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Literacy and Its Significance in Modern Life

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No skill is more crucial to the future of a child, or to a democratic and prosperous society, than literacy.

— Los Angeles Times, “A Child Literacy Initiative for the Greater Los Angeles Area”
The importance of literacy in modern society cannot be over-emphasized. The increasing need for all citizenry to acquire more than minimal basic literacy skills finds itself being played out in the struggle that is daily life. The significance of literacy in our lives, be it the ability to read or adequately interpret and comprehend the meaning of various levels of text for the purpose of being able to successfully participate in and navigate modern society is made ever more apparent through its demonstrated correlation with educational attainment (e.g., Figure 1A, Hyunjoon & Kyei, 2007). Through that attainment brings subsequent and meaningful employment. The failure to become sufficiently literate, however defined, invariably leaves the economic fate of many of those citizens in a precarious situation. And while some may argue that social class (SES) is the major factor in educational attainment, on average, SES is also associated with levels of literacy as a direct result of the impact that adequacy and stability of economic wealth can have on families.

Important to this discussion is the understanding that literacy is more than textual decoding and comprehension. Literacy can also impact other cognitive abilities. For example, Dotson et al. (2009) found that “the preponderance of studies that compare the test performance of literate and illiterate individuals or that use continuous measures of literacy have shown effects of reading ability on a range of cognitive tasks, including measures of orientation, visual and verbal memory, visuospatial ability, attention, language, calculation, and praxis” (p. 580).

Literacy and the Workforce

The lack of adequate literacy in our society, its association with subsequent educational attainment, and the implications for future employability are never more apparent than when the economy is in the throes of a recession. As Table 1 demonstrates, both before and after the last recession, the unemployment rate for adults 25 years of age and older was inversely related to their educational attainment. That is, the fewer years of formal education and corresponding lack of credentials, the higher the unemployment rate for those same individuals. The approximately 3:1 ratio of unemployed adults with no HS diploma compared to unemployed adults with a Bachelor degree and above was maintained throughout the recession, and essentially still continues today. At no time did those with higher educational attainment (i.e., some college and above) ever exceed the national unemployment rate, whereas those without a HS diploma experienced unemployment rates approximately 50%-60% above the national rate, and still do. For those with lower levels of educational attainment and its associated levels of literacy, the job market is not particularly forgiving and even less so when the economy is weak (Table 1).

Table 1
Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment for Adults 25 Years and Older, 2008-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Less than a High School Diploma</th>
<th>High School Graduates, No College</th>
<th>Some College or Associates Degree</th>
<th>Bachelors Degree or Higher</th>
<th>Average Nationa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 2008</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2009</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2010</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2011</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2012</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2014</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Department of Labor. (2015a)
Some may argue that the higher unemployment rates are due to the presence of older, less skilled Americans, but that same data paints a starker picture for young adults 20-24 years of age. While their unemployment rate for those possessing a Bachelor degree or higher was 6.7% in 2014, it jumped to nearly four times that level (25.3%) for those who had not completed high school (NCES, 2015). That very same 25.3% was over 2.5 times higher than the same unemployment rate for 25-64 year-olds who had not completed high school. Simply put, the employable, younger adults in our society with same or lower levels of educational attainment and associated literacy levels, on average, experience higher rates of unemployment and do so significantly more during economic downturns.

When examining younger adult employment rates without categorization by educational attainment, they generally earn less than their older counterparts (Table 2).

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age 16 +</th>
<th>Age 25 +</th>
<th>Age 16-24</th>
<th>Age 20-24</th>
<th>Age 25-35</th>
<th>Age 25-54</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Average</td>
<td>$803</td>
<td>$857</td>
<td>$491</td>
<td>$508</td>
<td>$739</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Department of Labor. (2015c)
When levels of educational attainment are factored in for all age groups 25 and over, those workers without a HS diploma earn, on average, far less than what their degree bearing counterparts (Table 3). In the 3rd quarter of 2015, HS graduates earned, on average, 87% of the usual weekly wage and salary of full-time workers possessing some college or an associate’s degree, but only 59% compared to those with a bachelor’s degree.

The aftermath of the major recessions of the last few decades has witnessed a major corporate shift toward increased technology use and with it, the expectation for increased knowledge and expertise on the part of workers as each recession has seen an eventual return to pre-recession productivity levels but with less employment demand (i.e., less workers). Those same recessions have led to an industrial re-visioning and restructuring of the workplace that includes new technological skills expected of the nation’s labor force. As industrialized nations continue their struggle to differentiate their workforce from the much cheaper manual or less skilled labor often associated with nations in the First World, increased skills by America’s workers which are invariably associated with greater levels of education and certification which, in turn, imply heightened levels of literacy in all their forms have become the new reality.

The educational implications for the country’s workers as well as those currently in the K12 system wrought by these global market forces are profound. For all intents and purposes, a minimal college education (i.e., community or four-year) has become the new HS diploma. Long gone are the days of underperforming in high school and then reasonably falling back on acquiring economically gainful employment that leads to a satisfactory middle class existence. And while there are those who do not think that college is necessary for everyone, that the young entrepreneurial spirit should be exercised through vehicles such as tech start-ups or participation in tech incubators (e.g., Weider, 2011), there is a significant difference between encouraging particularly capable individuals to explore that valuable path, and that course becoming the primary consideration for most workers, especially given that 9 out of 10 startups fail (Griffith, 2014). No, a significant majority of the population needs relatively stable and predictable employment circumstances.

As the economy evolves, what is required is an increasingly more educated and skilled population in order to maintain itself on a level comparable to previous generations, and that also necessitates higher degrees of literacy in the 21st century by Americans. Failure to acquire those requisite literacy skills frequently dooms those individuals to a
life of uncertainty and greater difficulty derived from the
associated economic insecurity that will too often ensue,
not to mention the correlates of poorer health and shorter
life expectancy. “Poverty not only diminishes a person’s
life chances, it steals years from one’s life” (Reisch cited in
Lowrey, 2014).

**Literacy and the Law**

Illiteracy or insufficient literacy and educational attain-
ment also tend to increase the likelihood of those same
individuals, often males, interacting negatively with the
legal system. For example, profiles of the prison population
from a 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (Haigler,
Harlow, O’Connor & Campbell, 1994) found that com-
pared to general households, the prison population was less
educated, with nearly 35% having 9-12 years of schooling
and 14% having only 0-8 years. In fact, “dropouts are 3.5
times more likely to be arrested than high school gradu-
ates. Nationally, 68% of all males in prison do not have a
high school diploma. Only 20% of California inmates demonstrate a
basic level of literacy, and the aver-
age offender reads at an eighth grade level” (Hanson & Stipek, 2014).
This should be of particular concern
to all of us because with only 5%
of the world’s population, the U.S.
is also in the unenviable position of
possessing “more than 20% of the
world’s prison population” (ACLU,
2015). And, if lack of literacy and
educational attainment has some
small part to play in the decision-
making that leads individuals down a path to eventual
incarceration, then bolstering the skills of reading and
writing at an early age would seem to take on heightened
importance, for social if not economic reasons.

For instance, in California alone, the cost of housing a
prisoner annually exceeds K12 per pupil funding by a
factor of seven (Hanson & Stipek, 2014). And as the well-
known HighScope-Perry study beginning in the 1960s
demonstrated, the lifetime effects from involvement with
a high quality preschool experience for those born into
poverty and identified as being at risk of failing in school
can be powerful. Decades later at age 40, the adults from
the original program group (who were exposed to literacy
and general school readiness skills) compared to those in
the group who experienced no preschool were much more
likely to have acquired basic achievement at age 14 (49%
v 15%), graduate from high school (77% v 60%), earn a
higher annual income and have been less involved with the
law (36% v 55%). As early as age five, it was reported that
students in the program cohort had even tested above an
IQ of 90 more frequently than their non-program counter-
parts (69% v 28%) (Schweinhart et al., 2005). The validity
issue of IQ for five-year-olds aside, the value of literacy
skills and the early exposure to them cannot be overstated.
In fact, 50 years later, both remain the foundation of the
federal government’s Head Start program.

**Literacy and the Economically
Disadvantaged**

Never has one set of skills been so
important in the lives of citizenry.
And while being literate does not
guarantee one’s economic future,
lack of literacy is a fairly strong
predictor of the struggles that await
those less literate. For example, in
reviewing Michigan’s final MEAP
and MME/ACT reading data from
2013, the sheer number of students
statewide in 3rd through 11th
grades who are deemed economical-
ly disadvantaged—free lunch eligible
(family of four with annual income
less than $24,000) and reduced lunch eligible (family of
four up to 185% of federal poverty level—approximately
$44,000)—should alarm legislators (Table 4, page 14).
And while their actual numbers decrease up into HS, that
fact probably has less to do with movement out of poverty
than it does with the likelihood of those students having
dropped out.

Michigan students identified as being economically
disadvantaged underperformed their non-economically
disadvantaged peers on reading and writing in 2010 and
In reading, economically disadvantaged students begin their state testing in 3rd grade 28 percentage points behind their non-economically disadvantaged counterparts. Up through 11th grade, that gap varies slightly, ranging in difference from 23-29 percentage points. The gap in writing is likewise maintained at 26 percentage points through middle school, but escalates significantly in HS to a difference of 46 percentage points, and this with a comparatively smaller percentage of the students in 11th grade being identified as economically disadvantaged.

Important to note in this discussion was the trend line of proficiency levels between those in 7th and 8th grades in writing and reading, and those in 11th grade. In both subject areas, the line was downward with the exception of the writing score for non-economically disadvantaged students; 11th grade students achieved higher relative proficiency levels than their middle school counterparts. Unlike many states, Michigan and a handful of others designates that all students take the national ACT in 11th grade. There is any number of possible reasons for that downward trend between 7th or 8th grade and 11th grade including the fact that the MEAP test administered in grades 3-8 is state-created, whereas the ACT is a nationally developed test that has been designed to generally address the breadth of state curricula across the country. While the authors of the ACT claim its general alignment with Michigan’s curriculum standards, whatever lack of fidelity may exist, all students in the state would have been similarly confronted in 11th grade. Some would simply have been better-prepared and better able to respond. The results of that performance for the economically disadvantaged and the size of the proficiency gap with their non-economically disadvantaged peers does not bode well for their HS graduation prospects nor does it portend well for their likelihood of success in college if they do graduate.

The proficiency gap in reading and writing between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students remains an important issue because it identifies the static, if not growing, differences between the performance results of typical middle and upper class students, and those from lower SES groupings. That difference is important because in an evolving and advanced industrialized economy such as ours, literacy and schooling and the associated educational credentials matter (e.g., HS diploma; college diploma/degree; various certificates and so forth). Credentials or the lack of them matter because of what they infer about each of us and what that means about the potential for economic participation and success in the adult world: gainful employment and all of its implications in our society. Understanding not only the plight of those economically disadvantaged, but develop-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>ED Students</th>
<th>% ED</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>ED Students</th>
<th>% ED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>105,010</td>
<td>54,557</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>109,935</td>
<td>55,825</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>106,654</td>
<td>53,759</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>112,549</td>
<td>56,305</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>110,379</td>
<td>52,513</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>115,696</td>
<td>54,160</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>111,879</td>
<td>51,579</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>115,551</td>
<td>52,068</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>105,329</td>
<td>40,806</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>109,617</td>
<td>38,072</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(MDE, 2013a; 2014b)
ing a greater appreciation for the daily circumstances of their lives and the resulting impact on their potential for success in school and in economic life are very important. Social class inarguably remains a powerful influence upon individuals’ life trajectories, from birth and early childhood experiences through to adulthood. Evidence of that can be seen, on average, in school readiness, literacy levels, and the general academic performance of the young who have been raised in disadvantaged circumstances. And, of course, whether they even graduate from HS or are eligible for, let alone successful in, college is also related to that. But the focus upon schools as the primary institutional mediator between those circumstances and more meaningful participation in economic life is wrongheaded. We live in a class-based society, and so how can schools, as micro-cosms of the larger society, reflect anything other than the circumstances of their students, notwithstanding all the well-intentioned and difficult work done by educators to overcome those circumstances. “No society can realistically expect schools alone to abolish inequality. If students come to school in unequal circumstances, they will largely, though not entirely, leave schools with unequal skills and abilities, in both cognitive and non-cognitive domains” (Rothstein, 2004, p. 129). Schools can only do so much. More is required from society.

### Table 5
**MEAP/ACT-MME Reading—Comparison of Proficiency Percentages for Economically Disadvantaged and Non-Economically Disadvantaged Students in Select Grades, 2010 & 2013**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th></th>
<th>2010</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>ED Students</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>Non-ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(MDE, 2013a; 2014b)

### Table 6
**MEAP/ACT-MME Writing—Comparison of Proficiency Percentages for Economically Disadvantaged and Non-Economically Disadvantaged Students, 2010 & 2013**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th></th>
<th>2010</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>ED Students</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>Non-ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(MDE, 2013a; 2014b). State testing of writing only occurs in these grades
References


