

# Changing Literacy

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*Current discussions about literacy often focus on how economic changes are raising expectations for literacy achievement. The emergence of a so-called knowledge economy or learning economy requires more people to do more things with print. Less attention has been given, however, to how the pressure to produce more literacy affects the contexts in which literacy learning takes place. This article looks at the literacy learning experience of an autoworker turned union representative, a blind computer programmer, two bilingual autodidacts, and a former southern sharecropper raising children in a high-tech university town. It uses the concept of the literacy sponsor to explore their access to learning and their responses to economic and technological change. Their experiences point to some directions for incorporating economic history into thinking about cultural diversity and for using resources in school to address economic turbulence and inequality beyond the school.*

All of us involved in education are well aware that literacy is in the grip of change. We can feel it in the rising standards for reading achievement and accountability in schools. We can experience it in the steady stream of technological innovations that alter the ways reading and writing take place. We can hear it in the economic drumbeat for more people to do more things with symbol systems. And we can see it in the increasing association between literacy and economic viability, the new vise of social injustice.

Literacy is changing because the economy is changing. The United States has become a so-called knowledge economy or informational economy, in which mental labor has replaced physical labor and making information and ideas has replaced making things as our main economic pursuit. Human capital is now regarded as more valuable than land or even money, so literacy has become a hot commodity (Bell, 1973; Beniger, 1986; Machlup, 1980).

You would think that these would be good times for teachers of reading and writing. For one thing, you would think that it would be noticed that only a population fairly highly skilled to begin with could manage to make and sustain a knowledge economy. You could argue that the mass literacy that developed out of free public schooling was the irresistible energy

source that fueled American capitalism in the 20th century (Kaestle, 1983; Mitch, 1992; Soltow & Stevens, 1981). Yet today teachers and students are routinely criticized for not producing enough of what is needed. For another thing, information, mental labor, ideas, literacy—these have always been the main crafts of the school. Schools, for better or worse, have always been organized as learning communities. We're all about human capital. You would think, in the current climate, that teachers and classrooms would be sources of authority, sites of investment and reward, models for reform instead of objects of reform. Yet this is rarely the case.

Finally, you would think that the intensifying worth of literacy in the nation's economy would bring renewed possibility to the democratic hope in public education that a more equal distribution of literate skill can moderate the effects of inequality in wealth and civil rights. But such equal distribution is not happening, and, in fact, the intensifying worth of literacy aggravates race and class inequity (Brandt, 2001). Just as it seems the rich get richer, the literate get more literate. So these are not good times for public school teachers of reading and writing.

To understand why not, I want to argue that it is necessary to examine more critically what is happening now in the history of literacy. Most of our talk about literacy focuses on how economic changes are raising expectations for achievement. But it is important to consider that this current climate of economic change also constitutes the context in which literacy learning must take place now and in the foreseeable future. What has this transformation from manufacturing to information been doing to the social circuits through which the skills of literacy are passed from one generation to the next? How does the relentless escalation in literacy standards arrive at the scenes where children and adults are now learning to read and write? And, most important from my point of view, what has the turning of literacy into an economic resource done to the meaning of literacy in America? What does it mean to be a nation where literacy is taught and learned under the banner of economic productivity and competition?

#### SPONSORS OF LITERACY IN AMERICAN LIVES

In the early 1990s, I set out to look for answers in the lives of ordinary Americans. Over a period of 5 years, I interviewed more than 80 people from all walks of life born between 1895 and 1985, asking them to remember everything they could about how they learned to read and write across their lifetimes, focusing particularly on the people, places, materials, and motivations involved in the process. Through their accounts, put side by side, across a period of some 90 years, emerged the contours of economic change and their impact on literacy learning and development. Most

fundamentally, these changes could be traced in what I came to describe as the sponsors of literacy: those agents, local or distant, abstract or concrete, who enable, support, teach, model, recruit, regulate, suppress or withhold literacy, and gain advantage by it in some way. Sponsors of any kind, as we know, lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored but do so for their own interests, whether by direct repayment or, indirectly, by credit of association (Bourne, 1986; Hortsman & Kurtz, 1978; Lynch, 1986). Whenever anybody is learning to read or write anything, it is always possible to ask who is subsidizing the event (or not), how the materials involved have arrived at the scene (or not), and whose interests are served in the learning (or not). As I suggest later, as literacy became more valuable in economic productivity and gain, sponsors of literacy proliferated in the United States, and their competition for developing and using available reading and writing skills for their own advantage had profound effects on all of our lives as workers, students, parents, and citizens.

People's accounts of how they learned to read and write were filled with references to people, places, and things: parents, teachers, religious figures, military officers, older relatives or friends, authors, editors, prison personnel, supervisors, physicians, therapists, librarians, cereal companies, government agencies, unions, school clubs, civil rights movements, political organizations, businesses and corporations, radio and television programs of all kinds as well as an array of materials from ballpoint pens to newspapers to phonographs to appointment calendars to computers that were sold, given, or issued at various times to the people I talked with. Through these references to sponsors, I was able to link individual episodes of literacy learning to larger forces—particularly economic forces—that were reorganizing American society across the 20th century. It was possible to compare the sponsorship networks of people living in one place and time with people in another place and time as well as compare people positioned differently in the same place and time.

This approach revealed many things. Seeing who was sponsoring whose literacy, how, for what, and to what degree made it possible to apprehend deeper causes for literacy inequity—the stratified systems of sponsorship stretching far beyond individual families and schools that affect access to, achievement of, and reward for literacy. A new dynamic in the sponsorship of mass literacy emerged in the 20th century. For a long time, most people learned to read and write under the auspices of a small number of largely conservative institutions, principally common schools or houses of worship. Literacy preserved the wisdom of the ages. Reading and writing gave you access to the traditions of the institutions that sponsored you, and through your literacy those institutions were able to maintain their authority and adapt to change. Although reading and writing existed as forms of skilled labor, literacy remained peripheral to most work. Its value was chiefly moral

and cultural, a sign of membership, compliance, conformity, belief, assimilation, just as its absence was a sign of noncompliance, nonassimilation, or exclusion. As literacy linked citizens to an official cultural past, traditional knowledge, and centralized authority, it could serve as a counterbalance in periods of social disruption and economic change, including industrialization (Graff, 1986; Mitch, 1992; Soltow & Stevens, 1981). By the early decades of the 20th century, however, this context of literacy was already changing, as the skills of reading and writing were becoming more deeply implicated in the engines of economic productivity. Rapid-process production, technological innovation, modern weaponry, corporate consolidation, the growth of consumerism, and especially the rise of knowledge industries all led to new and intensifying demands on reading and writing (Beniger, 1986; Castells, 1989). Buying and selling involved many more people in recording, moving, and promoting information; readers became targets both as audiences for advertising and as purchasers of literacy-based commodities.

At the same time, a market mentality was helping to separate out forms of human resources, including literacy skills, as commodities in themselves. In increasing numbers, people found their mental and scribal skills rated and tagged for market to employers. Even more profoundly, literacy loosened its allegiance with tradition and stability and aligned itself more often with competition and innovation, technological or otherwise. It was beginning to be understood as a mode of production and profit. Sponsors of literacy proliferated, grew more diffused, heterogeneous, hybrid, and sometimes short-lived. Where once people wanting access to literacy had to move, usually to urban centers, to get it, now sponsors of literacy started coming after them. Finding new ways to appeal to people's literacy or to use their skills more efficiently or their outputs more ingeniously or even to go around them when necessary became fundamental to economic competition, especially in the second half of the 20th century. Rather than serving to replicate tradition, literacy was pushed into the service of the restless search for new thinking, new knowledge, new products, new angles, and new markets. Instead of serving as a counterbalance during periods of excessive or rapid social change, literacy began to play a leading role in that change; it became a major catalyst in new modes of communication, production, and social relations. As sponsors participated in economic and political competition, they positioned and repositioned, seized and relinquished control over meanings and materials of literacy as part of this struggle. As the fortunes of these sponsors waxed and waned, people found their literacy learning and literacy skills caught up in the turbulence. This led to instability and volatility in the worth of people's literacy skills as well as disruption and deflation in the social and cultural systems through which literacy learning had traditionally occurred (Brandt, 2001).

## IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGE

I don't think the school has adequately come to terms with the implications of these changes, but I'd like to explore a couple of them, especially those that bear on matters of educational equity and cultural diversity, the central issues of this conference. First, we have to realize that the so-called literacy crisis will in all likelihood be chronic: The schools will probably never attain equilibrium between supply and demand when it comes to human capital, including literacy. The standards will keep rising; the rules of the game will keep changing. We have to understand better how escalating literacy standards relate to escalating competition of the kind I have been talking about. I interviewed many people who saw their literacy devalued or decertified, if you will, as a result of the economic or political losses of their sponsors. I have written about one man whom I call Dwayne Lowery,<sup>1</sup> a European American who was born in 1938 into a working-class home in the upper Midwest. After graduating from high school and doing a hitch in the Army, he became an autoworker in what, by the 1970s, was becoming known as the rust belt. Seeing what was coming, he changed occupations, taking a job as a meter reader for a municipal utility. The son of a rubber worker who was a feisty union activist, Lowery found himself gravitating to the American Federation of State, Municipal, and County Employees, which was growing by leaps and bounds in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of a rapid growth in government. Eventually Lowery took a leave from his job and was retrained as a union representative at an AFSCME training facility in Washington, D.C., where he took a crash course in organizing and bargaining as well as economic theory and law. He returned to his region, where he became an effective and articulate negotiator of contracts and grievances (Heckscher, 1988). But as the union continued to win expensive benefit packages for workers, local governments, many of which lacked the sophistication of these well-trained union reps, started hiring lawyers to conduct negotiations for them as a way of trying to regain the upper hand. "Pretty soon," Lowery said, "ninety per cent of the people [he] was dealing with across the table were attorneys." Negotiations became increasingly legalistic, slower, complex, and, according to Lowery, text based. The face-to-face give-and-take that he was so good at gave way to a stream of documents—the exhibit, the brief, the transcript, the letter, the appeal—things he was less effective in producing. He found himself working 70 hours a week, sweating over the preparation of briefs, until, more or less against his will, he took early retirement, replaced by a young, graduate-school-trained policy analyst whose literacy skills were a more equal match for the competition coming from the other side.

Another outgrowth of recent economic competitions is rapid change in communication technology. The race for faster, newer, stronger ways of

moving information has brought a stream of new technologies for reading and writing into workplaces, homes, and schools. This dynamic can have profound effects on the viability of individual literacy skills. The advent of personal computer technology and Web-based communication was largely a boon for John Douse, a young African American man who, at the time of our interview in 1995, had recently graduated from college with a degree in computer programming, despite being blind since infancy. At 26 years of age, he was working as a computer programmer for a large insurance company. Much had changed technology-wise since his first encounter with an Atari in a seventh-grade short course on computer programming in his public school in the early 1980s. He recalled his experience then as “really cool but really hard because to make a computer talk, I had to program the voice for every program I wrote.” He also recalled needing assistance from his classroom aide, who would read the screen to him as he programmed. By the mid-1990s, he was surrounded by some of the latest technology, including a talking computer, instantaneous Braille translators, and a scanner that could Braille any printed text. The new technology had allowed him to achieve independence from human assistants and to access a wealth of reading material through the World Wide Web—much different from the limited titles of books on tape he would borrow as a child from a regional library for the blind. At the time of our interview, Douse was using his programming skills not only to do his mainframe computer work at the insurance company but also to customize consumer software for his personal use. He said he was doing more writing—for example, journal entries, e-mails, and other writing—since leaving behind the cumbersome Braille typewriters and slates of the recent past.

Yet Douse’s account was revealing of what it is like to be a member of a blind minority in a volatile technology market, in which literacy and learning opportunities can be limited by principles of supply and demand. In such a context, technological windfalls mostly come indirectly. So, for instance, because corporations in search of time and labor savings invested heavily in voice-capable computer technologies, a spin-off consumer market became available for the blind. But things do not always go so favorably in a consumer-driven market. When Douse was in 11th grade, calculators were common commodities—so common that sighted students in his math classes were using them for class work and tests. “All the other kids had calculators in school and I was at a pretty big disadvantage,” he explained. “The only scientific calculator that talked cost \$600 and it didn’t even have anything like factorial functions and it couldn’t do binary numbers or anything.” Douse said he spent a whole weekend programming his Apple II-e computer so that it would do trigonometry he needed to keep up. More recently, in his spare time, Douse had written a program for an equation library with more than 200 equations and other functions. “It was

something I would have wanted in college,” he said. Douse tried to sell the program to the company that made his specialized computer. “I thought other blind people would want this,” he said, “but they told me that only five percent of blind people would understand enough math to use it so they wouldn’t buy it from me.” Not only the logic of niche markets but also the impact of monopoly affected the context of Douse’s literacy. At the time of our interview in 1995, the national insurance company he worked for had just contracted for a networked, Windows-based (i.e., visually based) system that was making it harder for him to integrate with people and systems on the job.<sup>2</sup>

These two examples of Dwayne Lowery and John Douse speak, I think, to the fast pace and volatile environments in which Americans try to define and develop their literacy. Although our failure to ensure basic literacy skills for Americans from diverse backgrounds remains a very real problem, a deeper problem has to do with what happens to the literacy once it is successfully produced, as it becomes a target of unending rounds of obsolescence, upgrades, overhauls, and replacements. How to teach in such a climate and what literacy equity can mean in such a climate are questions that too often go begging.

The mobilization of literacy as an economic asset also has important implications for understanding achievement gaps, especially those that break down along the familiar lines of gender, race, and class. According to some critics, disparities in literacy achievement are proof of the school’s complicity in maintaining inequality. Schools, they suggest, devise curriculum and assessment tools that protect society’s pecking order and justify its reward system. Other observers use this clustering of literacy with social advantage not to question what is happening in school but to explain it. Students’ family background—especially the education, race, or income of their parents—are treated on their face as sources of advantage or disadvantage for a student, and differences in socioeconomic status are used to make sense of differences in academic performance. Middle-class families are perceived as more school oriented, which explains why their children enjoy more success in school. Children from families with poor earnings or poor understanding of school culture are more poorly prepared, which explains their lesser achievement. School activists often regard these differences as a call to intervene in the families of the underperformers to help them negotiate the institution of the school in their children’s interests. Hence the popularity of family literacy programs that draw lower income and lower skilled parents into school-sanctioned literacy practices. In most of the nation’s literacy initiatives, primary attention is given to relationships between schools and individual students or schools and individual homes.<sup>3</sup>

But a broader look at sponsorship and its relationship to the new economic status of literacy provides a broader angle from which to consider

issues of access, proficiency, and reward in literacy learning. Correlations of literacy performance with individual socioeconomic status capture, yet obscure, in their shorthand way, larger conditions that lie behind differential outcomes in educational achievement. Literacy learning, both in school and out, takes place within systems of unequal subsidy and unequal reward systems that range beyond the influence of any individual family's assets, beyond any one pile of cultural capital that a student or a home might accumulate. Gaining a clearer vision of how these larger historical and economic conditions bear on acts of literacy learning can clarify why literacy remains so susceptible to the complex effects of economic inequity and racial discrimination.

This really hit home to me as I explored the parallel literacy learning experiences of a pair of young adults who were born in the same year, 1969. At the time I interviewed them their lives epitomized the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots. One, a European American male, had been born in Silicon Valley and was raised by highly educated parents. At the time I interviewed him in 1995, he had recently graduated from a 4-year university, and at the age of 26, he was successfully self-employed as a writer of software and software documentation. The other individual, a Mexican American female, had been born in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas and was raised by parents who had left migrant farm work, attended community colleges, and worked in an urban service sector. At the time I interviewed her, also in 1995, she was attending a community college part-time, raising a child, and working for a janitorial service cleaning downtown office buildings. A familiar disparity, but it was only in exploring interesting coincidences in the lives of these two young adults that I came to appreciate how their literacy development interacted with broader currents of economic development and stagnation in the community where they were raised.

The two, whom I call Raymond Branch and Dora Lopez, had interesting things in common. As young children, they both migrated with their families to a university town in the upper Midwest, where both of their fathers took jobs at the state university. Raymond's father was on the science faculty. Dora's father worked as a shipping and receiving clerk. But more intriguing, in the early 1980s when they were about 13 years old, they both decided to teach themselves how to read and write in a second language. Raymond set out to learn a computer programming language. Dora set out to learn to read and write in Spanish. It was not so much the difference in their socioeconomic status that had such a big impact on their literacy learning, although that clearly played a part. Rather it was the differential status of these two languages—programming language and Spanish—in the local economy at the time they were learning. Enormous subsidies were flowing to computer technologies and products at the time that Raymond



Branch was trying to learn his programming language. These subsidies were flowing into the school district where Raymond attended school in California (his first-grade classroom in 1975 was already hooked up to a mainframe at Stanford University) and into the science labs where Raymond often visited his father. After receiving a computer as a Christmas present when he was 12 years old, Raymond joined a pioneering user group that was pumped with written materials, manuals, guidebooks, and peripheral software, all provided free of charge by a major computer company that sponsored the group. He was enticed by software salesmen in the store he stopped in almost every afternoon on his bike ride home from school. He communicated via modem with a band of merry pirates who taught each other how to crack codes in their favorite electronic games. He entered the university at a time when millions of dollars were pouring into upgrading the computer skills of the faculty and staff, and he took employment at a technical center at the university where he had free access to all the latest knowledge and equipment and where he began to build networks that would form his client base when he started his own software design and documentation company.

No such subsidies were flowing to the Spanish language in the early 1980s in this Midwest university town where Spanish speakers constituted barely 1% of the population. Spanish was nearly inaudible and invisible in the larger community to which the Lopez family had moved. It was not a significant productive force in the economy. Dora Lopez recalled that her family had to travel 70 miles to a big city to find Spanish-language newspapers and magazines and only when reception was good could they tune in Spanish-language radio coming from Chicago, 150 miles away. Though her parents knew how to write in Spanish, they had no occasion to use it in workplaces or in dealings with other institutions. Dora taught herself to write in Spanish through trial and error, checking occasionally with her mother. She also practiced by writing letters to relatives in Mexico and Colombia and by writing poetry that she kept to herself. One summer she worked as a classroom aide in a federally funded summer school program for the children of migrant workers, where she assisted third- and fourth-graders in developing English reading skills. When I interviewed her, Dora Lopez was pursuing a college degree part-time with the hopes of becoming a bilingual social worker. At work, she served as an informal translator between her Anglo boss and the mostly Latina cleaning staff.

As we can see, when computer literacy was augmented as a productive force as part of economic growth in this community, Raymond Branch was positioned to have his reading and writing skills augmented by that same system. Resources were abundant and assets were redundant. His demographic particulars—young, White, male, affluent—made him a perfect target of consumer stimulation. Although his parents could afford to

buy him expensive computer equipment, the technology itself was gathering so much worth in his society and was being so heavily subsidized that he often had free access to it. No such level of endowment supported the Spanish language where Dora Lopez was pursuing her learning. Resources for Dora's preferred forms of literacy learning were scarcer and less systematic. Spanish-English biliteracy fluctuated as a kind of unstable currency as the Lopez family migrated from Texas to Wisconsin and as Dora moved between private and public worlds. We might notice that it is not lack of family support for literacy learning but that the family is the only source of support that distinguishes Dora's experience so starkly from Raymond's. If his literacy learning reaped secondhand benefits from the economic structure, hers reaped secondhand liabilities as her potential for learning and using Spanish was pulled down by the general economic devaluation that put Latinas as a group on one of the lowest rungs of the economic reward ladder.

Finally, the mobilization of literacy as an economic asset has important implications for understanding cultural differences in literacy practices and values. Although much recent work in literacy research has focused on multicultural diversity in reading and writing practices in America (Heath, 1983; Moss, 1994; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Valdes, 1996), we could better recognize how our economic history has been involved in the creation of this diversity. For example, over most of the 20th century, few of the economic channels by which literacy was being stimulated, subsidized, and rewarded were open to African Americans, who, by law and custom, were usually forced into physical labor and domestic service. African Americans who attained high-level literacy and advanced education often found their skills did not have the same status or tradeable value as those of the White population. The full worth of their literacy usually was honored only within their own racial or ethnic communities. Rarely have African Americans seen their literacy development figured into the needs of the nation except in periods of crisis, such as World War II or, perhaps, now, when anxieties over global competition are producing a greater interest in the reading achievement of urban minorities (Hill & Larsen, 2000).

Be that as it may, where literacy has developed among African Americans, it has rarely been at the vigorous invitation of mainstream economic sponsors (Weems, 1998). What this has meant, at least among the 17 African Americans who participated in my study, was that much literacy learning took place within the survival and self-help systems of African American culture. These resources included the church, the Black press, the civil rights movement, and formal and informal apprenticeship networks that offset barriers to schooling. In the face of economic and political exclusion, these sponsors not only circulated resources but also nurtured skills, including literacy, in ways that fostered self-determination

and racial advancement.<sup>4</sup> Within circumscribed economic and political conditions, these concentrated sites of sponsorship were the deep wells that fed a steady rise in literacy and education rates among African Americans in the first half of the 20th century and persisted even as educational and economic opportunity expanded in the second half of the century. Although in many spheres of American life, literacy sponsorship during this period was fragmenting and proliferating in response to economic expansion, literacy sponsorship among African American institutions remained consolidated, as sponsors performed multiple and more complex functions to meet human needs.

Because sponsors of literacy leave their marks on the literacy of the sponsored, literacy learning for many of the African Americans I interviewed was geared to various forms of double duty: responding to social changes in educational expectations and economic conditions even while fighting to secure basic rights to participate fully in educational and economic systems. It was perhaps not surprising that beneficiaries of these sponsorship networks preferred forms of reading and writing that performed double duties, linking, for instance, secular and spiritual meanings or ethical and practical values. Reading and writing among the African Americans I interviewed retained stronger associations with spirituality, freedom, citizenship, racial identity, and collective survival than I found among most of the European Americans I interviewed.

Although space does not allow a full illustration of this complex history,<sup>5</sup> I would like to focus briefly on the daily literacy practices of a woman I call Frances Hawkins, who was born in 1956 in one of the most notoriously oppressive counties of Mississippi. At the time I interviewed her in the 1990s, she was raising three children in a high-tech university town in the Midwest. A steward in a local AME church, Hawkins worked as a classroom aide in her children's schools, supervising the playground, occasionally tutoring, and trying to observe closely to learn what she could so that she could help to improve her children's chances for educational success. She belonged to a district-sponsored organization for low-income parents that provided instructional guides on how to compose letters and place telephone calls to teachers and administrators. She kept her workbook from the parents' group next to her Christian Keepsake Organizer, a daybook bordered by short religious messages and filled with family photographs. Pinned up on the wall of her living room, along with Christian images, were proreading posters she had rescued from the surplus-discard bin at the school library.

In the late 1990s in her northern home, Hawkins was calling on integrated values of faith, advancement, liberation, and survival that were tied to traditions of the AME church, especially the linking of spirituality, education, and racial advancement. The heritage was tangible in the wall

decor of her living room, where images from the sanctuary and the schoolhouse hung in one, unified inspirational message. The connection was also apparent in her ways of communicating with her children. “I dictate notes to myself and to my children,” she explained. “I leave notes all around. I have what I call positive information up on [bedroom] doors upstairs. This is what I love to do. I love other people who live, who learn, and who help others learn.” Just as the church served as a multiple sponsor for education and uplift, Hawkins’ position as a classroom aide sponsored multiple initiatives within the family economy. It provided a very modest living, and it allowed her to communicate to her children the importance of a collective effort toward learning. On a practical level, it enabled her to observe how things worked in her children’s school and how teachers responded to students.

As earnings permitted, Hawkins was gradually buying children’s books on African American history and culture, “unfolding” a library from which she was lending books to other children in the housing complex where she lived. She said,

Someday, if I live long enough, I would like to be president of my own company and set up a scholarship for all children, no matter what age, what color, what ethnic group. It would just be for your education. I want to move my way and I’m trying to set up a home library and it’s going to be important for myself, my children, and other people who would like access to it.

Hawkins’s account illustrates how the links among faith, moral uplift, educational improvement, and self-determination that launched the African American church at its onset continues in the practices of people it nurtures. The church’s influence brings a multiplicity and simultaneity to the meanings of literacy, a synergy that often combines practical and spiritual significance, making one meaning less compelling without the other.

Traditional sponsors of African American literacy ask their sponsored to reach deeply into human spirituality, solidarity, and citizenship rights as they read, write, and learn. If these ideological contexts for literacy were more valued in schools, workplaces, and other institutions in this nation, then racial equity in access, achievement, and reward for literacy might become more possible.

## CONCLUSIONS

Many studies of literacy and education—including those in this special issue—focus educators’ attention on the diversity of reading and writing

practices in U.S. society. These studies underscore that reading and writing serve many functions, appear in many places, take many forms. They demonstrate how children and adults achieve literacy by various avenues, how reading and writing and learning about them go on in many contexts beyond formal schooling, and often hand in hand with other cultural activities. Together, these studies strongly suggest that literacy among the U.S. citizenry has been underestimated by standardized tests and other narrow, usually school-based measurements that miss the meaning and forms of literacy in everyday life. Uncovering as they do the often surprising vigor and ingenuity of what Barton and Hamilton (1998) call “hidden” or “vernacular” literacy, many of these studies challenge stereotypes of low literacy that are often pinned on people who already carry other kinds of stigma. Most important, these studies provide educators with conceptual tools for bridging between the resources students bring to school and the different literacy practices they must learn to control.

But to fully integrate the meaning of cultural diversity into education, we need to understand what gives rise to it, including, especially, the role of economic relations and economic change. This perspective has become critical now, when literacy itself is becoming such a central ingredient in economic productivity and competition, caught up in the insatiable appetite for more, better, faster means of making profit. If we see our challenge now only in terms of meeting higher standards for literacy achievement, we miss many of the complications that make this goal most difficult. The diversity and multiplicity of literacy practices in our society rightly bear witness to cultural variety and human resourcefulness. But that is not all they tell. Multiple literacy practices are also signs of stratification and struggle—of competitions waged, won, and lost. Their variety speaks of different and often unequal subsidy systems for literacy—histories of opportunities granted and opportunities denied, ascending power or waning worth. These histories and their effects on the pursuit of literacy must be addressed more explicitly in literacy education.

The concept of sponsorship is a concrete analytical tool that can be used in such efforts. Sponsorship is a tool that can clarify for teachers how students in their classrooms are differentially subsidized in their literacy learning outside of school by virtue of the economic histories of their families and regions. Because sponsorship focuses on many factors that create and deny literacy opportunity, it moves our sights beyond socio-economic profiles of individual families and toward broad systems of resources for literacy operating in students’ worlds. It is inadequate to retool the school for new technologies and new jobs without also thinking what it would mean to retool the school for students like John Doue or Dora Lopez, for parents like Frances Hawkins, or for the grandchildren of

Dwayne Lowery for their moments and positions in history and especially for their aspirations. The more schools become beholden to a narrow set of sponsors, the more likely they are to leave a large number of students behind. As democratic institutions, schools must serve to stabilize and augment the value and development of all forms of literacy learning. We must manage the resources of the school, including curriculum, staff, equipment, materials, technology, time, space, and other forms of subsidy to compensate within the school for economic turbulence and inequality beyond the school. We must see not only that standards for literacy achievement keep rising but also what is behind the escalation—games of economic competition that will make the crisis chronic and will actively cause imbalances in access and reward for literacy as part of free market competition. Over the course of the 20th century, literacy was captured for the cause of private wealth. It is time for the public school to reclaim in a serious way the role of literacy in strengthening a democratic society. Schools can use their formidable resources to augment—beyond the needs of the market—the worth of all literacy practices and all people who enter there.

### Notes

1 This is a pseudonym, as are other names of individuals interviewed for this project.

2 For interesting discussion of this issue and other issues relating to technological change and the blind, see *Braille Monitor*, 43, No. 1 (Jan. 2000) available at <http://www.nfb.org/bm/bm00/bm0001/bm0001tc.htm>.

3 Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) provide foundations for understanding how schools reproduce political and economic inequity in societies in which ownership of “cultural capital” (i.e., symbolic power, including skills, expertise and language styles) becomes important to economic advantage. Bernstein (1977) explored how schools rely on and reward experience with “elaborated” linguistic codes associated with middle-class social life. For critiques of social reproduction forces in American schools, see Apple (1995) and Apple and Weis (1983) and Giroux (1981). Reports by schools on academic achievement, test results, and college continuance routinely sort out students by race, parental education, and family income as a kind of *prima facie* explanation of differential academic outcomes. In my own experience, this accounting practice helps to rationalize and normalize inequalities by making them seem to be permanent features of the social structure rather than ongoing accomplishments of education practice (see Lareau, 1989, for investigations into how cultural capital is either cashed in or not during teacher–parent interactions in school).

4 I draw heavily here on the work of Franklin (1984) and Lincoln and Mamiya (1990), who identify a core set of cultural agents within African American society who have been most responsible for racial survival since the days of slavery. They identify these agents with basic cultural values, including self-determination, freedom, education, advancement, and often a unity between religious and secular experience (for more on African American literacy learning, see Gadsden, 1992, 1993).

5 For a fuller treatment, see Chapter 4 in Brandt (2001).

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