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A Perpetual Literacy Crisis?: Bourgeois Fears, Working-Class Realities, and Pedagogical Responses

WHEN MORE THAN HALF OF "THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST" OF AMERICA'S boys, educated in the country's premiere prep schools, failed Harvard's first entrance exams in the 1870s due to their poor writing skills, anxieties over education began surfacing in print, and our first national literacy crisis was born. The proof was in the writing: mechanical errors "of all sorts" filled the pages, and the Harvard English faculty was in shock (Connors 128 - 129). In terms of national literacy insecurity, little seems to have changed since the 1870s. As Brownyn Williams points out, since that time, the literacy crisis has been "perpetual": from the 1870s outcry over the results of Harvard's entrance exams to the "Why Johnny Can't Read" crisis of the 1970s to the assessments of various national studies, the "wailing" has gone on (178). But the sheer constancy of the outcry can give pause. Why the concern when "clearly most people by adulthood have acquired adequate levels of literacy" (Williams 179)?

Williams may be right in seeing the national alarm as a reflection of middle-class anxieties over a desire to maintain "status and privilege"—bourgeois fears that without the proper literacy and linguistic markers, they will lose the cultural capital to insure their identities (179 - 180). But when the perpetual nature of the literacy crisis is highlighted, what may get lost are the unequal access to literacy experienced by the working-class poor and the material consequences of the lack of higher literacy acquisition. In my inquiry, the current "literacy crisis" does not concern whether the privileged punctuate their sentences according to Harvard's criteria or how well the tenets of standard language ideology are being maintained by the middle class. What I want to explore is the crisis experienced by working-class students (defined here as students of low social economic status) in access to higher literacy acquisition, an inequality that should be recognized and addressed in any attempt to improve what is seen as defects in our educational systems.

Decades ago, two icons within literacy scholarship published ethnographic research and case studies that foregrounded the difficulties of literacy acquisition for the working class. During the 1970s, Shirley Brice Heath completed extensive ethnographic research relying heavily on transcriptions of language use of communities in the Piedmont Carolinas. In

the resulting book, *Ways With Words,* Heath highlights the unique difficulties that working-class students had in school due to differing language use. Deborah Brandt, in *Literacy in American Lives,* explores the changing nature and inequalities of access of literacy acquisition through her case studies of 80 residents of south central Wisconsin. Brandt's research highlights the rising standards of literacy needed to sustain material well-being while exposing the economic factors that have made literacy acquisition problematic for the working class. Her work demonstrates that as literacy demands have increased for middle-class jobs in a variety of areas, working-class students experience increasing difficulties in obtaining that literacy.

From the time of these two studies, nothing has changed much judging from the data that government agencies and scholarly research churn out on a regular basis: low socioeconomic status (SES) students are clearly fighting against the odds. Steven Krashen reviews the literature correlating poverty with academic achievement and finds that poverty means lower scores on all measures of school achievement: the negative impact of low SES can be seen in food insecurity, lack of proper medical care, environmental conditions, and more limited access to books (17). The correlations are strong between SES status and academic factors that contribute to success in school studies. Relative to their wealthier counterparts, lower SES students develop pre-academic skills more slowly (Lopez and Burrueco 34), then attend schools with fewer resources (Aikens and Barbarin 235) with teaching staffs that are less experienced with a higher turnover rate (Muijs et al. 4). They have significantly less parental involvement in their education (Snyder and Dillow 99) and drop out of school at a much higher rate (Snyder and Dillow 182). While in school, students from working-class backgrounds do not test as well as their more affluent counterparts. The tested reading comprehension level of the poor is significantly lower by the third grade, and their lower level of reading comprehension rate indicates their greater probability of dropping out of college (Hernandez 2-3). Those who do attend college tend to enroll in less selective colleges (Karen 202 - 204), and they are more likely to quit before achieving their degree (Tinto 3). In *Completing College,* a comprehensive research of student retention in higher education, Vincent Tinto reports the discovery of a startling fact that reveals the achievement gap faced by the working-class poor, "Among four-year institutions there were too few first-generation college and low-income students of middle-high or high ability to be included in the data. That fact alone is a telling reminder of the association between social status broadly understood and the ability of students to acquire academic skills prior to college" (131).

Those who have lived working class or who teach working-class students do not need ethnographic research, case studies, or statistical data to reveal the frustrations of the lower socioeconomic classes in their attempts to gain higher literacy. In *Defying the Odds,* Donna

Dunbar-Odom, a scholar from a working-class background, uses the Anselm Kiefer sculpture "Book of Wings" as a metaphor for the literacy aspirations of the working class (1). While the metallic sculpture of a book with wings situated on a teacher's pedestal suggests the common belief that literacy offers the heady possibilities of flight, the working class finds itself "weighted inexorably to . . . material lives" (1). In my work inside the classrooms of an urban community college and a regional state university—and in my work outside the classroom in tutoring programs for working-class students attending secondary schools—it seems to me that the metaphor should be extended: Kiefer's winged-sculpture should be detached from the pedestal and turned on its head in semblance of a crash landing. This pose would reflect a more realistic assessment of my working-class students' literacy aspirations. Almost without exception, these students understand the acquisition of higher literacy as key to economic mobility, but the challenges they face are daunting. Children come to tutoring sessions hungry; adults come to midmorning college classes after a full night's work; there is the constant economic pressure to keep bills paid, families provided for, and studies completed. Even when highly motivated to achieve literacy, students struggle to maintain the level of persistency needed to develop the skills and habits of literacy. For these college students, often their academic preparation for acquiring higher literacy is suspect, and they now juggle work, family, and school in attempt to "catch up" and achieve their dreams of economic success and upper mobility. They struggle against the weight of their material lives.

Literacy scholars like Brandt and Heath acknowledge the role educators can play in an attempt to address issues of difference and inequitites. Without blaming teachers or our educational system as a whole, both Heath and Brandt call on teachers and school systems to stand in the gap for working-class students, overcoming the obstacles of cultural discontinuities (Heath 368–369), fragmented communities (Heath 375–376), and rectifying inequities in providing equal access to higher literacy resources (Brandt 206). Their studies conclude with their responses to the working-class dimension of the literacy acquisition. Since their groundbreaking studies, there has been no shortage of researchers interested in proposing pedagogical and educational systems solutions to what they see as a general literacy crisis (Faggella-Luby, Ware, and Capozzoli 454). One of the most influential reports on adolescent literacy is *Reading Next.* Faggella-Luby, Ware, and Capozzoli consider the *Reading Next* report a foundational document in current adolescent literacy studies, noting that it provides "example programs and pedagogies throughout," has been "cited more than 280 times," and "has provided a guiding framework for the field of adolescent literacy" (455).

In fact, the Carnegie Council touts its own report as "a cutting-edge report that combines the best research currently available with well-crafted strategies for turning that research into practice" ("Carnegie Council for Advancing Adolescent Literacy"). While this

report for the improvement of literacy acquisition may be cutting-edge, I believe it is incomplete and often does not offer solutions that sufficiently take into account social class issues. Given the extent that social class contributes to failures of literacy acquisition and that research has consistently indicated that "working class children, as a rule, do not desire higher literacy" (Dunbar-Odom 46 – 48), I want to see the currently most influential report on middle and high school literacy to more directly advocate practices that specifically address youth from working-class backgrounds.

In *Reading Next*, Biancarosa and Snow list the fifteen key elements of adolescent literacy programs "aimed at improving middle and high school literacy achievement right now" (4). The tables below give an abbreviated version of that list:

Tables. Key Elements in Programs Designed to Improve Adolescent Literacy Achievement in Middle and High Schools

Instructional Improvements	Infrastructure Improvements
1. Direct, explicit comprehension instruction	10. Extended time for literacy
2. Effective Instructional principles embedded in content	11. Professional development
3. Motivation and self-directed learning	12. Ongoing summative assessment of students and programs
4. Text-based collaborative learning	13. Teacher teams
5. Strategic tutoring	14. Leadership
6. Diverse texts	15. A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program
7. Intensive writing	
8. A technology component	
9. Ongoing formative assessment of students	

(Biancarosa and Snow 12)

As noted in the tables, the improvements involve both instructional and infrastructural improvements in middle and high schools. Many of the instructional recommendations have strong to moderate evidence of effectiveness in improving literacy, including the use of direct and explicit instruction, text-based collaborative instruction, and motivation for self-directed learning (Kamil et al.). Also, in the attempt to raise the literacy levels of all students, the recommendations on some level responds to Brandt, who asks that we acknowledge "how often the literacy skills that exist in American lives languish for lack of adequate sponsorship" and that we "dedicate the resources of the democratic school more wholly" to the cause of "stigmatized groups" (207). Similarly, *Reading Next*, in the last stated recommendation for the improvement of the educational infrastructure, concurs with Heath when recommending

that provision be made for a comprehensive and coordinated literacy program that will coordinate with out-of-school organizations and the local community (5). This recommendation responds to Heath's call for an expanded role for community organizations in order to fulfill the literacy responsibilities that were once accomplished through the home and community.

Admittedly, any measures that lead to an increase in literacy could be considered helpful to the working class since the working class almost by definition suffers from an unequal distribution of high literacy (Narcisse). Some of the improvements suggested by *Reading Next* are certainly "working-class friendly." Although the report does not articulate the fact that students must "invent school" (see Bartholomae, "Inventing the University"), the recommendation of "direct, explicit instruction" may represent an acknowledgment of the widely recognized difficulties of students who must "move from marginalized home discourses to standard academic discourses" (Chandler 155). When *Reading Next* recommends the practice of "reading apprenticeship" in which "high school students 'apprenticed' into the reasons and ways reading and writing are used within a 'discipline' (subject area) and the strategies and thinking that are particularly useful in that discipline" (Biancarosa and Snow 15), it is recognizing the difficulties associated with learning an academic discourse with its own linguistic style (White 371). There are "ways with words" that must be taught and learned (Heath).

As noted in *Reading Next*, students who are engaged and self-directed will be more successful academically. To motivate and engage students, the report recommends giving students choices for reading and to have reading materials available that are relevant to their lives (16). Both of these suggestions are valid and could help young people from working-class backgrounds. Offering reading material that reflects working-class culture and youthful, working-class interests not only shows cultural awareness on the part of the teacher but also provides motivation for students to read. However, the *Reading Next* report misses the opportunity to advocate significant sources of motivation that are especially significant for working-class youth.

Students need a supportive learning environment that can help them weather the mistakes they make as they learn new ways of speaking, writing, being and doing. Working-class youths will make a lot of mistakes, many of them attributable to the difficulties of learning a new discourse. Research shows, however, that a teacher's stance regarding mistakes makes a tremendous difference to student motivation and learning. In a systematic review of adolescent literacy research to determine "what works," the Institute of Education Sciences reports:

> When teachers put more emphasis on the learning process and provide a supportive environment where mistakes are viewed as growth opportunities instead of failures, students are more likely to develop learning goals. Studies have consistently shown

that students who have learning goals are more motivated and engaged and have better reading test scores than students who have performance goals. (Kamil et al. 27)

When teachers view mistakes as growth opportunities instead of a sign of impending failure, laziness, or sheer stupidity, a supportive environment is maintained. Finding the logic to student errors is an affirming approach modeled by Ken Goodman. Studying children as they read, Goodman discovered that the mistakes that were made by his readers were "wonderful." He saw that their mistakes came as a result of being "experienced users of language":

> Unlike most other researchers, who assumed that mistakes reflected incompetence, inexperience or carelessness or some combination of these, I discovered that *mistakes are part of the process of making sense of print* . . . .They were making sense, and to do so, they were combining language cues from the printed story with what they knew about how language works. (5)

This approach has validity for older learners too. Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue take Goodman's approach to mistakes in *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty* when they examine the way that older students experience difficulties with texts. Throughout the book, Salvatori and Donahue show students "that when they experience difficulties, there might be good reason for it" (xxii). Student difficulties, many times can be traced to student attempts to make a piece of writing fit a literary pattern that they already know. Sometimes prior knowledge is "mismatched" with the genre (35); other times, student knowledge is accurately matched to the genre, but the author of the work "transgresses" the rules of genre convention causing difficulty for the reader (55). Like their younger counterparts in Goodman's studies, older students are attempting to *make sense* of their texts, making use of what they do know. It causes them difficulty, but Salvadori and Donahue recognize the difficulty does not come from laziness or inattentiveness: the difficulties are all part of the process.

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The attitudes modeled by Goodman and Salvatori and Donahue create the supportive environment that motivates. Mistakes and difficulties are seen as opportunities for growth not failures of intellect. All students benefit from such a climate. Working-class students who as a group experience more than their fair share of failure stand to benefit the most from this approach to student mistakes.

Reading Next is mute on the possibilities of the new literacies to motivate and engage

learners. One gets the sense that the literacy promoted by *Reading Next* is print-based, excluding digital literacies. This exclusion regulates digital literacies outside of school where access is unequal, works against the literacy aspirations of the working class, and ultimately exacerbates social class divisions (Stone 52).

Reading Next calls for the use of technology as a tool and as a topic, but it remains oblivious to the new literacies that are supported by technology (19). Schools (and reports that inform the literacy practices of school) should engage in a paradigm shift and validate the new literacies in order to better engage working-class youth. New literacies are "literary practices that involve different kinds of values, sensibilities, norms and procedures and so on from those that characterize conventional literacies" (Knobel and Lankshear 7). The use of popular websites, video games, internet resources, online memes, and fan fiction all represent new literacies that have both relevancy and the power to engage working-class youth in a way that printed material does not. In her study of the literacy resource represented by favorite youth websites, "recommended by students of color and lower socioeconomic backgrounds—many of whom were seen in school as struggling readers," Jennifer Stone finds a disconnect between the reading performance of these students in school and online that is "striking," as they spend "hours poring over … websites, figuring out how to deal with complicated vocabulary and syntactical structures along the way" (56 - 57).

Video games have the potential to stimulate the "deeper learning" that higher literacy aspires to. James Gee, analyzing the well-known ability of good video games to engage, maintains that video game "learners" have a visual and embodied experience that leads to "deep learning," the kind of learning that excels beyond written tests and that produces both performance and competence. Good games do that by "forcing the player (learner) to accept (for this time and place) a strong set of values connected to a very specific identity" (108). Gee finds it a "shame" that schools don't offer the "deeper learning" of academic subjects that are available to gamers through their video games, a learning that develops a "competence that goes beyond definitions and test-taking" (111 - 112).

Reading Next's comments on "intensive writing" as a key element of an "effective adolescent literacy program" illustrate my frustration with the report as an effective response to working-class literacy needs. The study argues that since large numbers of students entering college must take remedial writing courses, teachers should teach writing skills and should teach about the writing process while avoiding "traditional explicit grammar instruction" (19). The recommendation concludes by stating that quality writing instruction "has clear objectives and expectations and consistently challenges students, regardless of ability, to engage with academic content at high levels of reasoning" (19). There is nothing here that offers new insight or acknowledges the special needs of working-class students. Nothing here discour-

ages teachers from giving writing instruction that is soaked in the highly particular language of academia, that is particularly remote from working-class youth, and that leads to the kind of school writing that is "to writing as catsup is to tomatoes: as junk food to food" (Brodkey 528). What is missing is an advocacy of the kind of writing that gets students to write.

Analyzing extensively the research regarding literacy and the working class, Dunbar-Odom in *Defying the Odds* points to literacy narratives and use of the personal as ways to get students to write. Teachers who have students writing personal literacy narratives put their working-class students in a rare position: they are motivated to write; they are able to write from a position of authority; and the importance of their stories, rooted in working class discourses, are validated. Dunbar-Odom finds (as Brandt does in *Literacy in American Lives*) that the only time when students might "experience writing as pleasurable is when they are writing to tell a story that they want to tell or writing privately to explore their own feelings" (55). While advocating the use of the personal, Dunbar-Odom is "calling neither for a return to the expressivist methods whereby students write to 'discover' their 'true' selves nor to current-traditional methods that place personal writing at the beginning of a modal approach because it is presumed to be the 'easiest' place to begin" (82). The "personal connection" that is offered by personal literacy narratives and the use of the personal in other school writings lead to a more "personal investment" (82), an investment that is important for working-class students who especially need motivation and encouragement to develop the writing skills associated with higher literacy.

Perhaps for political or ideological reasons, the researchers and authors of *Reading Next* felt compelled to address the literacy crisis in a "classless" way, seemingly oblivious to the unique needs of working-class youth to acquire higher literacy. As noted earlier, the report does provide a framework that includes a number of evidence-based practices that if implemented should enhance learners' odds of acquiring the literacy that they need. While "well-trodden battle lines of social conflict" (Foucalt 227) in the distribution of literacy are overtly ignored, simply by addressing the literacy crisis, *Reading Next* answers Brandt's call for schools to exercise their "democratic mission" as it attempts to galvanize Americans and the educational community in particular to respond to the literacy crisis.

There is an obvious danger, however, in letting literacy be viewed as a school problem. Both Heath and Brandt lead us to see the social and economic dimensions of the literacy crisis that extends beyond the resources of the classroom. Teachers have reason to feel inadequate to address the systemic needs of our nation's literacy challenges. Following the instructional recommendations that are based on the best studies of the best practices in the classroom can help teachers deal with the literacy crisis that sits immediately in front of them. But to meet the challenges of higher literacy acquisition demands a more comprehensive societal response to the social and economic needs of families and communities.

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