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# What we talk about when we talk about literacy: A look into the value, measurement, and power hierarchy of literacy

Veronica Carolyn Bond

*DePaul University*, [vcarolynbond@gmail.com](mailto:vcarolynbond@gmail.com)

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**What We Talk About When We Talk About Literacy:**  
**A Look into the Value, Measurement, and Power Hierarchy of Literacy**

Veronica C. Bond  
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## **Introduction: What Is Literacy?**

The idea of literacy conjures up different images for different people. For some it may be the ability to read a very specific form of writing – furniture assembly instructions or maps or the works of a Nobel Prize winning author. For others it may be the ability to write in a specific manner – composing a résumé or administering medical forms or summarizing a series of articles in scholarly journals. For still others, it may be the ability to perform those tasks which many take for granted – properly interpreting the directions on a prescription bottle or ordering from a menu or following along in a prayer missal at church. Literacy takes many different forms and the degree to which each of these forms is important is dependent not just on any given person’s needs, but on the community in which the person is required to operate. No two forms of literacy are exactly alike, although some forms may share characteristics that allow people to easily master more than one literacy.

Literacy organizations provide somewhat vague and open-ended definitions of what literacy is and how it affects people’s lives. According to the National Coalition for Literacy, adult literacy is defined as the ability to use “printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” The Chicago literacy organization Literacy Works states that their mission is to “fulfill the promise of a basic human right: to read, write, and interpret the world” in a city where “half a million adults cannot read, write, or speak English well enough to meet their own goals for education, employment, and enrichment for themselves and their families.” Similarly, fellow organization Open Books states on their website that “Literacy skills are life skills, and there is a literacy crisis in America.” This assertion is followed by supporting statistics, such as “In Chicago, 53% of the current adult population have low or limited literacy skills” and “61% of low-income households

do not have a single children's book at home." Chicago's Neighborhood Writing Alliance's vision statement proclaims that they "envision a society where adults connect through creative communities in which writing, discussing, and publishing personal narrative leads to civic engagement, neighborhood vitality, and social transformation." All statements stress the importance of literacy in adult's lives, yet there is little to tell us exactly what literacy is.

These local organizations champion the need for increased literacy skills for both children and adults, showing that adults who are deficient in literacy are also deficient in other areas of their lives. But what do we really mean by "literacy?" Most of these adults have some reported reading ability, yet they are not considered a member of the group labeled "literate." While it may be easy to agree that illiteracy is the complete inability to read and write, the point at which a person is considered literate can be difficult to determine. Contrary to the belief that literacy is the simple ability to read or write, the discussion surrounding literacy in this country implies an evaluation of the way people use these abilities. People must not only be able to read and write to be considered literate, but must be able to do so in specific ways. In fact, we are talking about something much more specific than whether people can read and write: we are talking about *how* people read and write.

The way people use literacy can have a monumental effect on their lives. In 2005, the *New York Times* published *Class Matters*, a collection of essays examining how, in what some would claim is a classless society, class issues continue to plague America. The authors acknowledge that while social diversity has allowed class disparities to be disguised – cars, clothing styles, and skin color are no longer definitive indicators of class – class has continued to play an important role in American lives and "[a]t a time when education matters more than ever, success in school remains tightly linked to class" (Scott & Leonhardt). Although the possibility

of socioeconomic mobility still exists, Americans are still very likely to end up in the class into which they were born. Parents with money and education pass these on to their children, while those without are less likely to see their children achieve these bench markers of success.

Leonhardt's essay on education's effect on social class reports that "Only 41 percent of low-income students entering a four-year college managed to graduate within five years...but 66 percent of high-income students did" (1-2). The monetary constraints of college may be a barrier for low-income students entering college, but this marked split in graduation rates suggests a cause greater than financial need. Whether these students receive less preparation for college from their high school teachers or whether they come from communities where few members have graduated from college, the reason for this disparity is as much lack of social support as it is lack of economic or academic means.

Literacy, like money and like education, can determine the course of a person's life and, just like money and education, literacy is a skill that is passed down from generation to generation. Although we believe schools to be the primary supplier of literacy skills, students with parents who have a higher level of education and who value literacy are more likely to be considered literate. It is equally important to note that there is a specific type of literacy taught in schools and it is only when people have mastered this literacy that society considers them to be "literate." Though people may be literate in a number of different ways, it is only when they master this schooled literacy that they receive the benefits of a higher socioeconomic class. Determining what this literacy is, how it is learned, and how it affects people's ability to participate in society is important in revealing why some groups of people are able to master it more easily than others. First, a look at two national literacy surveys – the National Endowment for the Arts's "To Read or Not To Read" and the National Assessment of Adult Literacy's

“Literacy in Everyday Life” – will provide some insight into how literacy is discussed as it relates to people’s everyday lives.

### **Talking About Literacy: “To Read or Not To Read” and “Literacy in Everyday Life”**

In 2007, the National Endowment for the Arts produced “To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence” compiling statistical data from national surveys to present a comprehensive look at reading patterns in America. This study follows the NEA’s 2004 report “Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America,” which was developed from a periodic survey the NEA has conducted since 1982 using the U.S. Census Bureau for administration. The survey collected data from more than 17,000 adults in every demographic group and “Reading at Risk” reported on trends in literary reading over the course of twenty years. The study found that literary reading was declining for every demographic group, but also declining most rapidly among younger Americans. “To Read or Not To Read” builds on these findings by examining two things: how this decline affects people in their everyday lives and why literary reading matters. While the results are harrowing to be sure – the report finds that the general decline in literary reading for all teenage and adult Americans affects their abilities to participate in classrooms, workplaces, and civic institutions – it is important to note that the study measures more than whether people *can* read. It also studies *what* they are reading.

The study’s definition of what “reading” is illustrates that it is a particular type of reading that is at risk. Our idea of what reading truly is has become more defined – it is not just the general ability to read that this discussion of literacy is concerned with. The report finds that Americans are reading “fiction, poetry, and drama – and books in general – at significantly lower rates than 10 or 20 years earlier” (7). One statistic illuminates this idea of reading perfectly: the

percentage of students who “read for fun” is shown to have declined for the age groups of 13 and 17, with the percentage of students who responded that they never or hardly ever read for fun increasing five points for the younger group and ten points for the older group and the percentage of students who responded that they read for fun almost every day dropping five points for the younger and nine points for the older (8). The study is not concerned with how much the students read in the classroom or for homework, but with how much they read when they are not required to do so. The study goes on to state that other media often interfere with reading for fun, suggesting a “less focused engagement with the text”: 58% of students reported that they use other media while reading “most” or “some of the time” (8). It is not that these students cannot read, but they are choosing not to read outside of school requirements and, when they do, they are frequently dividing their attention between reading and other media. Students are not only reading less, but they are reading less well and this is cause for concern.

In accordance with the above results, the NEA’s study shows that we, as a country, are buying fewer books. From 1985 to 2005, the amount of money spent on books, when adjusted for inflation, has dropped 14% (11). This is significant when taken in conjunction with the study’s subsequent claim that the number of books in the home is a “significant predictor of academic achievement” (12), which is measured by comparing average test scores with the number of books in the student’s home. For 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, the study found that test scores in science, civics, and history, as well as in language and literature, were consistently higher for those with a greater number of books in the home. The implication here is that “reading for pleasure correlates strongly with academic achievement” (14). This leads to the following conclusions: those who read voluntarily are better readers and writers, those who read regularly for pleasure score better on tests that evaluate reading, and frequent readers score better on

writing tests. What these claims suggest is that there is something specifically about voluntary reading that affects students' academic success. While we cannot presume from these statistics that the mere presence of books in the home increases a student's test scores, we might conclude that those families who spend more money on books and keep them in their homes value reading and academics more than those who do not and this value has been instilled in their children from a young age. Those students who engage in regular "literary reading" are the ones who are exposed to it in the home.

The effect of the decline in literary reading is evident in non-academic situations as well. Reading and writing skills rank as the top deficiencies in new hires as reported by employers and proficiency in reading appears to create a greater opportunity for financial success: 60% of proficient readers have jobs in "management, business, financial, professional, and related sectors" (17), proficient readers comprised 58% of those who earned \$850 or more per week in 2003 while 70% of those who said that their reading skills limited their job opportunities were scored as having below basic reading skills. Consequently, those who scored in the lowest reading levels were less likely to be employed full time: 45% of low level readers reported being employed full time compared to 78% of proficient readers (20). What this tells us is that there is something about frequent literary reading that is related to one's ability to be successful both inside and outside of school. While the authors maintain that their data on reading proficiency and personal and social characteristics of readers should not be used to draw a conclusive causal relationship between reading skills and the other variables measured, the correlations presented in this study suggest a strong relationship between the value of literary reading and the academic and financial success valued by society. Literary reading is clearly far more valuable than it seems.

The type of literacy measured in “To Read or Not To Read” is distinctly different from that measured by “Literacy in Everyday Life,” the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy. Assessing the English literacy of adults in the United States for the first time since the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey, the purpose of the NAAL study was to examine the relationship between literacy skills and other self-reported factors, such as education, employment, and community involvement. In home interviews, literacy skills were measured directly by administering tasks to be completed by adult respondents, ages 16 and older. The tasks were designed to represent the sort of literacy tasks that adults might encounter in their everyday lives. Here the authors define literacy as “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (2). Similar to the way the NEA defines literary reading as a specific type of reading, the NAAL study acknowledges that literacy is more than recognizing words or basic text comprehension. Literacy can be used in different ways to achieve specific objectives. Unlike the focus on the decline of literary reading in “To Read or Not To Read,” however, the data measured in the NAAL study was used to describe two things: how adults use literacy in their family lives, places of work, and communities and how literacy and formal education are related (4). The NAAL study categorizes literacy in three ways: prose literacy, which is used to comprehend news stories, instructional manuals, editorials, and brochures; document literacy, which is used to comprehend job applications, payroll forms, maps, and drug and food labels; and quantitative literacy, which is used to identify and perform calculations using numbers found in printed materials such as in checkbooks, order forms, and menus (3). Test questions included identifying information found in a presented article, filling in forms with alphanumerical information, and determining monetary transactions. Respondents’ reading skills were then classified in four levels: Below

Basic, ranging from nonliterate in English to being able to locate easily identifiable information in short prose texts, follow written instructions in simple documents, and locate numbers and use them to perform simply quantitative operations; Basic, indicating a firm grasp on the above abilities; Intermediate, indicating the ability to read and understand moderately dense prose texts, summarize, make simple inferences, recognize the author's purpose, locate information in dense, complex documents, and locate less familiar quantitative information and use it to solve problems; and Proficient, indicating the ability to read "lengthy, complex, abstract prose texts," synthesize information, make complex inferences, analyze multiple pieces of information, and locate abstract quantitative information and use it to solve multi-step problems (4).

Although the NAAL study measures different forms of literacy than the NEA study, the data is remarkably similar. Adults who scored in higher literacy levels were more likely to be employed full time and less likely to be unemployed compared to adults who scored in lower literacy levels. For all three forms of literacy, a higher percentage of adults who were classified as "Proficient" were employed in professional, managerial, business, and financial occupations while many of the individuals who were in lower literacy levels were employed in service occupations. Adults with lower literacy skills were also more likely to earn a lower income than those with Proficient literacy skills. Similar to the NEA's respondents, NAAL respondents in lower literacy levels were more likely to report that their reading skills had a negative effect on their job opportunities than adults in higher literacy levels whereas nearly all of those adults who were classified as Proficient readers reported that their reading skills did not at all limit their job opportunities (76). Additionally, women who were classified in higher literacy levels were less likely to have received public assistance; if they had received assistance they were likely to have received it for a shorter period of time than women in lower literacy levels (6).

Not surprisingly, the relationship between education and literacy is shown to have a positive correlation here. Adults with higher levels of education showed higher levels of literacy and literacy scores rose with each level of education. Literacy scores were lowest amongst those who did not complete high school and were highest for those with some graduate study or a graduate degree (58). The length of time over which adults completed their education was also correlated with their literacy level: adults who received their high school or college degrees at an age that indicated they began school at a traditional age and had no breaks in their education had higher literacy levels than adults who received their degrees at an older age (41). While adults who had completed more education had higher literacy levels across the board, the data shows a further correlation between race and literacy that persisted through all education levels. White adults at all education levels had higher average literacy scores than black and Hispanic adults at the same education levels, white adults with college degrees had higher literacy scores than Asian adults at the same education levels, and white adults who had no college education had higher literacy scores than Asian adults at the same education levels (39). Although education clearly affects literacy levels, this racial trend suggests that there are also cultural and social factors that affect literacy proficiency.

The NAAL study also found that literacy levels displayed a positive correlation with the amount of time parents spent reading to their children. This is consistent with the NEA study's finding that students who had more books in the home performed better in school, suggesting that literacy proficiency is affected by the degree to which a family values reading. A higher percentage of parents who scored in the Intermediate or Proficient literacy levels reported reading to their children five or more days per week, had children between the ages of three and five who knew the alphabet, and reported talking to their children about things the children

studied in school. Accordingly, the percentage of parents who reported helping their children with homework rose with each literacy level (67) and the percentage of parents who reported having reading materials in the home also rose with each literacy level (68). This, combined with the NEA's findings, implies a positive correlation between parents' value of literacy and students' own literacy levels. People who come from families who value reading are exposed to reading at a younger age, engage in frequent reading or literacy tasks in the home, are able to practice their literacy skills more frequently, and, consequently, are proficient in literacy.

An additional noteworthy similarity in both reports is the effect reading was found to have on community and civic involvement. In "To Read or Not To Read," literary readers were more likely to visit art museums, attend plays or musicals, attend classical or jazz concerts, play sports, and create art than those who did not frequently engage in literary reading (87). Literary readers were also more likely to participate in elections and twice as likely as non-literary readers to volunteer their time or do charity work (90). The NAAL study echoes these results: those respondents who scored in the higher literacy levels were increasingly more likely to have voted in the 2000 presidential election, reported obtaining more information about current events and public affairs from print and non-print sources, and reported giving more time to volunteer groups and participating in online communities than those in each level below them (8). Far from being relevant in solely the academic and occupational worlds, the benefits of frequent and proficient literary reading clearly extend to all aspects of people's lives.

In "To Read or Not To Read" and the NAAL study, there exists a shared definition of literacy that goes beyond simple word recognition or text comprehension. These studies show that literacy is used to accomplish tasks that people encounter in their daily lives and that literacy can have a profound effect on people's family, academic, financial, and social lives. It is not

whether one is literate or illiterate that matters, but how literacy is used. However, what these studies fail to explore is how people use literacy for their own means. The focus on one type of literacy works to devalue any other type of literacy in which people may be proficient. Brodkey suggests that by situating literacy as a literate “us” versus an illiterate “them,” and by designating the lowest levels of literacy as “functional literacy,” literacy campaigns fail to recognize that individuals use literacy to “fulfill their own self-determined objectives” (165). Those who are merely “functionally literate” may be able to complete a set of simple reading tasks or answer simple comprehension questions, but they may not have the literacy skills needed to operate in their daily lives as determined by a sector of society, whether this is the education system, the business world, or social groups. They are unable to participate in the culture of literary reading, a culture that these discussions of literacy promote. Because a specific type of literacy is valued most by this culture, mere comprehension is not enough for individuals to successfully achieve membership in the social groups that participate in this culture. If it were the case, people who scored in the Below Basic and Basic reading levels in the NAAL study and those who reported low levels of frequent non-required reading would not display significant differences in academics, employment, and community involvement.

Defining literacy in such dichotomous terms – “literate” vs. “illiterate” – rather than as a complex skill needed to navigate social tasks, does little to aid those who have not mastered this skill. In *Pathways to Literacy*, Cairney insists that literacy, in fact, contributes to the shaping of culture and that simplified definitions of literacy only “reduce it to little more than a technocratic skill” based on the assumption that it is merely a series of lessons that need to be taught (12). Cairney recalls that the first time he read a book occurred after he had known how to read for several years: “Sure, I had read school readers and some school magazine stories, a few comics

and one edition of *Boy's Own Annual*, but I'd never read a novel of my choice. In effect, I had learned to read but did not read regularly for other than school purposes" (75). This admission demonstrates a central problem with simplified definitions of literacy: Being *able to* read does not mean one *does* read.

A further problem with defining basic literacy skills as "functional literacy" is that such definitions divorce texts from the culture in which they are produced and read. Cairney goes on to describe how, as a teacher, the students in his community literacy program all read as if they were reading textbooks, characterizing these students as "mere consumers of other people's texts, not creators of meaning in the fullest sense of the word" (75). He found that, for these students, all attention was focused on the "surface features" of the text with a near complete disregard for meaning. The students were *reading* the texts, but they were not connecting with, responding to, or questioning the texts. These abilities go beyond the simple reading skills used to define functional literacy – proficient readers must make their own meanings from texts. They do not blindly consume texts, but learn to personally engage with the texts so that they are positioned in their lives. Some people are clearly able to master this skill while others are not and discussions of literacy should question why this is so.

When studies such as "To Read or Not To Read" report that reading rates are declining, we must be careful to understand that they are not stating that functional literacy is declining, but the way people practice, use, and value their literacy skills is changing. People are reading less frequently in a specific way and this decline is affecting much more than book sales. Thus, it is not functional literacy that a person needs in order to successfully navigate society, but proficiency in a literacy that society deems valuable. The NEA and the NAAL studies are not suggesting that literacy can be measured in such dichotomous terms as "literate" and "illiterate,"

but they do focus on one type of literacy the mastery of which is used as a benchmark for success. The NEA terms this “literary reading,” while the NAAL refers to “prose,” “document,” and “quantitative” literacy, but regardless of the name, it is undoubtedly a literacy that goes beyond simple word recognition and sentence comprehension.

These studies demonstrate that discussions of literacy focus more on mastery of a certain type of literacy rather than basic reading and writing skills. When the NEA measures the frequency of literary reading, they specifically mean fiction, poetry, and drama read outside of required classroom or work settings. Likewise, the NAAL study’s evaluation of adult Americans’ literacy skills goes beyond reading and writing to evaluate interpretation, synthesis, and analysis of both concrete and abstract information. The studies give some hints as to the differences between those who can master these skills and those who are only able to perform rudimentary literacy tasks, indicating that there are some demographic groups for whom frequent literary reading is highly valued. Children from these homes would ostensibly have more exposure to the type of literacy needed to perform well in school, in jobs, and in their communities. The characteristics of this type of literacy, the ways in which it is learned, and the disadvantages some demographic groups face in mastering it warrant further exploration.

### **Learning to Read and Write: Defining Schooled Literacy**

Discussions of literacy often focus on the way it provides access to economic and social benefits for some while limiting access to these benefits for others. In this way, literacy acts as a gatekeeper that regulates access to economic and social mobility. However, it is only one type of literacy that opens this gate. When discussing literacy, it is important to keep in mind that multiple literacies exist in the world and that people have the ability to be proficient in numerous

literacies, using them in different facets of their lives. When we talk about literacy we are most often referring to the way people are taught to read and write in school. It is a skill primarily taught in classrooms and used in papers and exams in academic settings. Some people are given access to this literacy prior to and outside of school and some people will encounter it only in classrooms. Because education's focus on this literacy rewards students who employ it successfully, the ability to master it is of paramount importance. To determine what allows some students to master this literacy more easily than other students, we must first define what this literacy is and the rules that govern its correct use.

The most apt term for this type of literacy is "schooled literacy," the term used by Jenny Cook-Gumperz in *The Social Construction of Literacy*. She differentiates schooled literacy from what she terms "functional literacy" as a literacy that is learned through "the process of classroom exchanges, learning group formation, through informal judgments and standardized tests and all other evaluative apparatus of schooling" (4). Cook-Gumperz goes on to describe schooled literacy as reflective of the pedagogical theories that have developed over the past sixty years during which educational institutions have played an increasing role in influencing socioeconomic opportunities (4). Mastering schooled literacy implies that a specific collection of skills is learned in the classroom – a person may not be entirely unable to read and write, but lack of proficiency in schooled literacy can result in being placed in "basic" or "below basic" literacy levels. The term "functionally literate" may be more suitable for such people, but as the NAAL study and "To Read or Not To Read," reveal, being functionally literate is not a sufficient skill level because education and society value schooled literacy over all other forms. As such, literacy tests do not merely assess whether a person is able to read and write, but *how* they read and write. These tests are evaluative and not a quantitative measurement of abilities. It is the

way in which and the purposes for which this literacy is used that determines whether the gate to economic and social mobility will be opened.

Certain characteristics are unique to schooled literacy and are reflected in the way students are taught to write or express their thoughts on a subject. In “Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues,” Peter Elbow outlines what characterizes the language academics use when they publish for other academics, noting that this is the language students are taught to use in universities. Elbow claims that one of the most crucial differences between this form of writing and other forms of writing students may use is that academic writing necessitates stepping outside the self and writing with a sense of detachment: “the conventions of academic discourse...reflect the diligence needed to step outside one’s narrow vision – they are the conventions of a certain impersonality and detachment all working toward this large and important goal of separating feeling, personality, opinion, and fashion from what is essential: clear positions, arguments, and evidence” (140). Academic writing requires the ability to separate ideas and arguments from the person who presents them. Arguments and claims must be clearly stated rather than merely implied. This form of writing rests on a fundamental objectivity and maintains that arguments are not influenced by the writer’s race, class, gender, or personal opinions, but are impartial to any subjective biases. Academic writing “tries to peel away from messages the evidence of how those messages are situated as the center of personal, political, or cultural interest” (Elbow 141). Essentially, successful academic writing does two things: 1) conceals the fact that the discourse is being used by people who are, in fact, influenced by their subjective opinions and biases; and 2) addresses an audience that either shares these same biases or attempts to convince an opposing audience that these biases are relevant.

Academic writing requires that certain rules be followed and Elbow divides these into four conventions that should be taught to students. The first is that language can be used in an explicit and straightforward manner so that students can gain control over language to directly and clearly express what they truly mean. Secondly, academic writing asserts a set of social and authoritarian relations that not only dictates how individuals, such as academics writing for an academic audience, use the language to speak to each other, but also works to exclude individuals who do not use the language. Academic writing acts as a barrier by using a more formal language with longer, more complex sentences that indicates that an academic conversation is taking place; similarly, using this language excludes people who are not in this social group and discourages them from joining the conversation. Thirdly, by disguising opinions and feelings as objective facts, academic writing masks the anxiety writers may feel about the claims they make. Avoiding an overly emotional tone and writing in a more formal, passive style allows the writer to take a restrained approach to their claims. Lastly, academic writing permits a certain amount of showing off or pretentiousness that Elbow attributes to the persistent feeling of writing for the purpose of impressing teachers or authority figures, allowing students to distinguish themselves from their peers. Quotations and footnotes citing important figures in a chosen subject provide credibility and authority to the ideas presented in a text. All four conventions allow students to emotionally distance themselves from the writing and show that they are aware of the ongoing academic conversation on the subject at hand while positioning themselves within it.

The OWL, Purdue University's Online Writing Lab, provides such advice to college students who are learning to write in the academic discourse. Language, style, audience, and citations are all integral components to the OWL's instruction. Here it is easy to see how the

language used in academic writing varies greatly from the language used in any other type of writing students may do. The OWL instructs students to be concise, using only the most effective and strongest words and ensuring that every word in a sentence serves a definite purpose. Words that explain the obvious, are excessive in detail, or are repetitive are to be omitted. Students are told to use language that fits their audience and matches their purpose as “inappropriate language uses can damage your credibility, undermine your argument, or alienate your audience.” Thus, students must know when it is appropriate to use jargon or specialized language depending on whether they are addressing a general audience or an audience to whom they wish to demonstrate their in-group status. Not using jargon when addressing an in-group audience shows that the writer is not a member of the group, which can “damage [their] credibility and interfere with [their] purpose in writing.” Students must also consider that authors, audiences, texts, and contexts can all be affected by background information. They must not assume that they, as authors, will have access to the same background information as their audience or that all texts are received in the same way and read in the same context. They must be mindful that personal experience, gender, location, level of education, and other demographic factors can have an immense impact on how an author is able to convey ideas and how an audience receives them. Unlike when communicating with a group of friends or family members, students must pay special care to the language they use when writing in the academic discourse.

Similarly, arguing a point in academic discourse is vastly different from arguing a point in everyday life. The OWL provides strict instructions on what academic arguments should be: “An argumentative or persuasive piece of writing must begin with a debatable thesis or claim. In other words, the thesis must be something that people could reasonably have differing opinions

on. If your thesis is something that is generally agreed upon or accepted as fact then there is no reason to try and persuade people.” Because the argument must be something the student’s audience will not necessarily agree with, they must support their argument with valid evidence from credible sources. While students may use any source of varying reputation to provide evidence for arguments in their everyday lives, arguments in academic discourse must be supported by evidence from sources that the audience knows to be credible. Evidence cannot merely be opinions – it must either be first-hand research from interviews, experiences, surveys, or experiments, or it must be second-hand research from published texts such as books or periodicals. When using sources, students must take note of the author’s credibility, the author’s purpose, how recent the source is, and what type of source their audience values. The OWL cautions students against using websites as sources unless the website is “associated with a reputable institution such as a respected university, a credible media outlet, government program or department, or well-known non-governmental organizations.” Using non-reputable sources will quickly signal to the audience that the student has not yet mastered academic discourse.

The purpose of these rules is to discourage students from using emotion as the sole means of supporting their arguments. Established texts and verifiable first-hand research provide the audience with a reason view the student’s argument as well planned and reasoned. In order to further establish themselves as authoritative authors, the OWL recommends that students strive to cite their sources properly, establish common ground with their audience by acknowledging beliefs shared by both sides of the argument, organize their argument in a logical, easy-to-follow approach, and only disclose their personal interest in the topic if appropriate. Students are advised to use caution when imparting their arguments with emotion: “Argument emphasizes reason, but used properly there is often a place for emotion as well...Only use an emotional

appeal if it truly supports the claim you are making, not as a way to distract from the real issues of debate.” Clearly, misuse of emotion is a clear sign that the student has not yet mastered academic discourse.

Marcia Farr’s definition of “essayist literacy,” similar to Elbow’s definition of academic writing, reinforces the notion that students should strive for emotion-free writing. In essayist literacy, writing employs a depersonalized form of language that rationalizes the writer’s position while taking into consideration alternative positions and arguments (10). Farr affirms that academic writing instruction is based on shared expectations on what is considered “good” writing compared to “bad” writing – evaluating such writing is inherently a qualitative, not quantitative, judgment. She argues that this particular type of literacy is taught primarily in school and, owing to this, a person with a higher level of education is much more likely to have mastered the literacy. More important, however, is the idea that some students have an advantage when learning the literacy in school. Students are not “blank slates” when they enter school – they already know the rules that govern communication and literacy in their home communities and they can bring any number of literacies into the classroom that represent different ways of viewing the world and using language. Students who come from home communities that use literacies similar to schooled literacy are, therefore, exposed to it at an earlier age and are able to master it faster than students who are exposed to dissimilar literacies.

Farr emphasizes that it is important to be mindful that these variations in literacies are not “deficient versions of the Western European (male) tradition of rational discourse” but are simply different in the way they are used (7). Any literacy has a unique context in which it is acquired and is valued by society in a unique way – no literacy develops or operates in a neutral environment. Literacy essentially operates as a social tool and any evaluative judgments of a

person's literacy proficiency is also a judgment of the way in which they fit into the community that values this tool. By learning literacy rules, students are also learning how to operate within the literacy and those who teach a specific form of literacy support the set of social relations that exclude individuals who are not able to be proficient in it (146). Because schooled literacy reflects the values of the mainstream and middle-class, as Farr argues, students who are from different socioeconomic classes may not be exposed to schooled literacy in the home and may be at a disadvantage when they begin learning it in the classroom. This inequality can result in the disadvantaged students receiving negative evaluations of written and spoken language use and, consequently, assignment to lower-ability tracks that serve to further exclude them from higher level academic instruction and literacy proficiency (6). The ability to master schooled literacy can, therefore, depend on more than a student's ability to read and write – demographic factors can play a key role in literacy proficiency.

When we talk about literacy, we often assume that all people normally possess the same basic cognitive abilities to master schooled literacy. We assume that any person who cannot successfully master it either has a cognitive impairment or simply lacks the desire to learn. While the development of literacy skills may be primarily cognitive, the use of these skills is primarily social. Thus, the problem with assuming that all people have a basic, inherent ability to master schooled literacy is that, based on their cultural and social upbringing, not everyone has a desire or a need to use it. Cook-Gumperz argues that while literacy campaigns have attempted to be culturally sensitive, they also assume that literacy skills are crucial to everyone's lives (23) and that, historically, "prior to the development of a complex bureaucratic universal education system, the acquisition of literacy was more likely to be through information in localized groups" (25). Education evolved to promote a specific form of literacy that each

person, regardless of their social and cultural need for it, is expected to adopt in its entirety. It is not that the people are able to transform from being completely illiterate to being proficiently literate in school, but that they become proficient in schooled literacy. As society has evolved from “a *pluralistic* idea about literacy and sections of society’s population, to a notion of a single, standardized *schooled literacy*,” (Cook-Gumperz 26), notions of what constitutes literacy have followed suit. While schooling may have been intended to create equal opportunity for all Americans to master literacy, the emphasis on one specific type of literacy further works to separate them from the literacies used in home communities and ultimately creates a new level of differentiation in society – those who are less literate are seen as knowing less.

This inequality in the ability to master literacy must be questioned. Do those students who come from families and communities that do not value schooled literacy truly have the same opportunity to master literacy as those students upon whom the value of schooled literacy is impressed from early childhood? If the culture in which you are raised does not possess a use for such practices, then your ability to master a literacy that employs these practices can be vastly impaired. Mastering schooled literacy means not only understanding words on a basic level, but also allowing one’s thinking to be transformed by what is read. When discussing the reading characteristics of the students in his community literacy program, Cairney notes that many of them read fiction passages as though they were reading from textbooks. The students were able to pronounce the words on the page and understand what they meant, but they were not creating any meanings with the texts. On the contrary, proficient readers and writers *create* meanings from texts instead of simply extracting it. These meanings are relative and socially constructed – they are only relevant within the contexts of the relationships between readers and texts and writers and texts. Thus, no two readers can read, nor can two writers write, texts in the exact

same way or create the exact same meanings (Cairney 9). Proficiency in literacy is not a mastery of cognitive skills, but a cultural tool that is learned in a social context. It is not the possession of basic literacy skills that allow students to be proficient in literacy, but the extent to which they are able to create meanings from texts they read, distance themselves emotionally from their arguments in texts they write, and situate themselves within the ongoing discussion of the chosen topic. The tests and evaluative measures used to promote or detain students from grade to grade would be arguably fairer if all students had an equal opportunity to master these skills.

### **Discourses: Literacy in Different Contexts**

The question of how a person becomes proficient in schooled literacy remains. There is clearly something needed beyond rudimentary classroom instruction to allow students to become proficient in schooled literacy. The fact that some students are able to successfully master schooled literacy while others are left behind indicates a deeper social issue that can be illuminated through an exploration of primary and secondary discourses. As used by James Paul Gee, the term “discourse” indicates a set of skills, beliefs, attitudes, manners of dress, and social identities that combine to form a specific type of identity. This identity then provides instruction on how to behave in a social role that will be recognized by others both inside and outside of the discourse (127). Discourses act as “socially accepted association[s] among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and ‘artifacts,’ of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group...or to signal a socially meaningful ‘role’” (131). In terms of literacy, it is not merely the language and the grammar that are important but the combination of written texts, beliefs, values, and expression that indicate the discourse to which a person belongs. It is not enough to be able to

read and write, but it must be done in a certain way for a person to be considered a participant in the schooled literacy discourse. Just as certain discourses require possession of certain skills, such as a member of an orchestra being able to read music or a swimmer being able to learn several different strokes, the schooled literacy discourse requires that individuals read, interpret, discuss, and write about literature in a certain way. In doing this, the individual signifies to themselves, and to others, that they are part of this discourse.

A crucial aspect of discourses is that they inherently endorse a set of values and viewpoints regarding how social relationships are developed and how social benefits are divided. Discourses determine who is an insider and who is an outsider by highlighting the values central to the discourse and marginalizing the values central to other discourses. “Control over certain Discourses can lead to the acquisition of social goods in a society,” Gee states. “These Discourses empower those groups who have the least conflicts with their other Discourses when they use them” (132). Thus, participation in a discourse can provide members of the group with certain social benefits – money, education, or power, for example – while limiting these benefits for those who do not participate in the discourse. Mastery of a discourse is easiest when the discourse does not conflict with other beliefs or values people might hold. As such, the benefits of schooled literacy – higher academic test scores, job advancement, higher pay grades, and increased cultural participation, as indicated by the above studies – are only provided to those whose other discourses are not in conflict with the schooled literacy discourse.

Most people participate in a number of discourses simultaneously throughout their lives. Discourses may be associated with any number of social roles, from job positions to familial roles to advocates of charitable causes. Although people can participate in multiple discourses that conflict with each other, they are more able to master a discourse when the ideologies of

their varying discourses do not conflict. Such conflict is not merely between the values and behaviors of the discourses, but “*who* I am summoned to be in this new Discourse and *who* I am in other Discourses” (Gee 135). Problems arise when one discourse dominates other discourses in a society. The dominant group can then use their discourse as a gatekeeper, limiting access to the benefits the discourse provides to those who have mastered it. This process excludes those whose discourses heavily conflict with the dominant discourse, such as those who were not born into the dominant discourse, those who were not given equal opportunity to master the dominant discourse, and those for whom the dominant Discourse has no valued place in their lives. For these people, it is not that they are cognitively or physically incapable of mastering the dominant discourse, but that their social identities have little use for it.

Thus, “correct” language and literacy, as used within the schooled literacy discourse, involves an entire set of beliefs, values, and social identities that must be properly maintained. If literacy is taught in schools, then one might assume that all students are presented with the same opportunity to master the schooled literacy discourse. The results of “To Read or Not to Read” and “Literacy in Everyday Life” tell us that this assumption is false. Not only does the amount of education that people receive affect their literacy proficiency, but factors outside of the classroom determine the opportunity to participate in and practice the discourse as well. People can learn these beliefs, values, and social identities elsewhere and those who fail to learn them are unable to participate in the discourse. Many of the students who are able to master schooled literacy do so through early practice and support in the home, allowing their primary discourse to more closely mirror the schooled literacy discourse and exist in harmony with it.

When literacy is assumed to be a cognitive skill, it is also assumed that it can be taught with equal efficacy in all classrooms. However, this assumption ignores the fact that literacy is a

skill affected by social environment. To claim that literacy is a skill that can be learned solely through school is to claim that it is socially neutral (Cook-Gumperz 43). The problem with this belief is that students do not enter schools having had no prior experience with reading and writing. Students bring with them “knowledge of the sociolinguistic repertoires of their home communities” and those from non-mainstream communities may bring reading and writing skills that differ from those taught in school (Farr 6). By privileging one discourse over others, some students are at an immediate disadvantage when entering school and are less likely to reach a high level of academic achievement compared to their classmates who come from communities whose discourses do not conflict with the schooled literacy discourse. Gee refers to this home discourse as a person’s “primary Discourse” (137). This is the discourse that people learn as members of their families and communities; the primary discourse contributes to an initial sense of social identity and allows people to understand who they are, who people like them are, and what people like them believe, value, and do. Secondary discourses are those which people are exposed to through socialization with peers, institutions, local organizations, churches, schools, and other social groups.

Gee divides mastery of discourses into two categories: acquisition and learning. He proposes that true mastery of any discourse is done through acquisition, not learning. Psychologists theorize that although people are born with the innate ability to acquire human language, the ability requires an environmental trigger to set it off – all people may have the ability to acquire a language, but environment controls the language that is learned (Galotti 488-89). Accordingly, literacy, or any discourse, “requires exposure to models in natural, meaningful, and functional settings, and overt teaching is not liable to be very successful” (Gee 144). In other words, a person’s environment controls the primary discourse they acquire. The

ability to critique a discourse, however, comes through learning. Gee terms this “meta-knowledge” which he argues “is best developed through learning, though often learning applied to a Discourse one has to a certain extent already acquired” (145). Thus, while a person can only successfully master a discourse through acquisition, the ability to critique the values, beliefs, and uses of the discourse comes only when the discourse been overtly taught.

Secondary discourses may coexist peacefully with a person’s primary discourse or, conversely, they may cause discord between social identities. Because primary discourses are not overtly taught, but are acquired through socialization, they have a stronger effect on people than discourses they may learn later in life. This primary discourse can shape the way other discourses are acquired and learned and later discourses can, in turn, shape a primary discourse. The challenge with secondary discourses is that, while primary discourses are acquired through socialization with a person’s intimate family and community members, a secondary discourse can only be acquired or learned by socialization with people who are outside of this group. Mastering a secondary discourse may then involve shifting one’s social identity to include ideologies that are not present in family or home community. Because schooled literacy is a discourse that is taught outside the home by people or groups who exist outside of the primary family or community, this discourse is inherently a secondary discourse.

Cognitive theories of learning and acquisition posit that a person’s cognitive capabilities are more than just the product of their hereditary lineage. Instead, what a person learns and how they learn are inextricably linked to their interaction with their social environment. Theorist Lev Vygotsky described several ways in which culture has a profound effect on cognition. First, cultures provide for the existence of cognitive problems and problem-solving opportunities – a culture that does not require the use of sentence composition skills, for example, will not have

people that are proficient in these skills. Second, culture determines the frequency at which such problems occur – a higher occurrence will provide members with the greater opportunity to practice their skills, allowing them to become more proficient than members from a culture who rarely have to use these skills. Third, cultures determine how problems go together – sentence composition may occur as part of email composition, text messaging, or academic writing and the requirements of each determine how this skill is developed and used. Fourth, cultures determine the difficulty of such problems at different levels – younger members may only be expected to compose sentences at a certain level while older members are expected to compose sentences on a higher, more complex level (Galotti 572). Cultures determine which skills are used, how they are used, the frequency with which they are used, and how proficient members must be according to their age. Furthermore, it is thought to be unlikely that such cognitive skills can be greatly affected or improved by outside manipulation, such as teaching. Theorists argue that cognition is “situated, or intimately bound, to the conditions in which it naturally occurs,” suggesting that a person’s everyday surroundings provide the greatest opportunity for developing and practicing cognitive skills (Galotti 577). It stands to reason that cultures that do not value such skills, such as the literacy skills with which we have been concerned, will not produce members that have solid experience using these skills – they will not have acquired them from their home communities and the experience of learning them in school will not be as effective as the experience of acquiring them at home would have been.

There exists an additional problem in the way we assume literacy skills are learned. When reading is taught as a series of sequential skills – letter sounding, word recognition, sentence comprehension, and so forth – we bypass the notion that a person’s background knowledge will have an effect on the way a text is comprehended. Reading skills are assumed to

be a bottom-up process, or data-driven process, where cognition is guided by outside input. In actuality, the type of reading skills that are possessed by those deemed proficient in literacy are a result of top-down processes, or conceptually-driven processes, where cognition is guided by the reader's expectations and used to form a greater concept or interpretation of the text. Thus, readers who are only able to pronounce words and comprehend basic meanings are engaged in bottom-up processes – these are the students that Cairney describes in his community literacy program. Readers who use past knowledge or prior experiences to connect with the text are able to approach it from a top-down level and are able to create new and personally relevant meanings. Top-down readers are, essentially, creating new texts each time they read. This latter group is who we normally refer to when we measure percentages of “literary” or “proficient readers” and it is this latter type of reading that occurs when one has mastered the schooled literacy discourse.

It is important to note that it is not solely the ability to read that leads to the development of literacy skills. Rather, it is reading as a practice within the context of a social group that is significant. Being a part of a social group that presents more frequent opportunities for reading allows a person a greater chance to become proficient at this skill. Those who enter school having been a part of a social group, such as a family, that values a type of literacy similar to schooled literacy have a greater chance of becoming proficient at this literacy than those who come from social groups that value a different type of literacy or do not place a high value on literacy at all. In other words, a person is much more likely to master a secondary, learned discourse when these skills are similar to those acquired in a primary discourse. This does not mean that people who are not proficient in the schooled literacy discourse lack the cognitive ability to learn this discourse, but that they did not have the opportunity to learn or practice this

discourse in their primary social groups. They have an immediate disadvantage compared to those individuals who did have this opportunity. Measurements of literacy are, therefore, not solely a measurement of cognitive skills, but a reflection of the way a person is raised.

In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell finds that it is a sense of entitlement that separates successful students from average or failing students. This sense of entitlement comes not from the students themselves, but from their parents who encouraged them to negotiate, reason with adults, and be active participants in their lives. This parenting style was found to be present in the middle and upper classes, who “talked things through with their children, reasoning with them...If their children were doing poorly at school, the wealthier parents challenged their teachers. They intervened on behalf of their kids” (103-4). Lower class parents were less engaged with their children’s lives and did not encourage their children to seize educational opportunities when they arose. This trend was present even among equally intelligent students. One study Gladwell discusses tracked students with exceptionally high IQs and found that the students who were successful in their later careers came from families with more educated and higher class parents while those who were later found to be unemployed or college dropouts came from families with less educated and lower class parents (111-12). This did not mean that the children of lower class parents were less intelligent, but that they and their parents lacked the social skills necessary to ensure their academic success. The way the student was raised played an even more important role in their success than their innate intelligence.

Looking at another study of the achievement gap between lower and higher class students on the California Aptitude Test, Gladwell reports that parenting styles also played a large role in how much students retained over the summer break. By testing students in June and September, the study’s results showed both how much students learned over the course of the year as well as

how much they learned, or lost, over the summer months. The results are concordant with what the results of “To Read or Not To Read” suggest: the higher class students’ reading scores rose after the summer break while the lower class students scores declined (258). Clearly, academic achievement is not solely a result of what students learn while they are in school, but also what they learn while they are not in school. The difference can be found in parenting styles.

Children who have access to books in the home, who are encouraged to participate in summer programs, who are taken to museums, and who participate in cultural and community events have a greater chance of cultivating schooled literacy outside of the normal school year. It is not necessarily that one student is more intelligent than the other, but that one student is, to use Gladwell’s term, “out-learning” the other (259). The study’s conclusion is that the achievement gap does not exist because schools do not work, but because there is not enough of it. If students of all economic classes were exposed to the same amount of schooling, the gap would be much smaller. Instead, those students who are exposed to academic work outside of school – frequently in the middle and upper classes – are presented with additional opportunities to learn while their lower class peers are not.

Unfortunately, tests of reading skills do not take the way a person is raised into account. Tests assume that the development of cognitive skills is a universal process and, if skills can be precisely defined, then they can be precisely measured (Cook-Gumperz 42). Low performance or failure on these tests is then seen as a lack of cognitive ability, ignoring the influence that differences in upbringing can have. Cook-Gumperz notes that the public education system and the development of a national standard for literacy have meant that schools have become one of the main “channels for a selective transmission of knowledge” and that in such a situation, more emphasis is placed on the development of technological tools and teaching techniques as a means

of increasing cognitive skills (43). Such tests assume that learning ability is entirely cognitive and is not significantly influenced by social factors, that all people possess the same cognitive ability to learn the same set of skills and differences in families or cultures neither enhance nor interfere with learning this skill set. In truth, this skill set – schooled literacy – is determined by members of a specific culture and reflects the values of this culture. In valuing these skills, other skills that people have learned at home are inevitably neglected and devalued.

Because the schooled literacy discourse is, by its very name, a discourse primarily taught in schools, people who have more education are more likely to be proficient in it. The results of “To Read or Not To Read” and “Literacy in Everyday Life” correspond with this notion. In both studies, education was positively correlated with reading ability. In “To Read or Not To Read,” the authors note that half of those readers in the Below Basic category had not completed high school (19) and those adults who had the highest literacy scores were those who had obtained some level of graduate study (64). Similarly, “Literacy in Everyday Life” found that literacy scores rose with each successive level of education: scores were lowest for those adults who did not complete high school and highest for those adults with some graduate study or a graduate degree (58). Additionally, the NAAL study notes that those adults whose ages and graduation dates indicated that they had begun school at a traditional age and completed their education with no breaks scored in higher literacy levels than those who graduated when they were older (41). What this tells us is that those people for whom completing school uninterrupted was a top priority are more likely to have mastered the schooled literacy discourse and be able to score at a high literacy level. Those for whom education was not a top priority – whether for financial, social, health, or other reasons and whether voluntary or involuntary – are left behind.

The focus on reading for pleasure in “To Read or Not To Read” offers another look at how primary discourses can have an effect on learned secondary discourses. The authors cite an article from the Department of Education that states, “Aliterates, people who have the ability to read but choose not to, miss just as much as those who cannot read at all” (68), meaning that the possession of these cognitive skills has little positive effect on a person if the skills are rarely used. The authors of “To Read or Not To Read” found that students’ reading scores increased with the frequency of reading for fun – those students who reported reading “almost everyday” had the highest average scores while those who reported reading “never or hardly ever” had the lowest average scores. Another revealing correlation here is that the number of books in the home was found to be positively associated with students’ test scores in a variety of subjects. Students who reported having more than a hundred books in the home consistently tested higher than students who reported having fewer books in the home. This correlation continued even when accounting for parents’ education levels – students whose parents had only a high school diploma but had more than a hundred books in the home consistently tested higher than those students whose parents were college graduates but had fewer than ten books in the home. The study presents no evidence that the relationship between books in the home and academic scores is definitively causal, but the strong correlation here suggests that students whose families value reading do have an academic advantage over students whose families do not.

The above statistics suggest that the degree to which a person’s primary acquired discourse mirrors a secondary learned discourse has a tremendous influence on their ability to master the secondary discourse. Students whose families value reading and education have this valued instilled in them prior to starting school. Likewise, those families that highly value reading and education have students who complete school without interruptions and graduate at a

traditional age. These students have acquired a discourse similar to the schooled literacy discourse before entering school and, once in school, they have less difficulty functioning in the discourse. Thus, higher literacy scores do not solely measure the cognitive differences between students, but display an amalgamation of their social and academic values, beliefs, and viewpoints. A person who *does not* read is not necessarily a person who *cannot* read, but one for whom reading is not, and likely has never been, integral to their daily lives.

### **Reading and Power: Literacy as the Social Dividing Line**

Primary literacy discourses can affect much more than the way a person initially learns to read and write. While mastery of a discourse allows a person to operate within specific social groups and maintain a certain social identity, their behavior is never solely a product of the discourse in which they are currently operating. Any learned secondary discourse is inherently affected by a person's primary discourse. The primary discourse influences the ability to master or use a secondary discourse and makes any attempt to operate in that secondary discourse an act of compromise (Gee 167). Discourses can also be heavily influenced by the historical period in which they operate. The acts of reading and writing are always performed within the context of social identities, institutions, tools, and other people that exist only within a specific historical moment. What and how we read, as well as what and how we write, are unique to our place in time. Gee's discourse perspective argues that "historic sociocultural struggles are enacted by and on people's bodies and minds, often with much pain and injustice" and that these struggles are enacted by certain "kinds" of people by people who are actually more than one "kind" of person (137). Thus, the social identities provided by discourses can ultimately be reductive in that they work to define a group of people by a single trait that exists in opposition to another trait as

defined by another discourse. In truth, the individuals in each discourse have the ability to operate in multiple discourses simultaneously.

Texts, like literacies, exist in different contexts and can have different meanings based on who is using them and in what social setting they are being used – there is more to the text than the literal meaning of the words. The ability to read and interpret texts, and the way readers value texts, displays inclusion in the social group that produced the text and inclusion in the audience for whom the text was produced. Texts and reader are not independent of each other nor are they static – readers’ positions and identities are constructed in relation to the different situations they encounter and can evolve as the situation changes. Readers’ identities are shaped by their interactions with the text, the ways in which they position themselves in relation to the text, and reflect the meanings that are made from the text (Moje, Dillon, & O’Brien 176). The texts that people encounter can be shaped in a variety of ways to construct any number of meanings through the processes of reading, writing, listening, and performing in the context of the social and cultural practices that the reader brings to the text. Essentially, we should not think of one person, living in one context, only able to construct one meaning from a text, but of many people living in many different contexts, constructing a variety of meanings from the texts they read. Moje, Dillon, & O’Brien further conclude that because the pedagogy of literacy is based on Eurocentric practices, the schooled literacy discourse inherently “privilege[s] the experiences and identities of European Americans,” a privileging that is particularly obvious when considering the similar privileging of print-based texts and, thus, a print-based form of literacy (177). In other words, schooled literacy is not without racial, ethnic, and cultural biases. It is born out of the values, uses, and needs of a specific social group and this power dynamic is important in understanding why it serves some people better than others. Schooled literacy

ultimately acts as a dividing line between people who operate in one discourse and people who operate in others. It will always work to separate those who read and use texts in ways that this culture deems valuable from those who do not. Students who are unable to master this discourse are not necessarily unfit learners, but if mainstream American society leaves these people behind we cannot ignore the inequalities that disparate literacy discourses create.

If we as a society believe that education provides people with the power to be heard and participate in our society, then we must also agree that literacy is part of that power. Bennett suggests that literacy is entwined with power in an additional way – literacy also works to keep existing power structures in place as different levels of literacy skills are associated with different classes and ethnic groups in the United States (14). Literacy, as it is currently measured, reinforces social stratification. By valuing the form of literacy used most by one group of people, society allows that group to have an advantage over those who belong to a different group. A prime example of this is the way students are tracked in schools - students who are unable to master the schooled literacy discourse are assigned to lower ability classes and kept away from the instruction of standard and higher ability classes, while other students who have already mastered the discourse are given the opportunity to receive advanced instruction. In his essay “I Just Wanna Be Average,” Mike Rose describes his experience as an accidental vocational-track student. Contrary to the idea of education as a liberating force, Rose found that the vocational track served to uphold the pre-existing social hierarchy. “If you’re a working-class kid in the vocational track, the options you’ll have to deal with this will be constrained in certain ways,” he writes. “You’re defined by your school as ‘slow’; you’re placed in a curriculum that isn’t designed to liberate you but to occupy you...other students are picking up the cues from your school and your curriculum and interacting with you in a particular way”

(40). As if in a self-fulfilling prophecy, students in these groups may also unintentionally work to uphold this structure by rejecting and refusing to participate in the socially valued discourse. From his research and personal experience, Rose concludes that students rarely cross tracks – those in remedial classes are presented with the same frustrating materials time and again and blame themselves for their inability to master it: “There is no excitement here. *No excitement...* Given the troubling histories many of these students have, it’s miraculous that any of them can lift the shroud of hopelessness sufficiently to make deliverance from these classes possible” (43). In this way, the hierarchy remains intact: Those students who are disadvantaged remain so and those who already have access to the type of literacy valued by society are the ones who have the opportunity to become successful students, workers, and members of society.

Cairney suggests that the interactions that are permitted and encouraged in classrooms can make a big difference in students’ literacy development. The way teachers control interaction and the role they play in the participant/learner or director/teacher dichotomies can be extremely influential to the way learning occurs (21). Here we begin to see a glimpse of the problem Paulo Freire identifies in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In his seminal work, Freire argues that pedagogy must be “forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity” (48). In the pedagogy used by the oppressors - what Freire calls the “banking method of education” - education becomes an act in which the teacher (the oppressor) deposits information into the students (the oppressed). Teachers communicate information while students’ participation in education consists solely of passively receiving and absorbing the deposited information (72). As education is passively received, it further renders its recipients passive participants in society. An oppressive pedagogy forces people to fit into the roles prescribed by the dominant group; those who do not fit into that role are left behind. Freire

challenges this practice by contending that “authentic education is not carried on by ‘A’ *for* ‘B’ or by ‘A’ *about* ‘B,’ but rather by ‘A’ *with* ‘B,’ mediated by the world” (84). In other words, effective education is not enacted on one group by another, but is a product of a partnership between two parties, a model that Freire refers to as “education as the practice of freedom.” This pedagogy acknowledges that individuals do not exist separately from their environment, isolated, abstract, or unattached from the world; they are a product of their relationships with the world and the people surrounding them (81). Essentially, education that acts as a means of liberation does not treat people as blank slates to be impressed upon or as unaffected by the communities in which they exist. People’s minds and the worlds in which they live are not separate, but always co-existing.

How are Freire’s theories applicable to contemporary US literacy practices? When focus is put solely on students’ cognitive abilities, we fail to take into account that students exist as a product of the environments in which they live. To claim that literacy is merely a matter of learning to produce certain sounds, recognize patterns of letters, or place words in a specific order, is to claim that this information need only be deposited into students’ minds in order to make them “literate.” If this were the case, then all students who receive literacy instruction, would have an equal opportunity to master it. The marked gaps in literacy proficiency between different groups of readers tells us this is otherwise. Cook-Gumperz argues that psychological and linguistic theories cannot solely account for the ability to learn to speak or write a language; instead, the values placed on the way the language is used are inherited from the culture in which a person lives and it is this skill set that provides power to people who use it correctly (5). Any way in which literacy is defined reflects a social judgment about the way it is used and the people who use it (7). Therefore, evaluating literacy without also examining the context in

which literacy is acquired and the values a culture assigns to literacy serves only to simplify the relationship between the acquisition and the practice of literacy.

Cook-Gumperz's examination of the history of schooling reveals that schooled literacy is as heavily influenced by social factors as any other literacy discourse. The development of schooling and literacy allowed for a new division between those who were educated and those who were not – it created a new form of social control that could be maintained through schooling. She goes on to argue that the major goal of schooling was “to control literacy not to promote it; to control both the forms of expression and behavior which accompanied the move into literacy” (32). Through this, the idea of schooled literacy came to be differentiated from other commonplace uses of literacy that existed for other purposes. Schooled literacy was not part of the “common culture” so people had less control over access to the benefits literacy could provide. This argument applies to schooled literacy today. When our culture values certain authors, texts, or forms of expression over others, we, too, aim to control literacy. Similarly, educational tracking exerts another form of control over schooling as it limits access to a higher standard of learning to those who are deemed incapable of mastering it. If schooling and schooled literacy are now meant to be equal and inclusive, there still exist agents of categorization that form educational and social hierarchies between the proficient literates and the basic or below-basic literates.

Contrary to this reality, school continues to be viewed as the primary situation in which cognitive literacy skills are developed and little regard is given to the way in which schools also shape the social uses of these skills. Teaching schooled literacy has come to be viewed as “a universal and standardized technical skill” (Cook-Gumperz 38) that is designed to distribute knowledge to everyone without being limited to any one specific social group. Yet, while equal

opportunity for learning theoretically allows all individuals access to literacy, such practices still serve to separate people from their home cultures. Ideally, some sort of transformation is to occur through successful schooling – students are to go from being members of their home cultures to being productive members of larger society. Failure to undergo this transformation is not typically seen as a problem in methods of schooling, but becomes a judgment on either the student’s cognitive abilities or their desire to be a part of larger society. The lack of literacy proficiency is seen to be attributable to ignorance or laziness, not as the result of inequalities in primary discourses, home communities, or values placed on different literacies. In this way, the ability to master schooled literacy works as a tool for judgment – those we label as literate are worthy of being valued members of society while those we label as illiterate are not.

Thus, schooling as an institution works to further stratify the general population. Through the growth of school, a specific pedagogy developed that controlled what was to be taught and when, and methods of evaluating were created to determine how well this material was learned. While schooling was intended to “selectively develop individual talent for differentiated occupational roles,” the differences in the distribution of knowledge came to be equated with social stratification – the knowledge of those who were less educated or less literate came to be seen as “lesser knowledge” (Cook-Gumperz 39-40). The divorce from one’s cultural base undoubtedly leads to the accusation by some that, by succeeding at school and participating in the larger society that schooled literacy provides access to, people are acting in a way that is foreign to their home cultures and communities. Educational tracking can produce similar results by determining which people are worthy to obtain a higher level of education and literacy instruction. While the skills learned by those on vocational tracks can be of great social need, they are seen as less educated and as possessing less knowledge because they are less “literate.”

Public education organizes the way people are separated or ranked and by viewing literacy as a tool for measuring and evaluating one's academic achievement, literacy also becomes the tool used for this ranking. Those who successfully master schooled literacy are able to move upwards in society and are bestowed with the social power that schooled literacy provides.

The use of any discourse reflects the way we construct meanings, the way we interpret experiences in our lives, and what we know about the world. By operating in multiple discourses in our lives, we are operating within multiple identities that are constructed and represented in different ways and are positioned by the context in which we are operating. These positions can be shaped by demographic factors such as race, gender, social class, and age, and they can also be shaped by ability level, subject interests, and other personal differences that affect one's engagement with the discourse. These positions then affect both how we construct our own identities and how our identities are constructed by others around us (Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien 166). This discussion of identity serves to illustrate that people operate within many different discourses and that, due to the construction of their identity, one person may be proficient in one discourse while not being proficient in another. How a person is positioned within that discourse or within their primary discourse can affect their positioning in other discourses. Additionally, the way those who are teaching a discourse position their students can affect the students' ability to master the discourse. For example, if a student is believed by the teacher to be unable to learn a specific subject, such as what occurs when students are placed into lower-ability tracks, that student will have a disadvantage at learning that subject. This does make the person who is not proficient in schooled literacy definitively illiterate, but simply ineffective in this particular discourse. It is, then, imperative to recognize that school is only one discourse in which individuals may or not may not exhibit proficiency.

It is important to note that while the literacy taught in classrooms may be similar to the literacy used in everyday life, it is in fact specific to the cultural practices used in the classroom. Being a student requires specific ways of using language such that reading and writing become social constructs of this group and reflect the values placed on certain texts, practices, and modes of expression that may not be found in the student's home community (Cairney 32). In *Illiterate America*, Jonathan Kozol argues that it is not illiteracy that creates more illiteracy – coming from an illiterate family does not necessarily mean a child will be illiterate – but it does set the child up to be unprepared for entering school (59). According to Kozol, illiteracy, in effect, perpetuates illiteracy, although this pattern has the potential to be broken by effective education. When the education system fails to provide adequate instruction to students, those who come from “illiterate” or “alliterate” families cannot rely upon the background knowledge the family may provide them. It is not entirely the quality of the school that determines a student's literacy ability, but how much literacy is supported at home. This is particularly applicable in the case of an inadequate school system and this idea supports the notion that people who belong to families and communities that do not value the type of literacy taught in schools do not receive the reinforcement needed to ensure that it is learned in school. Kozol's conclusion is that lack of valued literacy skills is not an accident – it is a consequence of “pedagogic class selection which for many decades has regarded certain sectors of the population as the proper persons to perform those unattractive labors which no man or woman would elect to do if he or she received the preparation for more lucrative and challenging employment” (90). Essentially, Kozol is arguing that schools use literacy as a gatekeeping tool to keep a sector of the population available to perform low-ability and low-paying jobs. It is a pessimistic reversal of the typical image of literacy as raising people above their current stations in life, but a, perhaps, more realistic notion

that literacy works just as well to keep part of the population socially stagnant. In truth, schools reinforce an economic and social order – those who are assigned to lower tracks in elementary schools or vocational tracks in high school are also those who cannot meet the job requirements expected of a literate person. Illiteracy itself may not breed further illiteracy, as Kozol concludes, but the social order imposed by schools ensures that those who are less literate remain so. In turn, their children are born into less literate families, ensuring the continuation of a cycle of literacy deficiency.

Support from the community, then, is the primary way to encourage and enhance literacy skills. Speaking on the need for support from teachers, Cairney writes that “children learn best when they have a relationship with other people who not only expect them to learn, but actively encourage and support them as learners” (53-4). This includes children’s family and community environments – children will learn best when they are in an environment in which they receive support for their learning and the mode of thinking this learning requires. Farr notes that it is important to acknowledge that any number of discourses may be present in the classroom and that the dominant discourse of schooled literacy represents one specific mode of thinking – other discourses are not deficient versions of this discourse but simply differ from it (7). Accordingly, the way a person uses oral and written language reflects their ways of thinking and this may conflict with the ways of thinking necessary for schooled literacy. Thus, literacy in general does not require any specific way of thinking, but specific literacies do. If all students had equal opportunity to learn this way of thinking and to master this literacy, then it could be argued that tests used to evaluate literacy skills are objective and fair. In truth, not only do some students receive early exposure to this literacy, but some are also placed in higher ability classes that receive advanced instruction in the literacy discourse. Because this literacy is used regularly in

various higher societal institutions – universities, for example – it becomes a gatekeeping tool for separating people into groups of “literate” and “illiterate” and it perpetuates social hierarchies that extend far beyond the classroom.

### **Conclusion: Why Reading Matters**

The statistics presented in “To Read or Not To Read” and the National Assessment of Adult Literacy may not be definitively conclusive, but the correlations between reading proficiency and socioeconomic success are impossible to ignore. The relationship between the declining frequency of fiction, poetry, and drama read for fun and a person’s socioeconomic well-being shows very clearly how literacy is valued in America. While reading tests may appear to measure quantitative skills – whether a person can or cannot read – what they truly do is evaluate whether a person is able to use these skills in the way literacy is taught in school. What we fail to acknowledge when we assume that literacy is only the possession of rudimentary reading and writing skills is that there are multiple forms of literacy and when we label one person as “literate” and another person as “illiterate,” we are judging how well they use schooled literacy. Because society values schooled literacy over other forms, literacy works to reinforce hierarchies between disparate social groups. Those who are born into lower socioeconomic groups do not become literate; rather they remain stagnant, while those who are born into higher socioeconomic groups with more access to books, education, and money become proficient in schooled literacy and are, thus, more successful in their academic, occupational, and civic pursuits. Being able to read simply is not enough.

In truth, instead of being used to equalize social disparities, schooled literacy is used as a gatekeeper to socioeconomic mobility. While people can use multiple literacies in their lives,

depending on which social groups they belong to, it is only when they master schooled literacy that they are considered “literate.” Where the schooled literacy discourse differs from other discourses is in its passivity – writers are expected to maintain an emotional distance from their subjects, step outside their narrow frame of personal reference, and separate their opinions from the evidence that supports their arguments. They must find a way to position themselves within the existing body of work on the subject without letting demographic factors such as race, gender, or class noticeably influence their argument. The writer who has mastered schooled literacy will be able to disguise any personal biases and present their arguments as clear, rational, balanced, and free of any political or cultural prejudices.

Yet, literacy cannot help but be affected by the very factors it strives to remain liberated from. Education is strongly tied to economic status, as the writers of *Class Matters* note, and being a part of a minority group – namely, anything outside the mainstream middle-class – can put a person a person at a disadvantage. These demographic factors have a very apparent influence on people’s ability to master and use schooled literacy. All people are born into specific social groups and are instructed in the rules that govern participation and membership in that group. These rules include the way reading and writing are used and valued, but not all social groups value reading and writing in the same ways. Those groups that use and value literacy in the same way that schools do provide a solid base for their members to begin learning schooled literacy. This difference in a person’s primary discourse – the literacy they learn in the family or community group – and secondary discourse – the literacy taught in schools – can have a profound affect on whether they become “literate.” Contrary to what may be believed, school is not the only place where children learn to read. Although reading skills are taught in school, people pick them up much more effectively when they are acquired from the social groups of

which they are members. Reading is not just a cognitive skill, but a social one, and the way literacy is measured reflects how well people have integrated themselves or aligned their social identities with the group that values this literacy. While a person's first form of literacy, or primary discourse, is easily acquired from their family and community, mastering a second form of literacy requires the desire and ability to be a part of another community whose values may conflict with the primary social group. Education can grant a person the skills to be more literate, but to assume that education is all a person needs to be literate is to ignore the fact that primary social groups also influence the way literacy is used. When we talk about literacy, we are talking about a top-down process, influenced by the reader's background knowledge. The way a person perceives the world affects the way they interpret and compose texts. The trick with schooled literacy is to disguise this influence by reading as though all texts are universally relatable and writing as though one's point of view is universal.

In truth, no text is created or consumed in a vacuum. All are influenced by both the writer's and the reader's primary discourse so that simply being able to read and write does not guarantee that either is done in the way that society values most. When literacy is taught in schools, people who come from communities that use discourses similar to the schooled literacy discourse are better able to learn this secondary discourse because it does not conflict highly with their primary discourse. Essentially, this means that parents who instill a love of literature – fiction, poetry, and drama – and writing in their children are preparing them to successfully master schooled literacy. Considering the statistics presented by “To Read or Not To Read” and “Literacy in Everyday Life,” this also prepares children to be successful in other facets later in their lives. They are more likely to complete school without any interruptions, are more likely to pursue higher education, are more likely to be in higher paying positions in the work force, and

are more likely to be involved in their communities through participation in cultural events, voting, and volunteering. Literacy affects much more than what a person reads – it affects who a person is and what they do.

The authors of *Class Matters* argue that the old system of educational privilege – where admittance to elite universities was passed down through birthright – has been replaced by a system of educational meritocracy. It is this meritocracy that has taken the place of a class system. Parents who received higher education pass on their values to their children, schools reward those children whose social identities most easily adhere to that of a student, and children whose social identities do not include that of student are more likely to be placed in lower level or vocational tracks. In this way schools work to perpetuate the existing class hierarchy. Students who have the opportunity to be introduced to schooled literacy in the home or their primary community are the ones that become literate in the way that society values; those students whose parents valued another form of communication or had no use for schooled literacy in their daily lives are less likely to achieve this form of success. Such students risk being placed in lower ability classes in schools, they risk not receiving the same level of instruction as their peers, and they may not be given the same chance to excel in academia. As Mike Rose describes from his time in vocational track classes, while vocational track education may be intended to increase the economic opportunities of students who are not doing well in school, it is “most often a place for those who are just not making it, a dumping ground for the disaffected” (37). These students remain in the same socioeconomic class as their parents and perpetuate the social hierarchy into which they were born.

If the purpose of education is to equalize the disparities between different social groups and to give every person the opportunity for social and economic achievement regardless of their

demographic background, then literacy should serve to raise disadvantaged students' skills to the same level as their peers. Instead, literacy, in the context of school, can work contrary to this belief. If education is used for the purpose of liberating all citizens, as Paulo Freire proposes, we must bear in mind that students must be taught how literacy is relevant to their lives and must learn how to read and compose texts in ways that mean something to them rather than as a way to exhibit such skills for the sole purpose of passing tests. As Cairney recalls from his time as a teacher in a community literacy program, students who only learn to read, but are not taught to connect with texts, read only on the surface level and do not create meanings with the text. They are not able to respond to or question texts that are outside their direct frames of reference. Because those who are proficient in literacy – both readers and writers – learn not just to consume the literal meanings of texts, but engage with the texts so that they are situated in their own lives, students who never learn to read beyond the surface level stand very little chance of becoming proficient in literacy. As “To Read or Not To Read” tells us, it is not just reading, but a high frequency of reading for fun that acts as a *de facto* gatekeeper to socioeconomic mobility; those who never reach this level are much less likely to move up in socioeconomic class.

Why is reading for fun ultimately so important? If we look at the results of “To Read or Not To Read” and “Literacy in Everyday Life,” reading for fun does much more than boost book sales. Not only do students who read for fun show higher academic achievement based on tests, but those who come from homes that value reading, as measured by the number of books in the home, also score higher on tests. Frequent readers are shown to be better readers and writers and those who have more education are the ones who report achieving financial success later in life. It is difficult to determine exactly what this means for literacy and whether all literacies should be considered equally valid with no single literacy given preference over another. While it is not

a practical solution to do away with a standard schooled literacy, it is an important first step to understand that literacy skills go far beyond reading and writing and that how a person reads and writes is as important as, if not more important than, whether a person can read and write. When we talk about literacy, we are talking about the *how* and not just the *what* of reading and writing.

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