Accessing their social knowledge drew them into the literacy related activity and increased the appeal of reading and writing. For one of the group literacy activities the tutors wrote clues for a scavenger hunt around the community center grounds for the campers to read and follow to find ice-pops as a reward. In order



to lead the campers to the tennis courts, the tutors wrote a clue about the African American tennis players Venus and Serena Williams who were celebrated role models for their success in a sport that is not known for welcoming minorities. Their enthusiasm in answering this clue was not matched for the other clues, which were less significant to the community culture. By using the literacy practice of writing a scavenger hunt with this particular clue, we formed a subtle connection between literacy and societal success. We indirectly encouraged a positive attitude about opportunity and success, one of the various non-linguistic components of educational (dis)advantage, as we engaged cultural literacy. A simple device like a scavenger hunt clue can contend with multiple elements of educational disadvantage .

The application of cultural literacy reached more people than the campers at the summer camp. Elizabeth, the program coordinator, brought a book of poetry by Tupac Shakur to camp one day. The junior counselors, who had distanced themselves from all of the literacy related activities, passed the book around covetously. The most aloof of the three teenage girls copied down one of the poems and ineffectively hid the paper in her purse. Providing a book with significant cultural meaning, Ostberg engaged the junior counselors in literacy without risking their social prestige. Finding language that spoke to the junior counselors broke down the barrier between their cultural values and the relation of literacy activities to the foreign culture of school.

Critical literacy was made conscious for the tutors and counselors because it played a significant role in staff relations and the success of the integration of the tutoring program and summer camp program that I have previously mentioned. The week long tutor training program was expanded to include the camp counselors in order to address some of the tensions that had arisen between the tutoring and camp staffs in the past. One of the main issues this inclusion attempted to prevent was a misunderstanding on the

part of the counselors as to why the tutors were involved in the camp in the first place. The camp had not previously included reading and writing, which were associated with school, with the fun of swimming, sports, and arts and crafts.

To concisely and simply explicate the theory of critical literacy Jennifer Nichols, the former director of the America Reads program at Bryn Mawr College, conducted an exercise called “Pat can’t read.” Together, the tutors and counselors brainstormed reasons why a token child, called Pat, could not read, and then unpacked the complexities of those reasons. If Pat can’t read because Pat’s parents do not read at home, it might be that Pat’s parents cannot read, for example. The group then asked, “What does it mean that Pat can’t read?” The tutors again brainstormed and unpacked the social, cultural, and economic implications of Pat’s illiteracy. Without the comprehension and political difficulties of academic jargon, the tutors and counselors gained an understanding of critical literacy, and united to empower the campers through support of the literacy component of the camp.

Despite the effectiveness of tutoring programs in raising students’ reading levels, and the evidence from the America Reads program with which I worked of attention to the issues of literacy theory that I have raised, the program as a whole is not without its critics. All programs geared toward social justice—as it is loosely defined-- have been and continue to be the subject of scrutiny because of the possibility of cultural imperialism. Earlier this century the condescension and bias of a community of mostly affluent white women weakened and almost eliminated a movement to “help” impoverished areas. However, there has been a return to social justice work that is more mindful of the implications of their assumptions and action (Nichols, 2000). Policy makers and grass-roots workers can address this critique by intentionally involving

members of impoverished communities in social justice programming, and empowering disadvantaged communities to initiate the most needed social reforms.

Shannon (1998) critiques Clinton's America Reads initiative for its perceived economic motivations, as opposed to the educational and ideological motivations set forth in the media.

The only barrier, he claims, is a lack of commitment and confidence that we can teach all children to read a book on their own by the time they enter third grade. A roaring economy will fuel the engine that pulls a train of united cars who "think they can" and share his plans to make society work again. Forget the economic justice sought in the liberalism during the New Deal. Forget the political justice sought in the War on Poverty. Through America Reads, Clinton seeks to rally Americans as troops to enhance our national chances for economic growth and market dominance.

And at the same time Shannon says that the economy cannot support the American Dream for everyone. Even though he criticizes America Reads for promising opportunities that cannot be fulfilled, he does not suggest reforms to either the tutoring program or the American economic structure.

In the first major analysis of America Reads policy, Jacqueline Edmondson (2000) challenges the assumption that teaching a child to read is an easy thing to do or that any volunteer could do it without specialized training in literacy education. She expresses surprise that teachers were not opposed to America Reads based on the implications that the classroom was insufficiently providing basic skills to students. All of the critics in this study included a skepticism about the need for an outside program to teach students at the very least a technical skill. In their accolades of tutoring programs like America Reads Meier and Invernizzi (1999) argued that long-term benefits of those programs could only be achieved through continued quality classroom instruction.

Given the universality of Clinton's original initiative, it is not surprising that America Reads has not fulfilled its own challenge. Not every child can read well and

independently by the end of third grade. Because the tutors in the program can reach only the students in need that live near their universities, and because not all universities participate in the program, not every child has access to an America Reads tutor. It is a valid critique that such a potentially effective program would not be available to every student who needs it; however, it is a weak critique, and perhaps misdirected toward the tutoring program instead of the school system (Edmondson, 2000).

One weakness in the structure of the America Reads program is the absence of organized assessment of students' reading skills in evaluation of the effectiveness of the tutoring. The campers in this program filled out evaluations that asked, among other questions of activity preference, if they thought they were better readers or not. No standardized form such as the NAEP was used to assess a camper's growth over the summer. The most effective response to students' needs necessitates a programmatic evaluative structure, not for comparing students to each other, but for maximizing individual progress in literacy proficiency.

Even in its initial stages, America Reads productively incorporates literacy theory while it significantly takes action against illiteracy. However, it has not fulfilled its original goals of enabling every 8-year-old in America to read an appropriate book all by him or herself. The causes of illiteracy in school are not repaired because the focus of this reform has remained outside the classroom. Without reforms interior to public schools, illiteracy will continue to disadvantage students.

## **Chapter Five: And Beyond**

American ideologies of possibility and opportunity promote the encouragement of both informal and formal education. “It is part of our faith, as Americans, that there is potential in all children” (Kozol, 1991). “You can do anything you want if you are given the opportunity and work hard enough. Formal education is the primary means by which individuals are given opportunities” (Yagelski, 2000). Schools should not be endorsing these promises if they are not also fulfilling them.

The inequalities in the American educational system and the exclusion of adequate understandings of diverse student backgrounds contribute to a cycle of discrimination and poverty instead of eliminating them. Even if the tangible components of education were equalized, the culture of poverty would still need to be addressed in schools. As Kozol (1991) asks, “Can it disseminate the limitless horizons of the middle class to those who have been trained to keep their eyes close to the ground?”

Educational reform in the context of critical literacy and literacy practices could either be accommodating reform, in which students are taught the linguistic culture of school in order to academically succeed. This approach would be effective on the outset as it addressed the effect of an oppressive system. A transformational approach would affect and address the larger sociopolitical constructions of prestige and achievement in society to allow for multiple definitions of success. Integrating the effective strategies of the America Reads program into the classrooms with the most need would combine the two approaches to a maximum benefit for the students.

The field of sociolinguistics cannot solve the problems of the educational system or the culture of poverty. On the other hand, a sociolinguistic perspective must augment educational reform in order to effectively address the complex influences of language in education. Informed paradigms for justice-seeking reform are based on multiple approaches to literacy, and ought to be developed through intentionally political perspectives both inside and alongside the schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed.

<sup>2</sup> Here and elsewhere I use the term “mainstream” as it is commonly accepted in educational literature without thick description (Heath, 1983).

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<sup>3</sup> It is argued that the effective instruction these students received should not have been a “privilege” but a right.. (Darling-Hammond, 1997) The law requires a “free and appropriate public education” in the “least restrictive environment” for all American children (Bradley, et al, 1997). The law is not effectively enforced.

<sup>4</sup> Success, here as elsewhere, is culturally defined. Unless noted, I assume an understanding of academic success as it is traditionally defined within schools.

<sup>5</sup> Because the term “mainstream” is commonly used without thick description in both popular and scholarly writings (Heath, 1983), I will not problematize it here. See Charnofsky 1971 and Chanan and Gilchrist 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Education serves several purposes such as socialization and the creation of a body of knowledge. Learning may be the central and most overt purpose of education, according to most current educators, but it is certainly not the only purpose. Many other developmental and political agendas are also at play.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of critical literacy and policy analysis, see Edmondson, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> See Freire, 1998 for a discussion of teaching as not just a transfer of knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> A major emphasis in the America Reads program with which I worked was the goal of the students liking to read better, as opposed to having better reading skills. This focus was based on the assumption that if a student likes to read, he or she will read more, and that reading more will improve his or her skills.

<sup>10</sup> The sounding-out and outlining of words acknowledges and contributes to the development of reading from phonics, a visual-auditory process of comprehension, to sight word reading, a purely visual comprehension which skips the translation of printed material into auditory. For a discussion of reading theory, see Ehri and Metsala, 1998.

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