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ABSTRACT

If teaching is to develop fully as a profession, the public must be made aware of the historical foundation of the present literacy crisis and the necessity for better learning conditions for students. Literacy standards adopted by the public progressed from oral literacy (speaking fluently), through signature literacy (signing one's name), recitation literacy (reciting familiar materials), and sign literacy (reading simple words), to comprehension literacy (reading unannounced passages from stories). Each of these previous standards met a specific national need during a particular historical period and each required a different teaching style. The new literacy standard for inferential literacy requires that citizens be able to go beyond literal word meanings to interpret textual meanings and that students as workers be able to solve problems to adapt to new technologies and participate in decision making. A new group of interactionist teaching practices for inferential literacy instruction emphasizes developmental changes in the mind's structure and social interaction as a key to intellectual development. To organize classrooms, the typical class load must be reduced, classroom interruptions must be stopped, more money must be spent on reading materials with content, and methods of assessing achievement must be changed--judgments of answers must be anchored in a discipline. Teachers must run their own staff development programs and be allotted time for professional interaction. The present literacy crisis is based on a record of unprecedented school success requiring an increasing standard of literacy. To achieve the new standard the public must be willing to continue to guarantee educational services. (NKA)

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The Present Literacy Crisis and the Public Interest

By Miles Myers, CFT President

The development of professions within capitalist and democratic societies has depended in large part upon the claim of these professions that they are committed to a set of ideals which serve the public interest (See Magali Sarfatti Larson's The Rise of Professionalism). In this country, the public has decided that it is in the public interest to resist the development of teaching as a profession by opposing a teacher majority on the licensing board, by delegating hiring and evaluation decisions to non-teachers who know little or nothing about the subjects and grades they evaluate and hire for, by increasing the pay of every so-called educator who stops teaching and does something else, by organizing teacher preparation programs around faculty who have inadequate experience in K-12 schools, by asking lawyers who have never taught a day in their lives and who make money from impasse to sit at a bargaining table and judge the value of teacher proposals --the list goes on.

Teaching will not fully develop as a profession unless the public understands two arguments, one showing the historical foundation of the present literacy crisis and the other explaining the necessity of better learning conditions for students. This paper will sketch these two arguments.

First, the historical foundations argument. A fully professionalized teaching staff was not necessary for the five standards of literacy adopted by the public between 1800 and 1980: oral literacy (you are a fluent speaker), signature literacy (you

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can sign your name), recitation literacy (you can recite familiar, pre-announced materials), sign literacy (you can read the alphabet and simple pictures and words) and comprehension literacy (in unannounced passages from newspapers and stories, you know the literal meanings of words). Each of these previous standards was designed to meet a specific national need during a particular historical period, each required a different teaching style, each persists in the folklore of our society, and each became part of the foundation for later, higher standards of literacy. In other words, the present literacy crisis evolves from a record of school success, not school failure.

Signature and Recitation Literacy

The shift from an oral to a print standard was well underway in the middle 1800's when signature literacy began to be accepted as the standard for all citizens. Signature literacy was specifically designed to meet the primary needs of a largely agrarian economy and a transient population shifting from East to West. The ability to sign one's name enabled a person to borrow money, to claim and settle land, to inventory moving property, to certify births and deaths, and so forth. Signature literacy could be taught at home by tutors or by graduates of high schools or elementary schools in single room schools housing children and young adults from many different grades. The central pedagogy of such a school was silent copying and penmanship drills.

Signature literacy still persists in the folklore of our

country. A substantial number of people still believe that the elegance of one's handwriting is an indication of one's level of literacy. But from 1880 until 1915, the country needed, in addition to signature literacy, another standard--recitation literacy. During this period of new immigrants entering the country, the schools were asked to socialize these new populations into the core culture of our country. Recitation literacy helped solve the problem by requiring that children and young adults learn to recite passages from the core texts of the culture. Thus, in the typical recitation lesson, students were asked to stand by their desks and recite aloud previously assigned passages from a poem, the introductory paragraph of A Tale of Two Cities, even Bible verses.

This standard of recitation literacy changed schools. First, the problem of having students at different grade levels all in the same room reciting aloud from different works created a pandemonium that required an educational reform --separate, closed classrooms for students. Second, the separate classrooms for specified groups of students made possible rows of desks bolted to the floor. Recitation literacy still persists in our culture. The recitation of familiar verses, and selections from is still a sign of literacy in many communities, and, it persists to this day in the citizenship test. But by 1915, the requirements of the automobile, industrialization, urbanization and a large army had shifted the country's standard of literacy to a different level.

Sign and comprehension literacy

From 1915 until 1970, the country moved toward a standard of comprehension literacy for all citizens. The first step was the development of sign literacy, the requirement that people understand the relationship between letters and sound and have the general ability to read simple signs and labels. If the population could not read signs and labels, one could not organize armies, factories, streets, highways and large shopping markets. The unannounced text in sign literacy was a radical departure from the familiar, pre-announced text in recitation literacy. In addition, recitation literacy emphasized the importance of memory while sign literacy emphasized the importance of letter-sound relationships and the use of print for memory storage. In the view of many people at the time, the new emphasis on print was causing a general loss of memory and a general decline in intelligence.

The first major step toward sign literacy was the introduction of the tests for army draftees in World War I. Draftees who said they had been to school received a written test and 40% tested at what was called the third grade level. By World War II, 60% were at the third grade level, and by Vietnam, 80% (See Ralph Tyler interview in the August 1977 Phi_Delta_Kappan). But by Vietnam, sign literacy was no longer enough. In fact, the shift to comprehension literacy for all students began with Sputnik in 1957.

This new standard of comprehension literacy required that one go beyond skills in phonics and simple signs to skills in summarizing the literal information of stories and newspaper

reports. In September 1986, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) concluded, after studying 3,600 subjects 21 to 25 years of age, that 95% of young American adults could read at the fourth grade level and about 80% at the eighth grade level. It is important to remember that even during the hullabaloo about the SAT decline, the reading scores in the lower grades were increasing. The recent Congressional Budget Office report "Trends in Educational Achievement" shows, according to Peter Schrag, that "on some tests children now in grades three to six...are scoring at levels higher than they've been in thirty years" (See Peter Schrag's article in The Nation, October 4, 1986). In California, grades 3 and 6 have shown significant gains every year since 1980 in reading, writing, and mathematics. In addition, the goal of reaching every student has been a success. Over 70% of the nation's seventeen year olds are in school, compared with 40% in the 1940's, and in 1984-1985 in California 67.4% of the students graduated from high school.

The goals of sign and comprehension literacy were not achieved without fundamental changes in the schools and in conceptions of teaching. To achieve sign and comprehension literacy, educators introduced a behaviorist model of learning in school materials and in the preparation of teachers. In this model, mind was, according to John Locke, a wax tablet on which experience writes its history. Experience enters the mind unmediated through the senses, and because logic and order are inherent in experience, one can discover logic and order by looking at experience. In Skinner's American version of behaviorism, the learner learns through carefully

structured, repetitive experience.

This kind of behaviorist learning requires teaching practices giving a heavy emphasis to slot-filling, sequenced drills, small pieces within small units, elaborate grading and reward systems, and multiple-choice tests. In addition, this kind of learning required a new kind of school organization, one that emphasized efficiency and the metaphor of schooling as manufacturing (See Raymond Callahan's The Cult of Efficiency). The role of the teacher in this model of school organization was clear. Bring to the classroom the teacher-proof materials prepared by some central agency specializing in Stimulus-Response-Reward patterns, provide reinforcement when told to do so by the script, and keep accurate records of the points, grades, M&M's, and smiling faces given to each student. In summary, the teacher was a routine worker in what the principal called "his plant," and the teacher's primary responsibility was to implement reinforcement schedules and to keep good records. All of these practices were quite effective in helping students to achieve standards of literacy emphasizing rote memory and the literal meaning of words. These practices, like those preceding them, did not require a fully professionalized teacher, only a routine worker willing to follow the lesson mandates of school boards and administrators. Of course, many teachers resisted, wanting to do more.

John Dewey, Margaret Haley, and others had warned as early as 1910 that the cult of efficiency in schools would undermine the education of students for citizenship in a democracy, and by the

1950's R.P. Blackmure, the literary critic, was saying that schooling which emphasized the literal would produce citizens easily manipulated by demagogues through printed material. By the 1980's the issue was no longer just citizenship; the issue was also economic. At the 1986 Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, the Berkeley Roundtable on the International Economy warned that survival in world markets depended upon a work-force with an "education broad enough to enable workers to move flexibly among technological generations." This kind of education is not specifically vocational, according to the Roundtable, and goes beyond sign and comprehension literacy.

A New Standard of Literacy

This new standard of literacy must meet a number of social needs. First, students as citizens must be able to go beyond the literal meanings of words and be able to interpret the meaning of texts, including an assessment of author intention. Second, students as workers must know how to learn and how to problem-solve in order to adapt to new technologies and the re-organization of old technologies. Third, students as workers must know how to participate in decision making both at the factory and in their unions, including writing and discussion skills. It is important to remember that technological change is not just a matter of new machines. There are also new ways of organizing work decisions, the Japanese and Swedish models of management being two examples. Both models create new roles for workers.

This new standard of inferential literacy emphasizes production as well as comprehension. Readers must compose essays. Second, reading goes beyond literal information and single answers. In one of the literary theories underlying this new standard of literacy, the reader helps create the text by bringing to the text prior experience with other texts, thereby generating expectations and guesses about meaning and purpose. Furthermore, readers belong to interpretive communities, groups of people with common experiences and common assumptions about text, and these interpretive communities become the arbiters of textual truth and reliability.

In this new standard of literacy, inference plays a large role not only in reading, but in the interpretation and description of reality in general. In earlier standards of literacy, the text was a window on reality. One looked through a transparent text at the facts of the world. Contemporary approaches to literacy see the text as a screen through which one sees the world darkly. In fact, the screen of language, including such elements as author intention and historical context, helps shape the reality we see. For example, in the earlier days of transparent texts, words like chairman and he were labels for things in the world. In today's world of screen texts, chairman and he shape attitudes toward men and women, producing sexist realities while labeling. An awareness of how language both produces and labels reality is one of the prerequisites of inferential literacy.

Efforts to organize curriculum around this new standard of literacy must not make the same mistakes made in the 1960's with the

New Math, the New Physics, the New Criticism, and the New Grammar (structural grammar). One of these mistakes was the nativist model of learning underlying the pedagogy of that period. In nativism, the mind, according to Descartes, was not the blank tablet of behaviorism but an indexed tablet of innate categories and presuppositions which form and shape experience. Thus, order and logic are inherently in the mind, and the task of the learner is to find this order by having experiences which trigger output from the categories of the mind.

Chomsky, who called one kind of trigger the Language acquisition Device (LAD), suggested that learning in this nativist theory of the mind resembles the imprinting process in Konrad Lorenz's ducks. At certain times, the LAD is activated, and the learner imprints on the available language, seeming to learn that language without any necessity for the kind of structured experiences one finds in behaviorism. This kind of learning emphasizes unstructured, holistic experiences, one example being Dan Fader's hooked-on-books approach (See Daniel Fader's Hooked-on-Books) in which students are simply put in room with plenty of reading material and asked to read and write journals everyday. The teacher in this model of learning is something approximating a caretaker-accountant. The teacher is expected to keep records of the learner's imprinting patterns and to provide some generalized nurturing.

It seems clear now that an imprinting pedagogy will do some things, but it will not develop inferential literacy. Piaget's

theory of learning provides a better guide. In Piaget's model, the mind has a developmental history in which the mind's overall structure goes through several stages of evolution -- sensori-motor, symbolic play, concrete operations, and formal operations. Each of these stages represent different overall structures of mind, each with its own internal logic and each with a characteristic approach to learning. As a result, what are often called errors by an expert may be quite logical within the structure of the mind of the learner or novice. Teachers need to know something about the developmental history of their students in order to make an appropriate fit between teaching and learning.

To say that the minds of all learners have an overall structure is to say that all learners can make hypotheses or guesses about what has happened, is happening, or might happen. In both Piaget's and Dewey's views, the learner cannot learn without active engagement through guesses. The learner is self motivated to make these guesses because development occurs as a dialectic between the guesses that the learner makes and the sensory data about events, either textual or actual. Guesses that work lead to assimilation of data into the overall structure of the mind, and guesses that do not work result in accommodations or modifications of the overall structure of the mind so that the data can be accounted for.

This structuralist view of mind inspired a group of teaching practices called interactionism, all of which emphasize developmental changes in the structure of the mind and social interaction as a key to intellectual development. In the teaching

of writing, for example, these practices structure writing assignments as interactions between speaker and audience. The specific interactions that the teacher might aim for will depend upon the developmental history of the students. For some audience-speaker relations might be close, for others distant. In addition, interaction practices have given special importance to pre-writing strategies such as mapping and drafting, reading strategies such as "predicting," "tentative choosing," questioning, and skipping, and math strategies such as estimation, restating the problem, and working backwards (Mathematics Framework, 1985:7 and 31).

In other words, in this interaction model of teaching, teacher-proof materials are not possible. The classroom is a negotiated setting, and the teacher must become a classroom researcher in order to monitor the negotiations with various students. The design of particular lessons is not predictable, and the teacher must be able to make adaptations of subject matter and procedures on-the-spot. The factory model of school, with the teacher as an assembly-line worker fixing student-products, cannot work in an interaction model of learning. Furthermore, the work of various researchers has shown us that teachers, like other people, have a developmental history which they must go through and that for teachers, as well as students, errors are ways to learn.

Piaget's model of learning is a good foundation for teaching inferential literacy, but the model has already undergone needed modifications. One problem is context. Margaret Donaldson has shown that answers to Piagetian problems are based on the context in which

one is working. She found that the child sometimes gave the wrong answer to Piagetian questions because the child had "not learned to distinguish between situations where he is supposed to give primacy to language, and situations where he is not" (See Margaret Donaldson's Children's Minds, 1978:79).

Another problem in Piaget's model, according to Howard Gardner, is that the developmental history of a child may be different in such different domains of knowledge as pictures, numbers, words, space, and logic. In addition, Gardner argues that Piaget learning models, like schools themselves, emphasize logical-mathematical intelligence and ignore others (See Howard Gardner's Frames of Mind). In addition, the evidence from various research projects is beginning to suggest that other ways of knowing --for example, visual designs-- may be useful problem solving devices which schools should promote. For example, teachers in the California Math Project encourage students, if they are so inclined, to draw the problem first.

Given the fact that inferential literacy for all students is not only necessary, but possible, we must ask whether any of our students have achieved this standard. To answer this question, one must distinguish between different types of reading distinctions. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) divided recent test scores into five reading levels -- rudimentary, basic, intermediate, adept, and advanced, advanced being highly inferential. The NAEP results show that 17-year-olds are improving in their basic and intermediate reading levels, but they are still

having trouble with the most advanced forms of problem solving, only 5% of the 17-year-olds having mastered the most advanced reading skills (Education Week, September 25, 1985:1).

This difference between basic and inferential literacy levels can be seen in a comparison of California's achievement scores in early and late grades. The tests for grades 3 and 6, which emphasize more literal material, show gains since 1980, but the tests for grades 8 and 12, which emphasize more inferential material, show losses or no significant gains since 1980. The recent NAEP study of adult literacy shows that less than one-fourth of the country's young adults could undertake the more challenging tasks of interpreting charts, maps, and tables. Less than 40% could calculate the change they were due when ordering a simple meal from a menu, and less than 10% could fill out a catalogue order form.

In summary, then, basic reading and math skills seem well under control, but students still lack inferential literacy. One reason may be that the organization of instruction puts a high value on "literalness" in reading and math. It is clear that for many secondary teachers slot-filling drills and multiple-choice responses are ways of managing 170 students in the midst of classroom interruptions and the record keeping burdens of contemporary programs. Inferential instruction requires more time for each student, a near impossibility given the usual secondary teacher's load of 150 or more students per day. If teachers spend only 10 minutes on each student's writing per week, teachers have added at least 1500 minutes or 25 hours to their load, a load which includes

each week a minimum of 25 hours of class time and another 5 hours of meetings, conferences, and record keeping.

To get classrooms organized to achieve an inference standard of literacy, we must reduce the typical class load, stop the classroom interruptions, spend more money on reading materials with content, and, among other things, change our methods of assessing achievement. One of the key differences in schools emphasizing inference literacy is that most of the questions and problems posed in classrooms do not have one answer. In fact, problems often have more than one or no answer, and because there is an emphasis on process and logic, unexpected, even slightly bizarre answers are treated with respect and may be to some degree or other correct.

A standard of inferential literacy also changes the teachers. First, if there is more than one right answer to problems in the classroom, then a machine scored test with a single right answer is not an adequate device for evaluating the achievement of students. The only way to evaluate the achievement of students in a classroom focused on inference literacy is to ask the students to write and to ask the teachers to judge. At this point the state is depending upon teacher judgement.

But a state cannot allow teachers to use personal whim as the basis for their judgments about student achievement. The teachers must be socialized into a community of fellow practitioners who have a procedure for arriving at acceptable norms for student and teacher performance. In short, teachers in this new standard of literacy must run their own staff development programs and must have time

during the school day for interacting with fellow professionals on questions of teaching practice.

Second, the judgments of answers must always be anchored in a discipline or field of study. What looks like a good approach to problem solving in math cannot be judged by the same standards that apply to pre-writing and planning for a literature essay. Problems exist in a discipline, and norms are context specific. Therefore, teachers in classrooms focusing on inference literacy must be educated in a discipline, thus requiring a teacher preparation program which postpones teacher education until the graduate year or some period after the candidate completes a major in a discipline.

In addition, the preparation of K-12 teachers in pedagogy, either in universities or colleges or in district staff development programs, cannot be assigned to faculty or personnel with less than seven years of full time teaching experience in K-12. The present university practice of using graduate students to supervise student teachers is a scandal. The system provides funds to keep people enrolled in Ph.D. programs, but it does not build strong teacher preparation programs. The Mentor teacher program in school districts is a recognition that teachers must be taught by people who know something about teaching. That insight has not, as yet, penetrated many of California's universities and colleges.

Finally, well-prepared teachers with the autonomy to develop norms within their professional community must work in institutional settings where teachers play a critical role in hiring, selection of materials, scheduling of classes, preparing school budgets, and so

forth. A thorough change in management style is long overdue. And last, but not least, salaries. It is not at all clear why teachers do not earn as much as the building principal or deputy superintendent. One can raise the beginning salary and make other promises to attract good people into the profession, but if teacher salaries and management style do not change, then good people will not stay.

Conclusion

The present literacy crisis is not based on school failure but a record of school success unmatched in the world. The achievement of each new standard of literacy contributes to the need for a higher standard, and, thus, like many social problems, the present literacy crisis is, in part, the result of a previous solution. The present crisis is, in part, a result of the fact that underdeveloped countries are becoming developed, increasing their standard of living and at the same time increasing their standard of literacy.

To achieve our country's new standard literacy, the public must have a professionalized teaching staff, and this means lower class sizes and teaching loads, higher salaries, better and longer teacher preparation, better textbooks -- all at a cost of \$3-4 billion according to one estimate. The first test for the public will be its willingness to revise or remove the Gann Limit and to provide a guaranteed base for educational services. If the public understood that its schools had been achieving the previous goals set by the public and that the new goals required a fully professionalized

teaching staff, then the public might be willing to pass that first test with flying colors.