

## Feature Articles

---

### *The Cycles of Literacy: Predicting the Future by Analyzing the Past*

B. Allan Quigley

Most authors who are intrepid enough to try to predict the future of adult literacy education end up like the proverbial general who jumped on his horse and rode off in all directions—very busy but sadly disappointed in the outcome. Because political promises and current funding trends play such an important part in the daily existence of literacy programs, many practitioners—like the good general—become so driven by the politics of the moment that the “future” is portrayed as a very short term, highly complex proposition. If asked about the future, many instructors of adult literacy would say that they only hope to have a job next fall. Administrators, as well, are often so aware that there may be no funding beyond this fiscal year and that this year’s available funds are dedicated to delivery, that any thoughts they initially might have concerning research on past patterns or any reflection on the future soon gravitates to the latest promised political initiatives.

The hegemony of our field is the “Here and Now.” We most recently awaited the train of stable funding to pull into the station. Some hoped the National Literacy Act of 1991 was it (Quigley, 1991b). Instead, we watched a grim unloading of one of this century’s most condemning reports of adult literacy levels in the *National Adult Literacy Survey*. We now hope the president (or his wife) will get on board. One asks if it was always like this—waiting for tomorrow in the here and now?

This article is intended to help us understand better where we have come from and, in seeking some order in apparent policy chaos, to uncover patterns which may assist in assessing the future more clearly. Secondly, the author of this article hopes to provide a model for understanding how, as well as why and when, literacy policies emerge. Finally, suggestions are given on how we might try to affect the process into the future.

### The Past as Prelude To The Future

The “unhappy history” of literacy education (Harman, 1977, p. 446) is a history of cycles. Smith (1977) commented: “Over the years, in times of crisis . . . Americans kept rediscovering the literacy problems and, over the years, hastily contrived solutions to the problem were invented or re-invented. As the crisis passed, so did the concern of America’s leaders” (p. vi). Thus, the peaks of literacy activity are closely linked to national crises—real or imagined; the valleys mark the passage of such crises and/or the interest in the crises. What Smith does not note, however, is how often the social policies which arise out of these crises, or “triggering events” (Arnové & Graff, 1987, p. 4), have been carried forward by visible political figures, here called “political champions.”

The field of governmentally sponsored literacy is inextricably bound to the political world; this reality is often ignored, either out of resignation or political naivete. It is in this political framework that I believe we need to conduct the discussion of our future. It would be an error, however, to assume that literacy social policies are created for the singular purpose of helping people read and write (Cervero, 1984). On the contrary, Arnove and Graff (1987; see also Graff, 1979; Quigley, 1991a; Verner, 1973) have demonstrated clearly that the history of literacy campaigns from Europe to Britain to the U.S. have been a means to political ends: “Then as now, reformers and idealists, shakers and movers of societies and historical periods, [sic] have viewed literacy as a means to other ends—whether a more moral society or a more stable political order” (p. 2). It is not the wealth or education levels of a country which dictates its literacy levels; rather, it is “the political will of national leaders” (Arnové & Graff, 1987, p. 5). More realistically, it is the agendas they choose to shape during their administration—literacy activities have an uncanny knack for appearing in times of crisis in this shaping process. If practitioners suffer from job uncertainty, the good news is that it has been going on for centuries, thus creating a tortured stability. The bad news is that our champions never last long.

### Literacy as the Repetition of History

The history of literacy as social policy and the subsequent campaigns suggest that our cyclical peak and valley existence has seven phases: 1) A national crisis is identified; 2) illiteracy is rediscovered and connected to the crisis; 3) a visible political champion helps initiate federal/state

support (particularly evident since the mid-1920s); 4) various disjointed activities emerge (often beginning first with grassroots efforts and followed with governmentally supported systems of activities); 5) the star of the political champion falls or the crisis passes as public disenchantment sets in; 6) a call for greater accountability is imposed; and 7) a decline in the episodic support of literacy follows. The cycle repeats itself. Since the late 1960s, the time span between cycles is four to six years in length; the activity peak never lasts beyond eight continuous years (Cook, 1977; Quigley, 1991a; Stevens, 1987). That the cyclical history reaches back in time is apparent from a review, however brief, of our field's history.

### *1870s-1900s: Literacy for Sinners, Literacy for Morality*

In 19th century Britain, "For some curious reason sin was associated almost exclusively with illiteracy" (Verner, 1973, p. 11). A reading of Pole's 1814 *History of Adult Schools* (Verner, 1967) makes the reasons less "curious" because those who could not read the Bible were considered sinners. Prominent citizens such as Dr. Pole emerged who thought sinfulness could be corrected through adult education. The Bible, he argued, would "moralize and Christianize the minds of men—Instead of idleness, profaneness, and vice—[it would] inculcate diligence, sobriety, frugality, piety, and heavenly mindedness" (in Verner, 1967).

The Puritans carried the belief to America that illiteracy and sin were connected; subsequently, "between the mid-seventeenth century and the end of the eighteenth century, society here changed from being about half literate to being nearly universally (males) literate" (Stubblefield & Keane, 1989). Similarly, promoters of the Common School Movement cited a crisis of morality to support their assertion that "the inculcation of morality was supreme" (Graff, 1979, p. 23).

By the 1870s the nation had a new crisis in the form of immigrants. In a *Special Report of the Commissioner of Education* (Leigh, 1871) illiteracy was singled out: "This immense evil, our weakness and our disgrace, extends among our native population as well as among those of foreign birth. . . . It is a wide-spread national calamity" (pp. 802-803). One champion who emerged in this crisis was Henry Cabot Lodge. His proposed bill in 1896 would refuse entry into America to those who could not read or write. Lodge argued that "the mental and moral qualities which make our race" could be saved by excluding "the wholesale infusion of races whose traditions and inheritances, whose thoughts and beliefs are wholly alien to ours" (in Cook, 1977, p. 2). This bill and others were passed by Congress in 1909 and 1915, but all were vetoed by presidents of the day.

*1900s-1920s: Literacy for Conformity and Citizenship*

The notion of sin shifted in the 20th century to a more secular understanding of morality: "Literacy could not be promoted or comprehended in isolation from morality. . . . ['Morality' now meant] a mode of conduct . . . a way of life, habits, values, attitudes which were based on the cultural necessities of progress" (Graff, 1979, p. 25). The perceived crisis of immigrants grew. In 1912, as Taft was voted out and Wilson in, the YMCA began Americanization and literacy programs. They argued that "unless we can assimilate, develop, train and make good citizens out of them, they are certain to make ignorant, suspicious and un-American citizens out of us. Unless we Americanize them they will foreignize us" (Carlson, 1970, p. 447). Calvin Coolidge emerged as the clearest champion at a national level. In 1924 he wrote,

When it is remembered that ignorance is the most fruitful source of poverty, vice, and crime, it is easy to realize the necessity for removing what is a menace [i.e., illiteracy], not only to our social well-being, but to the very existence of the Republic. (1924, p. 2)

In 1924 he created the first National Illiteracy Crusade (not "campaign"). No goals were established nor resources made available through this crusade; however, because John Finley of the *New York Times* was chair, illiteracy was publicized as a national concern (Cook, 1977). The second champion and first real campaign by today's standards was launched by Hoover in 1929. His campaign sought to make five million adults literate before the 1930 census (Cook, 1977). It was at this peak that illiterate Indians and Blacks were added as "special groups" for the first time (Quigley, in press).

*1930s-1940s: Literacy for Work and Economic Recovery*

Sinners and immigrants were groups held in contempt and fear—but the depression began a new crisis. Work relief under Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was initiated in 1933 to provide work for single men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. When the men were found to have an average grade reading level of only 6.8, literacy education was initiated within the CCC (Cook, 1977). This does not mean that the earlier goals of good behavior and citizenship were dropped; they continue into today.

*1940s: Literacy for Patriotism and Defense*

During World War II the economy was put on the back burner; literacy education was recruited for national defense against Nazism. In 1940 Commissioner Studebaker (1940) warned of the spread of Nazism, stating that if we were to defeat the Nazis, everyone needed to serve one's country, develop vocational skills, and be physically fit. We need, he said, "the eradication of illiteracy . . . Now!" (p. 1). Thus, literacy was again linked to a crisis and, again, illiterates were spurred to act "responsibly," at least until the war ended.

*1950s-1960s: Literacy for Manpower Productivity*

As the crisis of war passed, new economic needs grew. Now literacy education was recruited for manpower productivity (today called human capital formation). In 1951 champion Harry Truman asserted that the "primary aim of our manpower mobilization is to safeguard our national security through the maximum development and use of our human resources" (cited in Caliver, 1951). Ambrose Caliver (1951), an African-American with the U.S. Office of Education, echoed the message: "Illiteracy is one of the most important problems in the mobilization of our manpower to meet the present emergency" (p. 131). Senator Kilgore (1952) of West Virginia argued not only that illiteracy "endangers democracy," but that a "lack of ability to read makes the illiterate a menace to himself and his fellows in industry" (Caliver, 1952, pp. 90-91). All are common themes today.

Literacy for patriotism was not forgotten. From Berlin to the Korean War to Sputnik, paranoia over communism grew. As a writer in *The Nation's Business* put it, "Today, in the face of the Communist threat, illiteracy is a grave national problem" (Stavisky, 1954, p. 67). From a seedbed for sin to a seedbed for Nazism, from fertile ground for sloth to a Communist threat, literacy was called up, discharged, then called again.

*1960s-Today: Literacy for the Economy, Literacy for Jobs*

Kennedy's Great Society and the subsequent War On Poverty saw a programmatic climb through two Democratic administrations that would credit Johnson as one of this century's foremost political champions. Literacy education was utilized to fight the crisis of poverty. The Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA) of 1962 was followed by the Economic Opportunities Act of 1964. Programs flourished as the highest peak in funded literacy activities in this century was attained. However, formalizing the cycle, now came legislative accountability.

Legislators of the Adult Basic Education Act of 1966 reviewed the MDTA and, among their many recommendations, called for unity, co-ordination, a national resource center, and a standard reporting system—recommendations which have been repeated consistently with this recurrent accountability step ever since.

The crisis of poverty faded as the crisis of jobs grew: “without . . . basic skills, employment was doubtful even in the best of times” (Cook, 1977, p. 104). A second ascension was seen from Nixon to Ford; it fell under Carter, then arose again with Reagan and Barbara Bush—all due to the crisis of jobs.

The historic goals for literacy were never lost, however. In a speech to the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education in 1990, Barbara Bush outlined the archetypal goals of literacy: to create better citizens, to develop character, to stimulate the economy, to employ more people, and to help protect the country. An examination of such recent speeches “rediscovering illiteracy” will evoke the concerns listed by Coolidge in 1924; literacy should:

Stimulate and increase the power of the people to produce, . . . cultivate a taste for literature, history, and the fine arts, . . . [and] be the handmaid of citizenship. . . . Patriotism is always to be taught, . . . and morality, character, and religious convictions are to be built. (pp. 1-2)

### *The Future: Literacy for Ethnic Stability and Control?*

It is reasonable to assume a number of things for the future: 1) Literacy social policy will continue to be set for the people, not by the people. 2) The field will continue to depend on political champions; therefore, we will live with political and funding uncertainty. 3) Illiteracy will not be “eradicated”; literacy education will endure. 4) Literacy will be crises-linked. 5) The cycles will carry into a postmodern world.

If literacy’s past is a story of cycles, the questions are: Where do we stand today? Where will we be tomorrow? We are at the end of a peak. Like the end of the Republican peak in the 1970s-80s and the Democratic peak in the 60s, the ascent of our recent political champions has failed. We do not know if Clinton will be a Champion, but history shows that the same banner is rarely picked up by the new party in power. It may also be noticed that nowhere here is the voice of the learner to be found (Harman, 1977). The same is almost as true of practitioners and academics who have ridden the literacy roller coaster. “Almost” because the formation of the National

Literacy Act did involve a few practitioners who won concessions (Quigley, 1991b), suggesting the cycle can be affected. The cycle is best influenced at the crisis shaping stage, which is now. Sadly, the “Here and Now” resignation of so many and the tyranny of the next-year budget have made it almost treasonous for practitioners to engage in what would be an obvious need for lobbying in any other profession. Silence, too, has its patterns.

What will emerge as the next crisis over the longer term? If history repeats itself, I believe it will repeat itself around the growing crisis of immigrants in conflict with the needs of African Americans, Hispanics, and the working poor. This explosive situation is compellingly discussed by Stewart (1993) and described by Chisman (1989): “America must do a great many things to avoid [an] unhappy rendezvous with *demographic destiny* [italics added]. Among the most important things it must do is ensure that the twenty million-plus adults who are seriously deficient in basic skills become fully productive workers and citizens well before the rendezvous begins” (p. 3).

If literacy education has been used historically to achieve “a more moral society or a more stable political order” (Arnové & Graff, 1987, p. 2), then the next peak probably will be attained as a way to achieve “ethnic stability”—a theme reminiscent of the 1920s but with all the political echoes of economic and moral control of illiterates. Finally, as literacy enters the 21st century, we need to ask not only what can be learned from our past, but also if we, in fact, want the cycle of literacy to change in the future.

### References

- Arnové, R., & Graff, H. (1987). Introduction. In R. Arnove & H. Graff (Eds.), *National literacy campaigns*. New York: Plenum.
- Caliver, A. (1951). Illiteracy and manpower mobilization. *School Life*, 33(9), 131-133.
- Carlson, R. (1970, Winter). Americanization as an early twentieth century movement. *History of Education Quarterly*, pp. 441-465.
- Cervero, R. (1984). Is a common definition of literacy possible? *Adult Education Quarterly*, 36, 50-54.
- Chisman, F. (1989). *Jump start: The federal role in adult literacy*. Washington, DC: Project on Adult Literacy.
- Cook, W. (1977). *Adult literacy education in the United States*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

- Coolidge, C. (1924). New importance is attaching to the cause of education. *School Life*, 10(1), 1-2.
- Graff, H. (1979). *The literacy myth*. New York: Academic Press.
- Harman, D. (1977). The experimental world literacy program: A critical assessment. *Harvard Educational Review*, 47, 444-447.
- Kilgore, H. (1952). Literacy and the national welfare. *School Life*, 34(6), 90-91.
- Leigh, E. (1871). Illiteracy in the United States. In H. Barnard (Ed.), *Special Report of the Commissioner of Education*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office
- Quigley, A. (1989). Literacy as social policy: Issues for America in the 21st century. *Thresholds in Education*, 15(4), 11-15.
- Quigley, A. (1991a). Exception and reward: The history of social policy development of the GED in the U.S. and Canada. *Adult Basic Education*, 1, 27-43.
- Quigley, A. (1991b). The sleep of reason: Adult literacy and the S-2 Omnibus Education Bill. *Adult Basic Education*, 1, 109-117.
- Quigley, A. (in press). "This immense evil": The history of literacy education as social policy. *Beyond rhetoric: Fundamental issues in adult literacy education*. Malabar, FL: Kreiger.
- Smith, E. (1977). Introduction. In W. Cook (Ed.), *Adult literacy education in the United States*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Stavisky, S. (1954, July). Ignorance cuts production and defense. *Nation's Business*, pp. 23-24.
- Stevens, E. (1987). The anatomy of mass literacy in nineteenth-century United States. In R. Arnove & H. Graff (Eds.), *National literacy campaigns*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Stewart, D. (1993). *Immigration and education*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Stubblefield, H., & Keane, P. (1989). The history of adult and continuing education. In S.B. Merriam & P.M. Cunningham (Eds.), *Handbook of adult and continuing education* (pp. 26-36). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Stuebaker, J. (1940). *School Life*, 26(1), 1.
- Verner, C. (1967). *Pole's history of adult schools*. Washington, DC: Adult Education Associates of the U.S.
- Verner, C. (1973). Illiteracy and poverty. *B.T.S.D. Review*, 9(2), 9-15.