

Equity and Literacy: The Challenge of the Decade

by Enid Lee

This article is based on Enid Lee's presentation at the Professional Development Conference for Teacher Leaders, March 29-31, 2001 in Sacramento, California. The speech was edited by Carol Lingman.

I would like to spend some time today linking two important concepts—equity and literacy. At one time in my life, I taught people to read. I will include some of the experiences from that era as we turn our attention to the vision of education we need to have if every youngster is to succeed academically and is to be equipped to transform the society for greater justice. Essential to that vision of education are the pillars of equity and literacy.

We need to regard equity and literacy as features of the educational environment that we must create if a just, multicultural society is to flourish. In the introduction to this book we present our vision of the ideal multicultural society: “In a genuinely multicultural society, everyone would recognize and honor differences in race, ethnicity, gender, culture, class, language, sexual orientation, religion, abilities and so on, while also acknowledging the similarities of experiences and interests across these social categories. We also believe that a truly multicultural society would be a just society. People controlling societal institutions would do everything within their power to provide to *all people* the sources for meaningful livelihoods, ensure true physical and emotional safety and security and create an ecologically sustainable environment for the survival of future generations.” We believe this society can in part be fostered when our goal is critical literacy and our practices are equity-centered.

This is our vision of society, and in order to get there we need to take up those possibilities that are in our control. “In our control” is the perspective, the sociopolitical framework, in which we place all of our work with beginning teachers. The introduction of the concept of literacy to beginning teachers is a case in point.

We can think of the acquisition of literacy as the activity of decoding, or by contrast, we can think of it as the development of the capacity in the reader to read both the word and the world, according to Paulo Freire.

A Canadian colleague of mine reminded me that she heard me interpret the acquisition of literacy as an anti-racist strategy. I don't recall this particular utterance, but I will happily claim it since literacy from this perspective is one form of liberation. It is one method of helping students to access opportunities – opportunities to change their world, to speak for themselves, to build and transform their communities into viable and just places for all, where equality and dignity are not mere words.

Racism is something that *prevents* people from acquiring these opportunities by virtue of their skin color and the other parts of their identity that are racialized like their language. So an approach to literacy that is geared to the acquisition of opportunity, to confronting racism and to the promotion of racial justice is indeed an equity, anti-racist strategy.

In these days when standardized tests and the acquisition of discreet, decontextualized reading skills dominate the discourse in education, I want to remind us of some big questions: Why do we teach reading? Why is it important that students acquire the ability to read and to present themselves in writing? Every time we feel the urge to simply “do the spelling lesson” or simply “prepare for that test in May,” let us ask ourselves, “What for? Why do we do this? How do we make sure that everyone has access?” Perhaps the most important question of all relates to what this access is worth: “How will this access contribute to the identification and removal of barriers that children face based on their race or their culture or their language?”

Keely Floegel, a teacher with whom I have had the privilege of working, translates her awareness of the transformative power of reading and writing into this action research question, which she tries to answer through her work with the students in her third grade class: “What structures and/or strategies will empower students not only to utilize but also to manipulate the English language to transform themselves and the world they live in?” This is a

vital question if you want to embrace the equity principle and ensure that all students regardless of background have access to high quality, stimulating and empowering curriculum.

Literacy is one tool that can help bring about equality.

When I speak of literacy, I am referring to both the reading and writing aspects: reading, which is making meaning *from* print, and writing, which is making meaning *with* print.

The kind of literacy I want to encourage all teachers to aim for is literacy that is multilingual, multiracial and anti-racist. In an age where such virulent anti-immigrant status abounds, it is important that we advocate for the various mother tongues that children bring into the classroom and that we recognize those languages as sources of learning and strength. Taking bilingual education off the books is one more move in a long line of legislation that discriminates against people based on language and culture—and in this instance, on race as well. I want to encourage teachers to think about the value of literacy in more than one language.

The literacy we embrace must also be critical literacy—the kind we find in the work of Paulo Freire. This literacy allows us to read not only the words but also the world, to get to the deeper social significance of words, to notice and to question the absences and the interests reflected in texts. I can hear some protesting, “All I want to do is get them to meet the standards! Isn’t that good enough?” We must not only meet the standards, but also move beyond them.

Standards that keep students where they are, maintaining communities at the status quo, are not good enough for this decade. While students are learning to read, they also need to learn to ask, “Who is missing? How can we make a difference?” This is not an impossibility for young children.

Louise Derman-Sparks, an internationally recognized anti-bias early childhood educator and author, offers the example of a group of young children looking at a book titled *American Brides*. One of the children, a Mexican-American girl, said that the book was not right. It was not right because her mother was not there and she knew that her mother was an American too. The girl felt that

the book should be thrown out. (Derman-Sparks 1989) As this child was beginning to learn words, she was also learning to read between the lines. She was reading herself into the picture and seeing that she had a right to be there. Those two processes do not have to be separate. Often as educators we have the “real work” of teaching and then we have equity work, the critical teaching, the multicultural work, off to the side—and that is why it remains off to the side. The challenge that I’m throwing out today is that we integrate equity into everything that we are helping teachers learn to do—whether it’s observation, development of literacy, engagement with students about writing or whatever.

Literacy that is multilingual, anti-racist and critical will be transformational in its goal. It will enable students to see writing and reading as processes that help them to change their circumstances; processes that help them to make the world different, better, more fair than they found it. When we begin to think about reading and writing in those terms, education becomes a different picture. It’s recharged; it’s energized. Gone are the days when we have negative talk in the faculty room about “those children” as though they are undesirable rejects. We have a new vision of why we are educating children and the result will be a society that’s changed and transformed in small but significant ways by the work that we do.

I visit a lot of schools and children come up and talk to me about a variety of topics. If I go to the school often enough, the students think I have some authority, that I may even be a government person. They sometimes think I have the power to rectify such wrongs like the bad food in the cafeteria! But their conversations aren’t always about unpalatable food. In one school, a student called me over to read her latest writing to me. When that happens, I am always encouraged. In that particular school, kids had never talked to me about learning. This second grader read me a story about her neighborhood, the friends she had, the hill she climbed. She was so excited about the content of it that she read it to me three times! Then she asked me to sign on the back to show that I was one of the readers. What struck me was that she was learning several

important lessons about literacy. I want to cite some of them for you.

1. She was learning that writing and reading are two sides of the same coin. She had written a story and it became a book that she read to a visitor.
2. She was learning that by writing she had created text that someone could read and take meaning from and something that she could share.
3. She was learning that words you can say could be changed into marks on a paper.
4. She was learning that communities like hers, which often don't find their way into school textbooks, do have a place in the books in her school. Schools can make room for her and her community.
5. She was learning that if you don't get it right, you can change it. When she was writing my name, she reversed the "d" to a "b" and she quickly erased it and changed it.

At the second grade level, this student is learning more than just how to do a story. She is learning big things about the nature of literacy and the nature of education. Education means change. It means sharing; it means writing yourself into the picture; and it means that you can keep learning to do it better. Those are the kinds of lessons I would like to be sure that beginning teachers are teaching along with teaching literacy. What I saw with this young girl was joy. That's the kind of joy that I hope our teachers, as they work with students with a variety of language backgrounds, will begin to feel. They will feel it if we look beyond the worksheets and keep the vision in mind and the deeper understandings that we want children to grasp.

Let's put literacy into a historical context.

In looking at literacy, we have to take a historical view because the struggle for literacy has always been linked with the struggle for equality and emancipation. I don't need to tell you about the Compulsory Ignorance Laws that were on the books at one time in this country. They were designed to ensure that African Americans could not learn to read and that those

who helped them to do so would be punished. In fact, they were called anti-literacy laws in places in the South where literate Africans who were enslaved were considered to be great inconveniences and those who taught them could be fined one hundred pounds.

I want to put literacy into that context. When I talk with teachers about literacy, I don't want to start with looking at whether we're going to do whole language or phonics. I want to look at the sociopolitical context in which literacy needs to be understood, because to become literate in a critical way is a struggle. And it is a struggle that we need to keep working on because it doesn't end when those laws are off the books. As we push forward and teachers get discouraged, keep the big picture in mind of why we are trying to foster literacy among all students.

We also need to keep this big picture in mind for our students. One of the ways I used to motivate students was to say, "You know, having a chance to learn to read is not something that everybody in your community has had for all their lives." They say, "Yeah, but that's then." And I say, "This will also look like 'then' if we don't make use of the opportunities we have for learning now." Accounts of community struggle for literacy and education can be part of a reading program.

So literacy is much more than the acquisition of small particles of sound and syntax. It is also that greater reach for social meaning, sense of identity and access to the code of power. That's what students access when they are able to write themselves into the picture like that second grader I mentioned earlier. She can say, "School can be about me, about my community and about my people who never show up in books."

I want to share another perspective on literacy. It is the idea that illiteracy is something that is introduced into a community when a new code is introduced. Put another way, everyone can read some code. What are the other codes we read besides print? Signs, music, body language. Reading in its most generic sense has to do with bringing the knowledge about the world that you have in your head to make sense of whatever code you are trying to break through. Reading faces, reading music, reading

signs. I like to think of literacy as something that is present when people break into the code; everyone has the ability to make sense of a code. As teachers, we begin with a notion of optimism, with a sense that if I can access the knowledge in the head of the student, then I might be able to use that to help them make sense of the print.

Let me illustrate with the following example. Years ago I had a student named Rodney, who was in high school. Rodney was regarded as a nonreader. When I talked to him about reading, I talked about guessing, about thinking about what the words could be when you considered the contexts. We were actually reading an application form which had spaces for address, phone, occupation and other things. When he came to phone, he looked at me and said, "I thought 'phone' would begin with F." So I said, "Rodney, that's a perfect guess. Now, what I want you to do is, on the way to school, look at all the other places that have that F sound that begin with Ph." So Rodney began to build his sense of how words work in English. And what's more, he also started to help some ESL students learn to read. I heard him say, in the same tone that I had used a few weeks earlier, "You have to guess. What do you think the word could be?"

I use this example of Rodney because in fact Rodney had some knowledge of sounds/symbols correspondence and if we had treated him as though he were a blank slate, we would have started further back. Rodney had begun to read many things, but he hadn't put them together. So I talk about the importance of thinking of literacy as something that everyone has the potential to develop. This approach to literacy emerges from a paradigm of possibility. In a certain sense, illiteracy is often introduced among our students in a symbolic way, very much like the way that the Mayas became illiterate when the European languages were introduced into their lives. They could read what they needed to read through nature and through symbols, but they became illiterate when the European code became dominant in their world.

Some students become illiterate when they come into contact with our schools. They are treated like blank slates, as if they have no

prior knowledge that counts. They have experiences which we might tap into if we could acquaint ourselves with them. To acquaint ourselves with those experiences and that knowledge is to do the necessary equity work with students who are learning in an educational context not designed for their success.

Our job as teachers is to tap into the knowledge that's there—knowledge of context, of sound/symbol combinations, of grammar—and help students to make sense of the print. The equity-focused teacher begins her work on literacy by saying, "You are not walking into this class empty. You have words in your head, in your language, in your home that we can use to build from." When you approach literacy like that, it becomes accessible, enjoyable and doable. That's the kind of approach that I hope we will encourage beginning teachers to have.

I also hope all teachers convey high expectations regarding literacy to their students. I was in a kindergarten classroom where the teacher said every day, "I know that each of you is going to learn to write before you leave kindergarten." And after awhile, when the kids had free play, they would go over to the writing area and practice their writing. She repeated the same words every day without pressure, without force, but with confidence and with a smile. And the children would drift over and practice their letters and guess what? When everyone was ready to leave kindergarten, everyone could do those letters.

These are small steps that can be taken. I don't even know if she believed it, but the thing is she said it. And with beginning teachers sometimes even before they believe it, we need to encourage them to say it. We have this misguided view that people's hearts have to be fully changed and the grand revelation must come before change takes place. That is not my experience. Sometimes you have to engage in the behavior and the belief will follow. You say it with a smile, you say it to all the children and at the end of this year all of the kindergarten children can write. And next year that teacher *will truly* believe it because she has seen it happen.

I want us to help every beginning teacher to be a language teacher. They are teaching language whether they are teaching

math, science or social studies because language is the medium through which so much of what is going on in the classroom is going to be mediated. Sensitivity to the working of language is key.

In addition, I would like us to encourage teachers to make every classroom one in which language awareness abounds, in which children see language as a smorgasbord from which they can select and create their own identity.

I want to share with you some thoughts that Lisa Delpit offers in an article about language and students who speak what is described as Ebonics. This is what she says about appreciating linguistic diversity in the classroom: "What should teachers do about helping students acquire an additional oral form? First, they should recognize that the linguistic form a student brings to school is intimately connected with loved ones, community and personal identity. To suggest that form is 'wrong' or, even worse, that it is ignorant, is to suggest that something is wrong with the student and his or her family."

This is an important piece: "On the other hand, it is equally important to understand that students who do not have access to the politically popular dialect form in this country, that is, Standard English, are less likely to succeed economically than their peers who do. How can both realities be embraced?"

She poses that question and then she offers some concrete suggestions: "Teachers need to support the language that students bring to school, provide them input from an additional code and give them the opportunity to use the new code in a nonthreatening, real communicative context. Some teachers accomplish this goal by having groups of students create bidialectal dictionaries of their own language form and Standard English. Others have had students become involved with standard forms through various kinds of role play. For example, memorizing parts for drama productions will allow students to 'get the feel' of speaking Standard English while not under the threat of correction. Young students can create puppet shows or role-play cartoon characters. Playing a role eliminates the possibility of implying that the *child's* language

is inadequate and suggests, instead, that different language forms are appropriate in different contexts."

She's saying that context is what matters and that students need to know that some forms of expression are relevant, important and necessary in certain contexts and other forms of expression are relevant, important and necessary in other contexts.

For example, when I go back home to the Caribbean, I do not speak in a way that will make people think that I'm some rich person living in California. If I do, I will be charged the tourist price. I don't want that, so I make sure that it's very clear that I speak the Ebonics of my particular island so I will pay the Ebonics price! The point here is that students need to know about the context of communication and the appropriateness of different forms. They learn this by having opportunities to practice a standard form without diminishing the home form if the home form is not the standard form.

One of the things to remember is that every language that children bring into the classroom is able to do all the things that the community needs to do. What's important is to have students acquire both—and even more important is to have them acquire critical knowledge of why one language is prestigious and why one isn't. As we think about literacy, home language and power, we need to make sure that students have both languages—or several, if possible—and also that they have the critical sense of how power plays into what they are able to do with languages and the status that a language does or does not enjoy.

It's important that as we think about measures for deciding whether literacy is being acquired and equity is in place, that we keep two things in mind. In her book, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Gloria Ladson-Billings talks about having a twin vision of academic excellence—that all children can achieve and that all children can also have a strong sense of cultural identity. In the past, academic excellence has meant, for some children of working class backgrounds and racial minority status, that they are educated *away* from their community. Just this week, a teacher said to me: "I want to help the children *transcend* the

communities they come from." I said to her, "We need to have them *transform* the communities they come from, not transcend them." They have to be grounded in them and they have to know how to take action so they can build their communities into sites of self-determination where people speak for themselves.

In measuring this question of equity and literacy, what counts is what shows up in standardized test scores. Are students meeting the standards, whether or not their first language is English? I know there are lots of people advocating for broader measures, for multiple measures that allow us to see beyond the test scores. I want to be very clear that some of the standards are definitely worth working toward. And we need to push for those. But we also need to find ways of helping students know that they know other things than simply what is shown on the tests.

I want to end by sharing with you an example from Starlight Professional Development School in Watsonville, California, where there are beginning teachers who are supported and where there's an environment that nurtures all teachers. This is an example of how you can assess literacy and equality by a measure that is different and more comprehensive than what we currently use in standardized test scores.

Teachers sometimes write me e-mails after I've visited their classes. I have permission to share with you this e-mail that this outstanding teacher, Barbara Huebner, titled "spontaneous testimonials that feed our soul." Barbara and I had been talking about the test and the fact that some students were behind and she wasn't going to be able to get everyone to meet the standard. She says:

"Remember our conversation about how inadequate I have been feeling, not being able to teach everything that needs to be learned? Well, fortunately my students don't perceive their own learning experiences in the same way. A couple of weeks ago I shared a great moment with a group of my students that is still feeding my heart and soul.

"I was having the last literature circle with my lowest reading group—'lowest' in terms of fluency, not comprehension. They had just

finished reading the book *América Is Her Name* (by Luis J. Rodriguez) about an immigrant girl who lives in Chicago. I had really enjoyed the literature circle with this group because throughout the book we had great conversations about the subject. It prompted their comments and questions. In fact, they were very sophisticated in articulating their thoughts. Anyway, we had just finished the final step in the literacy circle, which is thinking about a new idea to add to our journal.

"As I was about to dismiss them, Diana asked if she could do a round of appreciations. She said she knew it was not customary for an appreciation after literature circle. Of course I said yes! And I thought to myself, how sweet this group is. They really enjoy and appreciate working together. Diana looked right at me and said in Spanish, 'I want to appreciate you, teacher, because you have taught me a lot about reading and writing ideas about our books.' At this point there was rush of hands in the air and every child in the group appreciated me for very specific academic reasons—either helping them to learn about reading or writing about literature or teaching them to talk about books. It was very heartfelt on their part and I was very moved. I felt I was in some kind of spontaneous testimonial to me as a teacher. This gave me the encouragement and the vision to keep going."

These spontaneous testimonials are the real evaluations of literacy and equality in this state and I wish for all of you here to have many such testimonials.

Thank you very much.

References

- Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning. 2000. *The status of the teaching profession: Research findings and policy recommendations*. www.cftl.org/publications.html
- Delpit, L. 1995. "Language diversity and learning" in *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: New Press.
- Derman-Sparks. L. and The A.B.C Task Force. 1989. *Anti-Bias curriculum: Tools for empowering young children*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Floegel, K. 2001. Presentation for Action Research for English Language Learner Summer Institute. Keely Floegel is a bilingual

teacher at Alianza Charter School, 440 Arthur Road, Watsonville, CA 95076

Heubner, B. 2000. "Spontaneous testimonials that feed our soul." E-mail correspondence.

Barbara Heubner is a teacher at Starlight Professional Development School, 225 Hammer Drive, Watsonville, CA 95076.

Ladson-Billings, G. 1994. *The Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Inquiry Questions

1. Enid Lee argues that literacy should be "geared to the acquisition of opportunity and changing the world." Review the ways you already teach literacy to promote opportunity and change in your district/school. How might you strengthen this focus on opportunity and change even more?
2. If we use the lens of equity to introduce the concepts of literacy to beginning teachers, what might that look like?
3. Look at disaggregated data about your students' achievement and other measurable outcomes. Based on the data, what are some of the inequalities that exist in your schools or classrooms?
4. What are ways you have already been proactive in addressing inequities in your district/school? What positive results have you had? What are some new ways that would help you be proactive in addressing inequities?
5. The author says, "The days are gone when we have negative talk in the faculty room about 'those children.'" What events or changes have taken place in your school in order for this to be a true statement?
6. How would Enid Lee's thoughts about tapping into prior knowledge and high expectations in literacy transfer to the subjects of mathematics, physical education and history?
7. Enid Lee reminds us that people tend to have a change of heart when they see results. Describe times in your district/school when you have experienced such a change of heart based on student results. How did these experiences impact your teaching and leadership?
8. Review the concrete ways in which Enid Lee suggests that literacy work becomes work toward equity. How do these practices contribute to equitable outcomes for children? For example, the practice of naming the

students who are succeeding and not succeeding or the practice of saying each day, "I know that everyone is going to learn to write before they leave kindergarten."

9. Many school systems discourage the use of students' primary language in the classrooms. Within this environment, define several strategies you use in your district, school or classroom to support the language used at home while introducing "a new code in a non-threatening, real communicative context."
10. How do the practices Enid Lee describes compare with the literacy practices in your school? What are some concrete ways you could increase the equity power of your literacy practices?

Action Research

1. Using data to close the achievement gap.
 - a. How might grade level teams or subject area teachers collect data on:
 - Student learning strengths?
 - Student learning needs?
 - Student interests?
 - b. Working with this data, think together about which literacy strategies would be appropriate for your struggling students.
2. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has developed advanced teaching standards for a broad range of teaching contexts. Choose a particular certificate area and review the standards developed for this area.
 - What is the role of literacy in education according to these standards?
 - Compare and contrast the role of literacy in education expressed in the national standards and in Enid Lee's article.

Inquiry questions and action research suggestions by Carol Lingman. Article reprinted with permission of the California Professional Development Consortia.