© 2005 INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION (pp. 286–301) doi:10.1598/JAAL.49.4.3

Keeping adults behind: Adult literacy education in the age of official reading regimes

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The author challenges the U.S. Partnership for Reading's principles for adult literacy instruction by describing two successful projects and a strategy he calls critical integrative literacy.

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The Partnership for Reading (PFR) in the United States has recently thrown its hat into the ring of adult literacy research and practice by introducing the document *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction* (Kruidenier, 2002), produced by the National Institute for Literacy, as "the best information available about how adults learn to read." (See the PFR website www.nifl.gov/nifl/partnershipforreading/about/about.html.) The information about adult literacy comes, almost entirely, from the National Reading Panel's (NRP) data on children. (See the NRP website www.nationalreadingpanel.org.) Building its case from the NRP data, the PFR advocates for a narrow, school-based conception of reading, excluding from its recommendations several aspects of literacy development that have been determined by many adult educators, scholars, and practitioners to be vital for the successful development of competent readers and writers (Brookfield, 1991, 2004; Campbell, 2003; Campbell & Burnaby, 2001; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000). By echoing the NRP data, the PFR has taken a giant step in legitimating a national agenda for adult literacy education, while substantiating data that have been shown to be problematic for both children and adults (Allington, 2002b; Coles, 2000a, 2000b).

The entanglement of educational agencies that are connected to the PFR and subsequently balanced on the head of the NRP's research findings are mapped on the PFR website as follows:

> The Partnership for Reading is a collaboration among four federal agencies: the Department of Education, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), which administers the PFR and coordinates its work.

Throughout this article, I argue that the PFR produces, legitimates, and disseminates knowledge that supports ideas about adult literacy development that are seriously flawed. The power of the PFR can be most readily seen in its ability to exclude and invalidate an array of research and theory that contradicts what it has determined to be the best direction for research and instruction. At stake in confronting and disrupting the hegemony of the PFR is no less than the pedagogical capacity to imagine and put into practice adult literacy initiatives that go beyond the strict confines of a federalized body of "official" and "scientifically proven" knowledge, where systematic phonics-based instruction is believed to be the best indicator of reading success. As a challenge to the PFR's official knowledge, I discuss two

successful adult literacy initiatives that utilize what I call a critical integrative literacy (i.e., a strategy of literacy development that merges the technical and contextual in the service of social change).

My critique of the PFR and its uncritical cooptation of the NRP data is framed by critical-feminist-postmodern theories of language, literacy, and knowledge. In the context of language and literacy, Gee's (1992, 1999, 2001) influential studies of discourse as well as Volosinov's (1973) social theory of language and knowledge inform my work. Language and literacy are related concerns that should be taken up as constituent objects of analysis. Through language we construct as well as interrogate complex social realities. Thus, literacy should be understood as the means by which we not only understand realities that differ from our own but also learn to collectively deliberate and transform realities that might be oppressive for us or others. The languages that we know are directly related to the realities that are constructed, known, and transformed. As such, reading is not simply decoding phonemes and the basic comprehension of texts. Rather, it describes a process by which systems of representations are interpreted, rewritten, and revised (i.e., a process that recognizes the complex dialogical relationship between text and context).

Not to be misunderstood, this is not a dismissal of the importance of developing linguistic skills in the development of critical literacy, nor is it an attempt to reposition whole language as the best method of reading instruction. Rather, my critique comes out of a linguistic/semiotic orientation to literacy and culture that recognizes the social dimensions of language, learning, and cognition, and as such links language competencies to what Mills (2000) called "sociological imagination." According to Lemert (2001), "The sociological imagination refers to the ability of some to learn...to realize that, just as often, one's personal troubles are in fact public *issues*" (p. 12). Because of this, the study and practice of literacy development is an ethical praxis; ethical because of our "capacity to 'spiritualize' the world, to make it either beautiful or ugly" (Freire, 2000, p. 67). Similarly, pedagogy is being understood as not just an epistemological issue, but one of power, ethics, and politics.

> As a form of counter-memory, critical pedagogy starts with the everyday and the particular as a basis of learning; it reclaims the historical and the popular as part of an ongoing effort to legitimate the voices of those who have been silenced, and to inform the voices of those who have been located within monolithic and totalizing narratives. At stake here is a pedagogy that provides the knowledge, skills, and habits for students and others to read history in ways that enable them to reclaim their identities in the interests of constructing forms of life that are more democratic and more just. (Giroux, 1997, p. 221)

For adult literacy students, the reclamation of voice is complicated by the urgency to create viable public spaces in which their voices can be heard. Finally, my work is situated in a "relational epistemology" (Thayer-Bacon, 2000), meaning that knowledge is understood to be contextual and embodied, "interested" (Foucault, 1972), theoretically critical (Giroux, 1983), and emotionally and imaginatively charged (Benhabib, 1992; Greene, 2000).

NRP and the appeal to science

As many in literacy education know, the NRP is a federally appointed panel that attempted to discern through research-based scientific evidence the best approach to reading instruction. The goal of the national panel was to disrupt the "reading wars" and essentially sanction a national approach to teaching reading to children. Ambruster and Osborn (2001) stated, "The National Reading Panel embraced the criteria in its review to bring balance to a field in which decisions have often been made based more on ideology than evidence." The panel's findings will have serious repercussions for public policy as well as classroom practice. As Garan (2002) pointed out, "Both Congress and the National

Institute of Child Health and Human Development are committed to ensuring that the findings of the NRP report affect classroom instruction" (p. 109). Donald Langenberg, Chairperson of the National Reading Panel, testified before Congress that

> The Panel's staff has developed a comprehensive strategy to disseminate its findings. The Panel's report and an accompanying interpretive and illustrative video tape will be provided to every member of Congress, to all governors and state departments of education, to all libraries, to all of the nation's major education and teacher organizations, and to the news media. Communication materials summarizing the major elements of our report will be developed to suit the specific needs of different audiences, including parents, teachers, school administrators, and policy makers. A speakers' bureau is being formed that will send teams—which may include Panel members—to present the Panel's findings and determinations to states and to local school districts. These teams will be prepared to provide teachers with specific examples and activities to help them apply these findings and determinations in their classrooms. A Reading Education Summit to provide a national forum on the findings and determinations of the Panel for leaders of colleges and universities that prepare future teachers and enhance the skills of current teachers is also being discussed. (See Getting the Word Out at www.nationalreadingpanel.org/Press/langenberg.htm)

On the NRP website there are at least six press releases praising the importance of the NRP's work as well as congressional testimonials from Duane Alexander, Director of National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; Langenberg; Kent McGuire, Assistant Secretary, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education; and Thad Cochran, U.S. Senator, Mississippi (www.nationalreadingpanel.org/Press/congress_testimony.htm).

Alexander praised the panel for developing new methodological standards for evaluating reading research as well as argued that the findings, if put into practice, would have significant consequences for U.S. economic health. To Congress he said,

> The Panel members took this charge seriously and went about their work conscientiously and with a high degree of professionalism. They broke new ground in their field in developing the methodology for critical review and analysis of research literature, and provided valuable service to the nation in preparing their report.... The significance of these findings for the well-being of our children and their families and teachers, and the implications for the future literacy of this nation and for the economic prosperity and global competitiveness of our people is enormous. (www.nationalreadingpanel.org/Press/alexander.htm)

Langenberg (www.nationalreadingpanel.org/Press/langenberg.htm) reported to Congress that

> the Panel's most important action [was that] it developed and adopted a set of rigorous methodological standards. These standards are essentially the standards normally used in medical and behavioral research to assess the efficacy of behavioral interventions, medications or medical procedures.

Although Langenberg acknowledged in his testimonial that the panel found the need for fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction, he focused his comments primarily on the need for direct phonics instruction. He stated,

> In fact, the Panel found that many difficulties learning to read were caused by inadequate awareness and that systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness directly caused improvements in children's reading and spelling skills. The evidence for these casual claims is so clear cut that the Panel concluded that systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness should be an important component of classroom reading instruction for children in preschool and beyond who have not been taught phoneme concepts or who have difficulties understanding that the words in oral language are composed of smaller speech sounds—sounds that will be linked to the letters of the alphabet.

He went on to say to Congress that systematic phonics instruction had the greatest effect on reading improvement for kindergarten through sixth grade. He also assured Congress that the NRP will make sure its research finds its way into

U.S. schools through a rigorous public relations campaign.

Unfortunately, as Allington (2002b) and others have forcefully pointed out, the NRP's work is often more ideological than scientific. From narrowly conceived models of "science" to problematic interpretations of data, the NRP is slowly becoming noteworthy not for its scholarly rigor but for its power to shape public policy, reading pedagogies, and assessment strategies using methodological standards that are intellectually careless and ideological. For example, Cunningham (2002) identified the NRP's "rigorous methodological standards" (p. 52) as those adopted in the past by logical positivists. These were scientists and philosophers who attempted to demarcate scientific logic from nonscientific research. Cunningham wrote,

> The National Reading Panel chose to engage itself in the messy and so far unsuccessful effort to solve the demarcation problem. The members boldly assert that they have differentiated the small amount of scientific, objective, and rigorous reading research from the great quantity of reading research.... It has been more than 30 years since such a claim would not have appeared naïve to anyone familiar with philosophy of science. (p. 53)

In spite of this, the NRP appeals to "logical positivism" and "verificationism" have successfully helped establish its findings as being beyond the reach of ideology.

This appeal to science is one important strategy in the creation of what Foucault (1972) referred to as a "discursive formation," or system of dispersion. In other words, the PFR, through its uncritical cooptation of the NRP data, has helped to create and normalize a discourse of reading, research, language, and learning, making alternatives appear fantastic, mythological, and ideological. This is not to say that the discourse of phonics and positivism is new, but rather that the organization, power, prestige, and authority the PFR represents are unprecedented in the history of the "reading wars." Power, in this instance, unabashedly has constructed, legitimized, and normalized a troubling and limited perspective on literacy, language, and learning. By appealing to science, we are to believe that the NRP and the PFR are neutral and nonideological institutions. As such, we are to conclude that their research is also nonideological. But when their conception of science is, in itself, ideological, their appeal to neutrality rings hollow.

In addition to the appeal to science, it is equally important to recognize the power of the PFR to establish a consensus of common sense, or hegemony. By concentrating on skills and direct instruction at the expense of a more broadly conceived notion of literacy and pedagogy, the PFR has effectively dismissed what might be some of the most important dimensions of adult literacy development on the one hand, while attempting to create a consensus of common sense about the role that direct instruction in phonics, comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary plays in teaching people how to read on the other (Brookfield, 1991; Coles, 2000a, 2000b; Edmondson, 2003; Freire, 1971, 1973, 1978; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gee, 1992, 2001; Goodman, 1996; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Macedo, 1994; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000; Shannon, 1990, 1998). From this perspective, it is not simply "bad science," as Coles has argued, that perverts the PFR's approach to literacy development but "bad theory" as well. As such, it becomes important to understand and question the underlying theory of language and learning that supports the house of cards the PFR has built.

Adult literacy in the age of the PFR

Specific to adult literacy, the PFR claims that the research it supports and sponsors is modeled after the high standards of "evidenced-based" scientific research established by the NRP and is, as I already mentioned, "the best information available about how adults learn to read." What is revealing about the PFR claim is the list of authors

and research that it includes on its website in defense of phonics-oriented and programmatic pedagogical approaches to reading. Allington (2002a, 2000b, 2004), Brookfield (1991), Coles (2000a, 2000b, 2004), Freire (1971, 1973, 1978), Gee (1992, 1999, 2001), Goodman (1996), Hull (1997), Lankshear and McLaren (1993), Macedo (1994), and Shannon (1998), for example, are nowhere to be found. For the cynical, their absence is common sense. But if we are concerned with disseminating research about the complexities of the reading process, is it not in the public's best interest to be exposed to data and knowledge that are the result of rigorous scholarship and are epistemologically diverse? The ideological constraints of the PFR are evidenced, in part, by the exclusion of anyone whose research comes to, or even explores, alternative conclusions and ideas about what constitutes good reading practices. Equally egregious perhaps is the PFR's hypocritical stance when determining what constitutes valid scientific data.

Kruidenier (2002) admitted that

> Applying research from the K–12 level to adults is largely speculative, especially in areas where there is little existing ABE [Adult Basic Education] research. Nevertheless, a convincing argument can be made for the use of K–12 results with adults when no research-based practices exist at the adult level. (p. 11)

This is an interesting statement, given the attention the PFR places on positivistic research. It excludes research that falls outside of the tight, if not impossible, constraints of logical positivism, but nevertheless accepts, when it is in its interest to do so, the "unscientific" use of "scientific" data. Just to be clear as to the ideological severity that such a position connotes, the PFR confesses a commitment to research-based practices on the one hand but, on the other, advocates using data for adults that was compiled in a K–12 setting. In short, the research-based practices that it supports for use in adult settings can no longer be considered research based—by its own standards—if we change the research questions, the subjects of research, and the location of the studies when the research focus shifts from children to adults. Its appeal to "convincing arguments" has replaced its previous appeal to science. Although I support the imperative to make convincing arguments in support of specific interpretations of data, the PFR seems to be changing its own rules for its own purposes.

In order to avoid just this kind of accusation, the evaluation of what counts as good research was slightly amended from the NRP criteria. Qualitative research was included as a relevant means of advancing our understanding of literacy developments in adults. However, the amendment is insufficient in and of itself to disrupt the ideological continuity of its approach to reading research and practice, in part because, "To date, only a few qualitative studies have been selected and all are case studies of individual adult learners" (Kruidenier, 2002, p. 15). This statement begs several questions. First, why is there no evidenced-based adult research available for review? Have adults admittedly been "left behind" regarding research into issues specific to adult literacy? If that's so, why? Or, more accurately, has the PFR excluded an enormous amount of adult literacy research because it did not conform to its positivistic criteria?

These questions are not answered by the PFR. Instead, it reaffirms the relevancy of the NRP's findings:

> Following the lead of the National Reading Panel (NRP), which conducted a comprehensive review of reading instruction research at the K–12 level, the major research topics, or categories, selected for review are based on those components of reading found by the National Research Council (NRC) and others to be most important in learning to read: alphabetics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. (Kruidenier, 2002, p. 3)

Diverging from the NRP research, it should be noted that the PFR also included studies that investigated family literacy and workplace literacy. Nevertheless, the focus on alphabetics, fluency,

vocabulary, and comprehension at the exclusion of other components of reading, like poverty, wealth, privilege, power, culture, history, and memory, reveals the theoretical commitment that the PFR has to applying the NRP's reductionistic view of language, literacy, and learning to our understanding of adult literacy.

If these dimensions of literacy were included in the PFR report, educators would more likely be made aware of the many important realities that affect adults who are struggling to learn to read and thereby adjust their pedagogies to meet their students' needs. For example, poverty has been associated with illiteracy in a way that assumes illiteracy causes poverty as opposed to being its effect. From this perspective, illiteracy is the problem as opposed to a symptom. As such, adult reading instruction often follows a vocationalized path, rationalizing itself in terms of the economic opportunities it supposedly offers poor people. This path is plagued by numerous problems, but one that is particularly disturbing is the tendency to ignore the literacies that adults who struggle with academic written texts possess. This model of reading instruction separates the knowledge of the reader and the texts to be read. This separation easily leads to unnecessary hardships for the adult who is struggling to learn not only new technical skills but also the new knowledge (e.g., culture, history, and memory) that intrinsically permeates the texts being read. This brief example could easily include the other dimensions of literacy that I mentioned earlier. They all demand attentiveness on the part of the teacher, a responsiveness that necessarily situates the teacher as learner and the learner as teacher.

By separating the contextual from the technical, the PFR does a great disservice to our understanding of how the learning of technical skills is more than a question of what skills should be learned and how they should be taught. Rather, it is a question that must be understood to address the following as well: Who is learning, under what conditions, and in the service of what project? What literacies do the students possess? What literacy skills do they have? What illiteracies do the teachers have? What skills does the teacher need to learn to teach her or his students what kind of literacies? Acknowledging the need for an integrated approach to adult literacy (technical and contextual) does not negate the importance of acquiring the technical skills needed to interpret written language. Nor does it mean ignoring or relegating the contextual to the back burner of pedagogical priority. It does mean that without integration adults will continue to struggle to critically read both the word and the world, a reality that most, if not all, adult educators and researchers want to transform. In what follows I discuss the categories of literacy that the PFR does find important in the context of adult literacy education, explaining why at best they are insufficient and at worst embrace a deficit model of learning that only helps to further marginalize an economically oppressed population of struggling readers. Following the critique of the categories, I discuss two adult literacy programs that refused to separate the technical from the contextual.

Alphabetics

Alphabetics, the PFR explains, was chosen specifically because the NRP had determined phonological awareness an important determinate of language development for children. Kruidenier (2002) wrote, "Teaching alphabetics leads to improved achievement in other aspects of reading. This emerging principle in the adult research is supported by research conducted with children" (p. 37). But as Garan (2002) pointed out, and the NRP itself concluded, "There were insufficient data to draw any conclusions about the effects of phonics instruction with normally developing readers above the first grade" (p. 107). In fact, the PFR's entire rationale for teaching phonemic awareness comes directly, without amendment, from the NRP. How, might we ask, can the PFR extend the misinterpreted summaries from the NRP data to adults when the findings aren't even valid for children? The PFR does a double-edged disservice to our understanding of adult literacy

by (a) appropriating research meant for children and (b) uncritically accepting that research as valid for both children and adults. In this instance, it effectively acts as an epistemological public relations machine, disseminating research, perpetuating myths of language development, and constructing new myths about adult literacy development.

In spite of the claims of the PFR, there is existing research about the relationship between alphabetics and adult literacy. The following list is not meant to represent a complete overview of research, but it is intended to give readers a place to begin their own research into these matters. See, for example, Davidson and Strucker (2002); Freire (1971, 1973, 1978); Massengill, (2004); Purcell-Gates (1996); and Purcell-Gates and Waterman (2000). This is not to say that the adult population of struggling readers would not benefit from more research on the relationship between alphabetic knowledge and reading competencies.

Fluency

Training in fluency is also defended by the PFR (using the NRP findings as support) as a primary determinate of reading success in adults.

> Why should fluency be taught? Students who are not fluent readers spend more time on decoding than they do on understanding the meaning of a text. Choppy, inaccurate reading will impede reading comprehension. Reproducing the rhythm that the author of a text intended will help a reader understand the author's intended meaning. (Kruidenier, 2002, p. 56)

Fluency, by many accounts, is an important aspect of literacy, but how adult literacy students best achieve fluency, according to the PFR and the NRP, is through repeated reading. They both ignore the pedagogical efficacy of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), claiming that it is not an instructional practice supported by science. But, as Edmondson and Shannon (2002) pointed out, this is confusing, given that "in 1985 the National Academy of Science's *Becoming a Nation of Readers* recommended the practice enthusiastically" (p. 229). For additional research on the issue of fluency in adult literacy education, see Taylor and McAtee (2003). For a recent discussion about SSR for young adults, see Fisher (2004).

Vocabulary

The significance of vocabulary in adult literacy development, according to the PFR, is also derived from the NRP's research on children:

> Vocabulary occupies an important position in learning to read. As a learner begins to read, reading vocabulary encountered in texts is mapped onto the oral vocabulary the learner brings to the task. The reader learns to translate the (relatively) unfamiliar words in print into speech, with the expectation that the speech forms will be easier to comprehend. Benefits in understanding text by applying letter–sound correspondences to printed material come about only if the target word is in the learner's oral vocabulary. When the word is not in the learner's oral vocabulary, it will not be understood when it occurs in print. (Kruidenier, 2002, p. 67)

The PFR cites the NRP's suggestions for the best methods of developing vocabulary for children. They include explicit instruction, implicit instruction, multimedia methods, capacity methods, and association methods. That explicit instruction is listed first and the association method listed last should not be ignored or understood as an arbitrary ordering. Consistent with their other perspectives on literacy, the emphasis is being placed on direct instruction over and above more holistic approaches to literacy development.

However, in contradiction to explicit instruction, vocabulary development is recognized by the PFR, at least cautiously, as most effective when it occurs in "rich" settings.

> Some of the K–12 research on vocabulary instruction with children might explain why vocabulary instruction

> in workplace and family literacy settings with adults seems promising. A trend in vocabulary instruction research with children suggests that repeated exposure to new vocabulary in rich contexts is important for learning. (Kruidenier, 2002, p. 67)

Why then is associated learning not placed ahead of explicit instruction? Why is an understanding of "rich contexts" as they relate to language and literacy not situated in a more prominent manner on these sites and in their philosophy of adult literacy development? What kind of literacies do adult students possess that arise from these "rich contexts" that might be relevant to developing the skills of (de)codification? Unfortunately, these questions are not addressed, just as the role of authority, voice, prior knowledge, and the power of creative self-expression are ignored.

By contrast, Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1987) recalled his vocabulary work with adult literacy students when he wrote,

> I always saw teaching adults to read and write as a political act, an act of knowledge, and therefore a creative act. I would find it impossible to be engaged in a work of mechanically memorizing vowel sounds.... Nor could I reduce learning to read and write merely to learning words, syllables, or letter, a process of teaching in which the teacher *fills* the supposedly *empty* heads of learners with his or her words. On the contrary, the student is the subject of the process of learning to read and write as an act of knowing and of creating. (p. 34)

For subjects with memories, languages, and histories, Freire recognized that vocabulary needed to come from the

> "word universe" of people who are learning, expressing their actual language, their anxieties, fears, demands, and dreams. Words should be laden with the meaning of the people's existential experience, and not of the teacher's experience. Surveying the word universe thus gives us the people's words, pregnant with the world, words from the people's reading of the world. (p. 35)

Purcell-Gates and Waterman (2000), drawing from personal experience with adult literacy development, agreed and commented that it is "apparent" that adult literacy educators must use "the very own words of adult students" (p. 134) to provoke a meaningful engagement with written language.

Words, as Volosinov (1973) wrote, are the ideological signs par excellence into which our histories, memories, dreams, and troubles are embedded; they are pregnant with power and voice, with the possibility for hope and the reclamation of dignity. The notion of vocabulary, as it is expressed in the NRP and subsequently repeated in the discourse of the PFR, is given less weight; it is notable for its lightness. Words represent communicative symbols, fixed in time and space—nonnegotiable, one-dimensional signs that are meant to regulate and order a chaotic world. Vocabulary development is understood outside its dialectical relationship "to configurations of knowledge and power, on the one hand, and the political and cultural struggle over language and experience on the other" (Giroux, 1997, p. 1). These partnerships have situated vocabulary as the means by which students can obtain cultural currency or job advancement. There is absolutely no mention of the word as a "tool" by which people can decolonize their minds, critically assess the world, and generate new vocabularies upon which to build new hopes and dreams. Given the economically depleted contexts of many adults who are struggling to develop their literacy skills, this absence should not be ignored or taken lightly.

Comprehension

Comprehension, according to the PFR and stemming from the NRP data, "can be described as understanding a text that is read, or the process of constructing meaning from a text" (Kruidenier, 2002, p. 77). This is an interesting moment in both the NRP report and its cooptation by practitioners and researchers responsible for the PFR report on adult literacy. If comprehension is a "process of constructing meaning," then wouldn't

meaning become relative (albeit contextual), language negotiable, words ideological, and sounds geopolitical? In short, doesn't this perspective on comprehension articulate in a profound way with many of the lessons of whole language and a poststructural view of language? Can we speak of comprehension as a process of constructing meaning without acknowledging a constitutive relationship between the knower and what is known (Thayer-Bacon, 2000)? To the contrary, Kruidenier explained,

> Reading comprehension involves all of the elements of the reading process [i.e., alphabetics, fluency, vocabulary] acting together. As comprehension takes place, words are decoded and associated with their meanings in the reader's memory, and phrases and sentences are processed rapidly or fluently enough so that the meanings derived from one word, phrase, or sentence are not lost before the next is processed. (p. 77)

Comprehension, from this perspective, is more about finding or discovering meaning and less about constructing it. Likewise, language is not understood as a poststructural system of representation and meaning, but rather is seen as a reflective structure, words mimetically mirroring the objects that they name. Constructing meaning, by contrast, is an intrinsically social and interpretive act, whereas the reading skills that the NRP and the PFR advocate are taught as though they were independent of a larger social order (i.e., private acts). Grossberg (1996), explaining Stuart Hall's position on cultural practice like language interpretation, said, "The meaning is not in the text itself but is the active product of the text's social articulation, of the web of connotations and codes into which it is inserted" (p. 157). If we do not identify and examine—"read"—the complexities of the "web," then we will most likely be unable to develop interpretive strategies that encourage agency, a vital principle in the literacy process. It is understandable then that the PFR thinks about comprehension skills as strategies of textual understanding and not as cultural practices tied up in the production of power and knowledge.

The PFR's view implies that language is a private affair and not a social system. As a social system, neither the reader nor the author can be "the sole or unique source of meanings in language, since that would mean that we could express ourselves in entirely private languages" (Hall, 1997, p. 25). Emphasizing interpretation as opposed to comprehension necessitates a pedagogical engagement with history, operations of power, and sociological structures. Through this engagement, we can teach literacy students how to situate texts historically, sociologically, and politically, giving them anticipatory power over the words through a critical engagement with the contexts of which they are a part. As Freire and Macedo (1987) wrote, "Reading always involves critical perception, interpretation, and the *rewriting* of what is said" (p. 36). Similarly, writing always involves reading and revising the world.

Motivation

The motivation of adult students is often discussed as a major problem in literacy programs. Although many reasons are given as to why adult students often stop attending literacy programs, Wagner (2000) wrote, "There is little doubt, however, that the general factor behind all of these technical issues is that learners, for whatever sets of reasons, do not feel motivated to participate and remain in such voluntary programmes" (p. 20). Kruidenier (2002) explained that

> Many adult educators are convinced that motivation is an important factor in the progress adults are able to make, especially given the fact that ABE, unlike K–12 education, is not mandatory. Despite its importance among adult literacy educators, effects of motivation (whether they are positive, negative, or neutral) on reading achievement have received virtually no attention in the research examined for this review. Where it has been addressed, in the reading comprehension studies, results suggest that when issues related to motivation and feelings about one's reading ability are dealt with directly, reading achievement improves. Replication of this research and new research related to motivation are needed. Psychometric measures of motivation would also be useful if we

> want to know whether (or how) initial motivational levels increase in programs that address motivation in order to improve reading achievement. (p. 110)

Motivation is an important referent for all theories and practices of teaching and learning. We tend to learn well when we are motivated to do so. But as an insight on the success or failure of adult literacy students, it risks banality without further clarification.

Motivation can be understood as either a sign of personal failure on the one hand or institutional failure on the other. The latter is often the focus of critical literacy educators, researchers, and theorists. The level of motivation a student feels toward her or his own learning, from this perspective, is an effect, in part, of how meaningful the curriculum and pedagogy are to the student. The meaningfulness of literacy development is not intrinsic to the activity itself nor is the motivation to learn intrinsic to the student. Rather, learning is made meaningful by any number of pedagogical and curricular strategies, some of which I discuss at the end of this article. When the learning context is made meaningful, students are more likely to be motivated to be actively engaged in the learning process. Simply because the context of learning is meaningful, however, does not mean that students will attend classes, do homework, or read independently. Meaningfulness is one vital but insufficient dimension of creating a successful literacy program. Other considerations, such as time, place, instructor, language, child care, and support, are just as important as creating a pedagogically meaningful environment. The difficulties arise when the notion of motivation is used to explain, for example, an adult's absenteeism when the location or time of the class is inappropriate for any number of adults who might otherwise be motivated to attend literacy classes.

When motivation is understood, not as an effect or implication of a "context of learning" but as a dimension of a student's own intrinsic character, it often (especially when used to describe poor students and students of color) is just another way to express what has come to be understood as the deficit model of learning. Purcell-Gates (1996) explained that

> For years, professionals and public opinion have held on to the notion that poor and minority peoples are deficient in important ways. The list of supposed deficiencies is long and inclusive: deficient cognitive abilities, deficient language, poor motivation, devaluation of education, poor parenting skills. *"Those people"* don't care about education, or are generally unfit, or cannot even speak correctly, much less learn to read and write standard English. (p. 3)

In short, the deficit model positions poor people and minorities as lacking in language, intelligence, sophistication, attitude, and so on. Countering the deficit model of learning, Purcell-Gates advocated for what she called a sociocultural model of learning. She wrote,

> All communities have appropriate cognitive abilities, albeit different ones to fit varied life situations. Similarly, language variation between groups reflects community use and norms, resulting in dialects and registers that must be judged not relative to some "perfect" language but rather to their effectiveness in varying contexts. We can no longer make judgments about the abilities and or disabilities of peoples from sociocultural groups different from our own, using "our" group as the standard (no matter which group is "ours"). (p. 4)

In the context of adult literacy education (as well as early childhood and adolescent contexts), the sociocultural model of learning leads educators to understand the notion of motivation in context. For example, adult learners are often motivated to acquire more economic power, cultural capital, and authority but might be less motivated to subject themselves to the kind of pedagogies that the PFR advocates. In this sense, motivation is not the problem, whereas the deficit approach to adult literacy development is.

The PFR does not, in this instance, draw on the NPR's research because the PFR argues that the issue of voluntary versus mandatory schooling makes the issue of motivation different for children. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how the trope of motivation in adult literacy education

positions adults as if they were problem children. When educators speak of at-risk students or problem children, the focus of the attention is often upon the child. What is wrong with these kids? Why don't they want to learn? The institution is rarely looked at in these theories of failure as a contributing force of failure for these "at-risk" students. The reasonable question to ask would be, "What is putting these kids at risk?" More often than not, the answer comes back, "Themselves." These children, we as a society are to believe, are a risk to themselves and us. The ultimate brutality of this position is realized when the children start to believe it. The internalization of this social marginalization—sometimes called false consciousness—helps to reproduce the very realities that schools claim to want to fix.

The correlation to adult literacy students is striking. Not only are adult literacy students often the "at-risk" kids now grown, but they must also contend, once again, with a powerful institution positioning their "literacy" about the denigration that they experience in the world regarding their reading skills as a feeling of self-efficacy. This is both demeaning and negating. Instead of using the reality of marginalization as the student understands it to motivate the dialectic of teaching and learning, the educator is encouraged to dismiss it as a feeling that blocks reading success. What blocks reading success? Adult literacy students' attitude (i.e., their motivation) does. This invalidates their realities, just as it misses a pedagogical opportunity to use the words and internalized experiences of oppression that are being expressed by the student in a literacy exercise. For some recent work around the issue of motivation, see Padak and Bardine (2004) and Demetrion (2001).

Critical integrative literacy: Merging the technical and contextual

Moving beyond the confines of the PFR literacy categories, the two adult literacy projects that I discuss critically integrate the technical and the contextual. These forms of critical integrated literacy are "critical" because they engage illiteracy as a function of power, just as they move to empower those who are struggling to read to change their social and political conditions.

First project

With the support of Myles Horton and Highlander Folk School (Monteagle, Tennessee), Septima Clark and others created the Citizenship Schools, which initiated a mass-based adult literacy campaign (Adams, 1975/1998). According to Adams, in the early 1950s Esau Jenkins and Septima Clark visited Highlander Folk School and Horton to participate in a workshop on the United Nations. But Jenkins approached Horton, telling him that his concern was adult literacy education and that without it a workshop on the United Nations remained meaningless for his community in Charleston, South Carolina. He asked Horton if he would consider establishing an adult literacy program "to help them become better citizens" (p. 113). At this time in South Carolina, the political inequity that was caused through the racial segregation of schools was complicated and made even more manifest by a state law that said if African Americans "couldn't read the constitution, then they couldn't register to vote" (p. 120). Within this context of racism and poverty, Horton struggled, not unlike many adult educators still struggle today, to understand the failure of state- and federal-supported adult literacy programs. He concluded that these programs were degrading to adults who were being taught like young children. Adults with years of significant life experiences were being asked to "read sentences of dubious value, even to children" (p. 115). For Horton and others who were concerned about the relationship between adult illiteracy and political power, *what* and *why* the adults read in the course of learning to read was as important as *how* they were taught to read.

Myles Horton recognized the need to establish the school in a place that adults could relate to and feel comfortable. "Moreover, the work of

learning to read must be adult work and work that was a part of the islanders' own lives" (Adams, 1975/1998, p. 115). As many progressive adult educators know, the setting in which adult literacy takes place is often the first and most difficult hurdle for many adult learners. If adults are asked to enter an elementary school or cold and dank basement for their schooling, the message is clear to them that their learning is not a priority and that their real-world literacies should be left at the door.

When I taught adult basic education and GED (General Equivalency Diploma) classes, the setting was a cold and ill-equipped basement in a youth center. As the thud of basketballs reverberated through the ceiling from the kids playing above us in the gym, my students tried to concentrate and ignore the noise as well as the children's reading books that lined the shelves in the room. Leaving the classroom, they would often bump into their children's friends who were at the center for after-dinner activities. Such encounters are often difficult and degrading to adults who are struggling to learn to read, and they make it quite easy for adults to simply stop coming to class. Again, the question that needs to be asked as far as attendance goes in this context is not why do adults *stop* coming or fail to come at all, but rather why *do* they attend when the environment for learning is so hostile to their own knowledges, literacies, and experiences?

The *how* of Highlander is directly connected to the *who*. In other words, it became apparent that "the teacher had to be a peer and someone who could teach them to read what they needed to read, in this case, the South Carolina constitution" (Adams, 1975/1998, p. 115). Drawing from the community, Septima Clark "hired" her niece, who had no formal teaching experience. By using the "cultural" resources of a community, adult literacy educators would create an implicit degree of trust. The community teaches the community. Clark, in a conversation with Hilliard (2003), stated, "I generally avoided using regular trained teachers...their education got in the way" (p. 102). The Highlander literacy initiative, spearheaded by Clark, was a huge success. "These schools were responsible for teaching reading to 12 million potential voters who were illiterate. In a short period of time...the number of illiterates were reduced from 12 million to about 12,000, radically altering voting patterns in the South" (p. 102). Various methods were used, from teaching phonemic awareness to discussing how to use literacy as a political tool. But the most important lesson to be taken away from Clark's literacy initiative is the notion that an adult literacy program should be built upon a foundation of respect, shared knowledge, and a social–political project that is of consequence to the learners and teachers.

Second project

The second adult literacy program that I discuss is a women's literacy class taught in rural El Salvador. The information about the Freirean-based program comes out of an 18-month ethnographic study and subsequent book on the research collaboration between a professor and an on-site literacy instructor (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000). They wanted to "gain telling insights into how people learn to read and write in a program that focuses on achieving awareness and knowledge of the nature of one's own oppression and ways to act to achieve liberation and social justice" (p. x). Acknowledging at the outset that many educators who are "sympathetic to critical literacy principles and committed to social change have little understanding of how learners actually go about learning to read and to write" (p. xi), Purcell-Gates and Waterman presented a cogent ethnographic account of critical literacy in practice.

What is initially striking about this account of adult literacy is the time and effort the researchers put into understanding the social, political, and pedagogical contexts of the El Salvadorean literacy students. The ethnography includes maps and pictures of the community and the students. We are told that the meeting times were changed by the students, which

"allowed them to prepare and serve lunch to their families, as well as return home in time to prepare and serve evening meals" (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000, p. 49). We learn detailed information about each woman in the class, such as history with schooling, family relations, community responsibilities, and home life (pp. 50–63). As an aside, when I included this book in my graduate seminar on adult literacy, it was interesting to see my students getting quite impatient with this part of the ethnography. Trained in a more traditional approach to early childhood literacy development, basically the one advocated by the NRP, these students were unexpectedly hostile to the focus on social justice, oppression, and social context. Thinking that these components of literacy were secondary to language development, they expressed their discontent with the authors, suggesting that they were ideologues.

From this ethnographic information we get some insights about motivation and student attendance. In contrast to the PFR's deficit perspective concerning motivation, Purcell-Gates and Waterman (2000) found that "One element that seemed to stand out in the data was the degree to which the literacy classes and their potential students were supported by the community" (p. 64). Moreover, the purpose of the literacy classes was not couched in workplace efficiency but rather was "framed by the leaders of the community as an opportunity to help the community and its people in their drive for social justice and economic well-being" (p. 64). Even though Waterman was an outsider in the community, she nevertheless had the skills to develop intimate, respectful, and trusting relationships with her students. (Without these skills and the disposition to use them, I believe that adult literacy educators cannot create a literacy environment that is conducive to learning.)

> The value served by [Waterman's] decision to live within the community cannot be overstated...this allowed her to learn about her students and their culture, language, and ways of being to a much greater depth than if she only appeared from the outside just before class and left the community when the class ended each day. The relationship and trust she established proved to be a critical element of the program. (pp. 65–66)

This is not to say that in their book Purcell-Gates and Waterman romanticize the power of interpersonal relationships to overcome the material difficulties that plague the adult literacy contexts in the United States as well as less developed nations like El Salvador, difficulties such as

> lack of materials, scarcity of adequate classroom space, the supreme obstacles to attendance created by the demanding life responsibilities that adults face, and the effects that life's stresses, particularly those associated with oppressed and marginalized people, have on the adult student's ability to learn when in class. (p. 66)

On the contrary, they confront the enormity of the challenge by using this knowledge in the development of critical praxis, while avoiding quick-fix interventions.

Oral discussion played a major role in developing the reading and writing skills of these students. Even as some students were hesitant or confused by so much discussion, Waterman explained that discussion was important to reading and writing because the students have important opinions and insights that should be included in the class. What is important in this exchange is not only the acknowledgement that oral expression plays an important role in adult literacy skill development but also that Waterman spoke honestly and clearly about what her methods were and why she had chosen to use them. By using students' knowledge in the development of literacy skills, we also have a better chance of making the reading and writing process meaningful. No longer abstract skills, reading and writing take on a meaning that is rooted in the knowledges and experiences of the students.

In one class, Waterman introduces a "generative theme" on a poster-size photograph, which has a word printed in bold underneath it. She then reads a short paragraph dealing with issues

related to the photograph and printed word. The paragraph also deals directly with the life and history of her students. So we have six "texts" operating at one time in this example: (1) the photograph, (2) the printed word, (3) the orally read paragraph, (4) the teacher, (5) each student (separately and as a class), and (6) the social reality in which all this is taking place. The convergence of these six texts drives the work the class does on that day.

Here's how the class continues. A discussion ensues about the paragraph that was read. Most students participate, adding different ideas and opinions to the mix. Waterman, in this particular exchange, does not offer any opinions about what the group is discussing, acting as facilitator instead of participant. The absence of her opinions, from a Freirean perspective, presents a problem in that Freire (2000) argued that teachers should never pretend that they are neutral, because neutrality is an impossible ideal. However, it is possible that her participation might have hampered the lively dialogue that took place, making Freire's position on neutrality an important consideration, although one that must be measured and responsive to the specific pedagogical context in which dialogue is taking place.

We are told that at the conclusion of the discussion Waterman asks, "Who can give me a sentence that summarizes what we have been talking about?" (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000, p. 74). She writes a student's response on the chalkboard. Waterman then leads the class in "three choral readings of the sentence, the third independently" (p. 74), while pointing to each word. Next, she affirms that each class member has, in fact, just read what's on the board. She then has all students copy the sentence into their notebooks and encourages them to continue writing other thoughts about the generative theme. Because she knows her students very well, Waterman anticipates their fear and apprehension about misspellings and penmanship by telling them this:

> I do not care about your spelling or your penmanship. The most important thing is that you try and use words that express more of what you think. Write the words whatever way you can. Really it does not matter to me if you spell words correctly. (p. 75)

Making her way around to each of the students as they are writing, Waterman begins to collect words from her students for a "dictionary" that she hangs in full view. Each student then reads her writing to Waterman and to the entire class. Only two students are hesitant to read publicly to the class, and in the end everyone reads aloud but one student. Waterman then shifts the focus of the class to a lesson on syllables. She tells her students,

> One way that we learn to read is by learning the sounds of letters, breaking words down to their parts, and sounding these parts out in order to finally read the whole word. In the beginning, some will only be able to read the words that contain the syllables that we have studied. But little by little, we will be able to read more. (p. 76)

This is an important exchange to highlight because it shows that (a) phonological concerns are not beyond the scope of critical literacy and (b) the teacher should continue to communicate with students about the reasoning, intentions, and expectations behind each reading strategy. If we do not communicate with our students about the methodological approaches we employ, it is like blindfolding a beginning mountain climber who is expected to negotiate foreign terrain simply on the directions of the leader.

Purcell-Gates and Waterman (2000) identified this type of literacy strategy as "whole-part-whole," beginning with the larger social context, identifying parts of speech and language that arise from an analysis of the social context, then moving back out again, connecting the parts to the whole. The process is a kind of dialectical dance, always moving out and in and out, connecting social reality to syllables to social reality. Interestingly, Waterman noted that in El Salvador students often have a much better understanding

of the "wholes" than adult students in the United States.

The power of this ethnographic study is not in how, once again, we see that a contextualized, dialogic process is the most effective means of teaching adults how to read and write written texts. The power in this study is how it illustrates the pedagogical possibilities of blending the principles and insights of critical theory with the practices of critical literacy and whole language. On the one hand, we see a focus and commitment to a critical engagement with issues of oppression, identity, ideology, and power. On the other hand, we see an ethical obligation to understanding literacy's relationship to hegemonic and counterhegemonic practices and ideas. Last, we see a pedagogy of freedom that links reading the world and word to collective power and individual agency. These three dimensions of adult literacy development provide a strong and sturdy foundation upon which we can continue to build politically responsive literacy projects.

Conclusion

By echoing the work of the National Reading Panel in its support of a skill-based adult literacy model, the Partnership for Reading ignored these two effective and proven models of adult literacy education. The two projects described suggest that a successful adult literacy project must be contextually specific. It must be culturally, politically, and historically grounded in the needs of the adults who want to develop the reading skills that will be critical for their own pleasure, agency, utility, and independence. The educators in these examples illustrate the relationship between their own illiteracy in the discourses of those that they wish to teach and the need to become more literate in those discourses.

I believe these two models provide adult educators with a strong foundation upon which to build effective mass-based literacy campaigns as well as motivate more research and the production of new knowledge. Adult literacy education is an enormously complex social project, and the more complex a map we have of the field, the better prepared we will be to meet the needs of those in U.S. society who often need the most. However, if the PFR continues to support, legitimate, and disseminate misguided or incomplete knowledge about adult literacy development, we can expect that critical integrative adult literacy programs will continue to be excluded from the national agenda and erased from historical memory.

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TITLE: Keeping adults behind: Adult literacy education in the age of official
SOURCE: Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy 49 no4 D 2005/Ja 2006
PAGE(S): 286-301
WN: 0533504940003

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