

# I'll See That When I Believe It: A Dialogue on Epistemological Difference and Rural Literacies

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*Why read? We take a turn in the conversation initiated by Jean Stockard's article, "Increasing Reading Skills in Rural Areas: An Analysis of Three School Districts" (2011a), with a dialog in which we engage the epistemological positions at play within this debate. We understand the different positions as representations of each author's ideas about what reading is and what reading is for. These ideas evoke productive questions of power and ideology which we argue should be positioned squarely at the center of this debate.*

In a clever inversion of a common phrase, the idea that reality is unproblematically visible and available is thrown into question. Thus, "I'll believe that when I see it," gets turned around into, "I'll see that when I believe it." This inversion raises epistemological questions about how there are different ways to frame knowledge and how to interpret social reality. We understand reading and literacy learning as phenomena that are constructed differently from different epistemological positions and this is what we take up here. It is not our intent in this conversation to engage directly in substantive debate about whether or not a particular reading program works or does not work with a target group of marginal children. Our point is that the terms in which the central problem is understood is what is at issue in the recent exchange around rural literacy learning in the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*. As our inversion suggests, what we see and count as important is essentially shaped by beliefs and assumptions. These assumptions, which refer in this case to what counts as reading, fundamentally structure the kinds of questions we ask and the ways we ask them.

We are part of a larger group that is currently considering how the problematic idea of rurality fits together with the equally problematic idea of literacy and so we have given such questions considerable consideration. In fact, we began this journey in April of 2011 at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) meetings in New Orleans in what we are hoping will become what Bill Green of

Charles Sturt in Australia has coined, the Rural Literacies Network. The name of the network sets the starting point in the discussion on multiple grounds by pluralizing both literacy and rurality to illustrate the way that each of these terms has been used as a singularity, with the effect being that country people are typically marginalized in the discourse that results. By doing so we follow a number of literacy scholars (Donehower, Shell, & Hogg, 2007; Fagan, 1997; Sohn, 2006) who have taken up what it means to be and work in a rural location. In this work we have begun to create what we hope is a new space that goes beyond historic practices and discourses around schooling and literacy by following the lead of the New Literacy Studies movement (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2001; Street, 2003, 2005) which situates literacy as multiple located social practices arising out of analyses of literacy which considers social class (Heath, 1983, Shannon, 1998, Williams, 1980/2006), gender (Newkirk, 2002, Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), feminist studies (Davies, 1989, 2003) and postcolonial scholarship (Thiong'o, 1998).

The debate around literacy in recent issues of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* is one that is very well rehearsed from different epistemological positions. The reading wars will never—in an important sense—be over because the real war is not really a war at all, it is a disagreement about what counts as reading, as Jim Heap pointed out more than three decades ago (1980). The fact is that since the 1970s when the sociolinguists, and later, sociologists of education and critical curriculum scholars, began to challenge the hegemony around literacy pedagogies that situated reading and writing (not so much speaking) as cognitive processes that are best understood

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from the perspective of the psychology of the individual, things began slowly to change. Indeed, this established epistemological frame is deeply rooted in educational thought, a situation that provoked Frank Smith (1987) to wonder what schools might look like today had psychology not been the foundational discipline upon which schooling was constructed. For Smith and for others, there has been a lingering suspicion that education may have, as he put it, “backed the wrong horse” (1987). Smith suggested anthropology as a better horse.

Today the legacy of sociolinguistics, critical theory, feminist theorizing, postcolonial theory, critical race theory, poststructural and postmodern theories as well as certain variants of progressivism, all point to the loosening of the grip of positivist conceptions of knowledge and what counts as literacy. Qualitative methodologies and findings about the depth and complexity of literacies have also broadened our understanding of the scale and diversity of literate activity in contemporary societies. At the same time though, there has been a very powerful retrenchment of what has been variously called evidence-based, data-driven, or science-based approaches to learning and teaching. Literacy researchers today find themselves on one train or the other and for the most part each seems to be heading in a different direction. People on each of the trains seldom speak with one another because there is work to do teaching people to read and write. They have different visions of how to do this and even different visions of what reading and writing are. And of course, the flash-point for all of this is in communities of disadvantage where everyone wants to do something to improve the lives of children in school.

By way of responding to Stockard (2011a, 2011b) and Engelmann (2011), we would like to offer the following conversation that takes up, in the form of a dialogue, the epistemological assumptions that are seldom treated explicitly in literacy discourse. We also pay particular attention to the fact that rurality matters as a cultural phenomenon that can be best understood from a phenomenological perspective. Karen opens this conversation with some thoughts about epistemology.

**Karen:** My wish for this conversation is that it invites a discussion of difference (Shannon, 2011) by recognizing two contrasting epistemological positions at work in this debate. Placing this conversation within its epistemological frame is necessary not only to highlight our different theoretical “trains” (or horses) but to illustrate that we are travelling to altogether different destinations. While we likely share the same concern for children, we are working toward different goals informed by our different frames of reference (epistemological positions). Our respective positions are also differently influenced by the omnipotence of profitability. Reading Mastery is a commercial product, one version of which is currently sold by publishing giant

McGraw-Hill. I believe that this signals a particular vested interest in marginalized places and people as potential markets. Rural places are a source of profit.

Even still, a discussion of difference is a far more productive option than an atheoretical my-science-versus-your-science tit for tat. In fact, when placed within its positivist epistemological frame, I am the first to concede that both the tenets of Reading Mastery and Stockard (2011b) and Engelmann’s (2011) rejection of my critique (Eppley, 2011) make perfect sense.

Within positivist epistemologies about reading, reading is a measurable change in behavior. Thus, a child’s response needs to be such that it can clearly be evaluated as either correct or incorrect. Fidelity to the program is compromised when teachers opt to discuss texts rather than read the script. Transitioning to this kind of teacher/student interaction takes time and is likely not easy for the teachers, but is necessary in order to establish standardized instruction that can be fairly measured. By design, teaching scripts are intended to control language and interactions between teacher and learner. Although teachers frequently subvert them, directed scripts actually attempt to prevent teachers from making connections personally with the child and facilitating connections between the child and text. Within behaviorism, readers are empty containers. Scripts, by definition, limit language and silence students (metaphorically) by denying them opportunities to demonstrate competencies by connecting school and personal identities (Whitmore, Poock & Malamut, 2011). This results in “symbolic violence,” (Bourdieu, 1999) the ethical concern to which I pointed in the earlier response. Underlying all of this is the idea that language “happens” in isolation and can therefore be learned in isolation and assessed objectively.

**Mike:** Yes, it is hard to escape the way that instructional scripts end up both constructing what it is to read and limiting what assessment tools can be used to evaluate reading. The scripting is, in a sense, holding people and their lives at a distance so that they can be measured against a common standard. For me, questions of power need to be introduced into this conversation as well. By taking power out of the equation the whole business of language learning is treated as though it were a clinical exercise. It isn’t. If we have learned anything in the last generation of literacy scholarship it is that language is implicated in the exercise of power in societies. Since Foucault (1972, 1980) at least, it seems to me impossible to retreat to a position of innocence around questions of how language is used.

Pierre Bourdieu’s classic *Language and Symbolic Power* (1999) is a key text in this debate. I don’t think violence is too strong a word for what ensues from an allegedly neutral treatment of language pedagogy, even though the intent may well be to “help” as you point out. Your comment about symbolic violence reminded me of a conversation

I had with a friend who lives in a small fishing village in Atlantic Canada near my village. Like a lot of men in this community of his generation (he is now into his mid 60s) he received very little formal education. In fact, he barely made it out of elementary school before his father put him to work on a fishing boat. A few years ago my friend was randomly selected to participate in the OECD's International Adult Literacy Test. He called me when he got the results of his test and wanted to talk with me about getting tested for dyslexia or signing up for some adult literacy training.

The results of the test placed him at level 1 on the IALTS grid, below the score of 3, which is considered to be literate enough to get by in the modern world. My friend is a conscientious person and he didn't want to be walking around illiterate. Before taking the test, he told me that he never considered himself illiterate, in fact, he had never thought much about literacy at all. He just lived his life. What that life consisted of was a lot of work and a thorough place-based knowledge of how to harvest the resources of the sea along the Atlantic coast of Canada. He is also very aware that he speaks a form of vernacular English which he learned in school to be "wrong."

When he confessed his illiteracy to me, wondering if there is something wrong with him, I asked him what he read. "Nothing," was his reply. Yet, there were magazines and manuals all over the house along with his wife's novels and cookbooks. When he said "nothing" he meant that he didn't read novels the way his wife did and that he found them hard to understand when he tried. He just couldn't get into them. The literacy test that was administered in his home felt to him like some kind of school test about things he did not understand or care about. They reminded him of the irrelevant and seemingly pointless tests he struggled with as a student, and which he left school to avoid. The test asked him to speculate about things he did not know or care about, and asked tricky little questions about the irrelevant details of stories that seemed to him trivial and silly.

When I asked him about a magazine I saw near his chair, off he went, telling me about the new electronic gear he could get for his boat or different hull designs he was investigating for a new boat. He also follows the politics around state regulation of his industry and policies that he argues have marginalized small boat fishing families like his. My friend's literacy is almost totally caught up in his primary interest and his abiding passion which is the fishery, its politics, the technical aspects of the work, and the economics of the industry through which he demonstrated to me a keen understanding of globalization and commodities markets. I have no doubt that he had made more money than I ever will. His particular, focused literacy has supported his prosperity.

All of this, I think, supports the points you made, Karen, about literacy and the teaching of children. Without

an understanding of the contexts within which meaning is made, it is very difficult to imagine an effective and useful literacy program. Engelmann (2011) and Stockard (2011a, 2011b) on the other hand seem to take the opposite position arguing that it is the careful and systematic inculcation of a set of placeless and generic skills that allow a child to get started in literacy. In fact, a key point of contention is the place of nonsense phonemes, words and sentences that are constructed to promote automaticity. How automatic a young reader ought to be is what is at issue. You seem to argue, Karen, that automatic recognition of phonemic structures and words, either out of context or in nonsense contexts will actually inhibit the process of literacy. Your sense of literacy learning is focused squarely on meaning and context. Engelmann and Stockard again seem to take the opposite view that reading does not occur fluently unless there is automatic recognition of micro bits of text out of context. It is also important to note that this is precisely the kind of literacy teaching that convinced my friend that his English is substandard and his situated literacy is irrelevant. If he couldn't pass the test, then he must be illiterate even though the test had nothing to do with his reading interests or reading practices. Again, drawing on Foucault and Bourdieu, one of the most remarkable features of modern education is that way that it is able to convince so many people that judgments made by this kind of assessment defines one's literacy and even intelligence.

**Karen:** Your story is also a good demonstration about the role of context in literacy learning and teaching. The OECD's attempt to reposition your fisherman friend as illiterate within its official discourse and his response (Is there something wrong with me?) highlights the tension between the diverse sociolinguistic and cultural resources of students in our schools and the "better way with words" of the official curriculum (Dyson, 2006, p. 34). This is a good time to clarify that in literacy learning, background knowledge is but one component of context. Even still, employing a child's background knowledge in the teaching of literacy is far more involved than knowing if students were "at mastery" on earlier lessons. This is the kind of "background knowledge" useful in the teaching and assessment of literal comprehension, but likely would not have mediated the literacy learning of your fisherman friend. The engagement of context that would have mediated his literacy development is instruction that begins where children begin, with their experience (Dyson, 2003, 2006).

Within sociocultural epistemologies, students' outside-of-school knowledge is vital in the process of learning to read because readers make, rather than consume, meaning. This is a key epistemological difference between our positions. If reading is fundamentally social, it cannot be understood as a transaction between a script and a child. Neither can it be taught without authentic social interaction.

All learning is situated in a complex web of interaction between teachers, texts, peers, schooling, and the larger society (Dudley-Marling, 2011; Friere & Macedo, 1987). This is why place matters in literacy education. Attempts to standardize instruction and procedures, by definition, preclude a response to context. The kind of reading that you and I refer to here is reading that enables citizens to read in ways that facilitate connections with others in order to construct a better and more just democracy (Shannon, 2007). “Basic” skills, which can be standardized and are purportedly neutral, are a poor fit for this goal, at least because daily life is not standardized (Dyson, 2006).

**Mike:** I actually think that you and your interlocutors probably want the same thing at some level. I don’t want to put words in anyone’s mouth, but I expect that you all believe that your particular approach provides the best way to achieve a stronger democracy and to support those on the margins (and rural is effectively code for marginal it seems to me in this discussion). I tend to think that there is more in your argument than in that of Stockard and Engelmann. I have a very hard time understanding how doing more of what has gotten us where we are today is going to make things any better. I also take Alan Luke’s (2012) point about policy borrowing and the globalized attempt to compare and contrast different national and regional education systems as though they operate in a comparable space. When literacy is understood to be singularity, then it can be defined, broken apart into constituent bits, and measured. Basically, you do not seem to believe that this is a good thing to do and that we need to retreat from the positivist dream of literacy as a measurable outcome. You seem to favor, instead, the idea that literacy (or literacies) are multiple and located and that they represent social practices as opposed to decontextualized skill sets. This seems correct to me when I observe the different kinds of school practices each of the two positions engenders. I would much rather be in the class where children are reading and producing real texts that connect to their lives.

But I do understand that this penchant for authenticity over automaticity is a particular bias of mine and that large numbers of people want children to be more automatic in their reading and writing. Frankly, I don’t, and tend to side with the Finns who don’t bother introducing much in the way of reading until age 7 when children enter school (Darling-Hammond, 2010). As Wolf (2008) points out, there is considerable research to illustrate that while it is possible to teach 4 year olds to “read” in the sense of decoding accurately, most aren’t cognitively able to understand much of what they read until several years later.

At this point in time, each of these two discursive positions have developed their own ways of measuring things and taking account of learning. Indeed, they seldom interact with one another and have separate spaces (publishers and

journals) where they essentially talk to one another. I think this is understandable and perhaps unfortunate. For me, what is missing in the arguments and data that Stockard and Engleman present is an insufficient understanding that literacy practices are located in time and space. I’d like to illustrate what I mean with another literacy story, again one which is distinctly, each of them distinctly non—standard and distinctly rural.

I’ll start with a story about a former student. He was a very challenged reader and writer. He was identified as a struggling reader virtually from the moment he entered school. He grew up in a working class family and was fascinated with hunting, fishing, 4-wheelers, dirt bikes, big trucks and all of the accouterments of rural manhood. By the age of 10, he looked like a small version of his dad. His body was thick and heavy, not fat but strong and muscular. Getting him to remove his greasy baseball cap was an ongoing struggle that most teachers conceded in the end. By the time he reached my upper elementary class, he was considered a non-reader and indeed he showed no evidence that he could or would read much of anything in school independently. He chose books for his reading file based primarily on their length and by secondly, by the machismo or machinery illustrated on the cover.

So the year passed by. My student was tested, and predictably he was operating about three to four grades below the expected level. His parents were very upset and demanded that the school do something. But we were doing all we could and had been for some years. My student had support teachers who worked with him. He sat back in his chair looking out the window not wanting to focus on the text presented to him. There were phonetic drills and various sorts of exercises, worksheets and intervention that were supposed to increase his ability to attend to and decode print. Nothing seemed to be working. His story is not particularly unusual for young men in the part of rural Nova Scotia where I worked. As a young child, his interest was in the sandbox manipulating toy trucks and earth moving machines. By the time he was 7 or 8, he was operating 4-wheelers and small bikes in the backcountry around his home and on his family’s land. By the time he was 12, he could operate a chain saw as well as a man. Not much later, he was a regular on his father’s commercial fishing boat when school was not in session. Today, he operates heavy equipment in western Canada, and, like the man in the earlier story, makes more money than I do.

But the point of the story came at the end of my year with this allegedly reluctant reader. We were on our class trip and the student in question was sitting beside me in the car. A classic Pontiac passed us by and my student said, “oh, cool, a 68 Parisienne.” I said to him, “How do you know it wasn’t a 69?” His reply was a segue into a discussion of the tail light configurations of late 60s and

early 70s Parisiennes. It turned out that this boy had an encyclopedic knowledge of General Motors products (he didn't care much about Fords, Chryslers or heaven forbid, "foreign" vehicles), their body styles, engine displacements, performance features, etc. When I asked him how he knew all this, he just snorted as though to say that this is simply common knowledge that any man ought to have. When I pushed him a little further he told me about the manuals, car books, and the buying, selling and trade magazines he read because his father was always trolling for good deals on parts and vehicles.

It can, of course, be argued that what I am describing here is the well-known distinction between what James Gee (2001) calls acquired and learned literacies. There is no doubt that both matter. There are those forms of literate activity that are acquired naturally through authentic engagement in what Bourdieu (1984) called the "habitus" or the ordinary activities that people in located social positions enact without explicit reflection. Then, there are those literate spaces that connect the child (typically in school) to forms of literate activity that may not connect with the habitus of particular children. And of course, the challenge is to bring these two forms of literate activity into connection with one another. This raises important questions about the connection between home language and acquired literacy practices, on the one hand, and the literacy practices of the school. One reason that I think that your position is more convincing is because I think it opens up the possibility of a richer pedagogical conversation and research agenda than does the epistemological stance of Engelmann and Stockard. For the latter, the fact that the population you/we are writing about is rural has little substance other than that it is one instantiation of a disadvantage population which is in need of the placeless, acontextual mechanics of their generic program to teach decoding. Your position Karen, seems to suggest that there needs to be a strong connection between my student's knowledge and his literacy instruction. Situated within broader ideologies, these two pedagogies each make powerful statements about how language should be used. This is true because language is unavoidably permeated with concrete value judgments (Bakhtin, 1982).

**Karen:** Our disagreement about what counts as reading and what form quality reading instruction ought to take is really a disagreement about what reading is for. This is where Bakhtin's concrete value judgments come into play. In short, reading for accuracy is not the kind of reading that enables citizens to make collective decisions about how they wish to live together (Shannon, 2011), even if such instruction "works." In an earlier conversation in this journal, quite similar to this one, Howley, Theobald, and Howley write, "Because of its concern for rural meanings, for context deeply engaged, rural education research cannot properly be confined, as we have asserted, to evaluating

'what works' for rural students" (2005, p. 3), unless, perhaps, we re-envision what we mean by "works." What works depends on one's epistemological (and ideological) positions. For me, literacy that works is (are) literacies that enable citizens, urban or rural, to connect with others and participate in the political decisions that impact day to day lives.

**Mike:** Yes, and I think what works depends on what "work" you count as important. Every program "works," the question for me is what work does it do?

**Karen:** I take your point. We are concerned with the big picture for rural communities and rural educators facing important challenges. Stockard outlines some of the most pressing challenges in the day-to-day lives of far too many rural citizens. While we both seem to understand the impossibility of the rural idyll, I see these circumstances as collective challenges facing some rural communities, as opposed to problems of individuals (Mills, 2000). This distinction has everything to do with the purposes for reading. From this point of view, these challenges can only be solved collectively and require reading the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) with one's sociological imagination, as opposed to reading for accuracy (Mills, 2000; Shannon, 2011). Stockard states that denying rural children the very best education is morally reprehensible. I couldn't agree more. While I disagree that rural is code for struggling or disadvantaged, we both share concern for struggling literacy learners. The heart of our disagreement, however, is our epistemological beliefs about the purpose of reading. Why read? The seriousness and scope of the very unromantic problems that Stockard lists require advanced and complex literacies. An emphasis on critical thinking and problem-solving will enable rural citizens to participate in democratic decision-making processes about how they wish to live their lives. Jacqueline Edmondson characterizes this project as a, "radical reworking of a new and hopeful rural life" (2003, p. 67). Basic skills are woefully inadequate for this project. In their ground-breaking book on Rural Literacies, Donehower, Schell and Hogg (2007) make the same point.

**Mike:** And things are changing. It is important to think about the particular literate challenges faced by rural citizens and communities, and young people growing up in rural places. But at the same time, it is also important to understand how space is shrinking in important ways. To be rural or to grow up rural does not necessarily mean to grow up in a space that is any less connected than anywhere else these days.

In this regard, I think about my son who grew up in a small Atlantic Canadian village where the family lived when I taught school through the mid to late 1980s and through the 1990s. He is now a graduate student working on the west coast of Canada in biology laboratories. Last Christmas, he was visiting me at my place in rural Nova

Scotia. One afternoon, we went out to visit in the Clare region of the province and we decided to have dinner at my favorite Acadian restaurant. I realized that I forgot my glasses at home and my middle-aged eyes are now as good as blind for reading print. I said to my son that he would have to read the menu for/to me.

For me, this was a simple fact but for my son, there was a solution. He simply suggested that I use my smartphone to read the menu. When I told him that I can't see the text on the phone any better than I can see the menu, he laughed. "No, no," he said, you can use your phone as glasses. I still had no idea what he was talking about. "It's simple," he said; "just go and get an app for your phone that will turn it into a pair of reading glasses." When I asked him if he had ever seen such an app, he said, no but he was sure that there would be one. And sure enough there was. In fact, there were several, all free of charge. He downloaded two and in less than two minutes he let me choose the one I liked best. Not only did my phone turn into a pair of reading glasses, it also turned the camera flash into a reading light.

I was absolutely stunned by this rather simple literate act performed in a small restaurant in what might be considered an isolated rural village. Now, if you are under 30 or really tech-savvy, you are probably thinking: so what? This is normal to you. I have taken to calling this "app-think" and it is the process of thinking about problems in terms of the capacity of interactive technologies like smart phones. App-think involves thinking in a literate way with a new set of tools to accomplish a variety of social purposes. My son did not know that the app existed, but he knew that it could exist and so engaging in a literacy practice that is still very new and foreign to me solved the problem for him. We are seeing a whole range of this kind of mingling of technological savvy and collective social action, everything from revolutionary organizing in the Middle East and in the Occupy Movement to young people connecting to share transportation through ride share.

I was reminded of how I used to watch him as an adolescent perched in front of two monitors interacting in an online totally text-based role play game where the players' entries were color coded to differentiate one from the other. The text was scrolling by just about as fast as I could read it. He was reading and adding his own text to the mix. But this was only part of it. He had his homework open in another window and was doing a history assignment. On the other monitor he was managing some kind of medieval village in a game called Civilization where his characters were responding to his occasional commands. And in the corner of the screen he was carrying on at least 3 separate conversations with friends in an MSN chat window (that ancient pre-Facebook social network landscape). It occurred to me then that the relative isolation of our village and the distance to the homes of his friends actually shifted

much of my son's social life into cyberspace. What he was doing was essentially hanging out and playing with friends while chipping away at his homework. The magnitude of the literate skill he was employing to do this simply amazed me. So, his rural location along with the cultural and economic capital of his computer-worker parents effectively created the conditions for his literacy. In the process, he was producing and accessing texts that mattered to him. I sometimes wonder if the recent turn toward standardization and surveillance is more about controlling potentially dangerous and anarchic literate spaces than about a real concern with literate deficits.

As such, the perspective of Engelmann and Stockard can be seen as a form of what Bourdieu called symbolic violence precisely because it positions students as objects of linguistic programming that effectively ignores the way that they use language. And, it must be said that this can be accomplished because those who are its objects typically lack the power to resist other than in the unproductive and self-harming ways that marginalized children and youth typically do.

It can be argued, as Stockard suggests, that the real symbolic violence comes in the form of not teaching struggling youth to "break the code" and thus, relegating them to a life of poverty and further marginalization. On the negative side of this question, there are a lot of highly literate people who remain marginal, their literacy notwithstanding. African American and Atlantic Canadian literature and ethnography are full of such people. But on the positive side, there are other problems. For instance, it is becoming increasingly difficult to argue that there is a single unified code that needs to be cracked. It is also becoming very clear that modern literate environments provide new and evolving literate hooks for more and more young people. As the story of my son illustrates, contemporary literacy is much more visual, and much more located in networked social spaces that require flexibility and the ability to code switch (and mode switch) continuously. In the case of app-think, the technology actually mediates and shapes the way literacy is learned, and, it is doing so in a way that responds to the immediate need and desires of the reader. In addition, like any other historic new literate practices, it has potentially subversive potential to challenge existing arrangements of power.

Where in fact is the real evidence that significant numbers of young people are unable to function in this emerging literate world? It seems to me that their level of functioning is more influenced by their access to ever changing technologies and networked spaces than by any lack of skill and this is a problem once again of power and privilege.

**Karen:** Issues of power and privilege keep coming up again and again in this conversation. For example, Stockard

and Engelmann's interpretation of reading as performance on standardized evaluation measures aligns squarely with the ideologies that undergird current state and national educational policy in the U. S. This makes excellent financial sense given the well-known ties between McGraw-Hill, Reading First and conservative policy makers (Leistyna, 2007; Manzo, 2006; Metcalf, 2002; Shannon, 2007). Defense of Reading Mastery and other such products, that they are fair and equitable, echoes the classical liberal defense of educational standardization as a whole (Luke, 2012). I want to return to Allen Luke's 2011 Distinguished Lecture of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). He asks, "At what point does it (educational standardization) have the effect of placing cultural and educational, linguistic, and sociocultural diversity at risk?" (p. 370). Luke calls standardization the "new common sense" with the potential to erase difference (p. 372). This gets at the heart of my concern about standardization in general, but particularly the standardization of teaching and learning in rural schools.

Thus, our impasse. Standardization, by design, overcomes the limits of place. Socio-cultural and critical theories insist that learning is inherently social and contextually dependent and situated within multiple structures of power. Learning within positivist epistemologies holds that it is possible and desirable to control for social context and that the teaching of reading is a politically neutral endeavor.

**Mike:** This is exactly what critical literacy theorists and the New Literacy Studies people have been arguing for several decades now, not that this is really recognized much beyond the academy. To position literacy education, or any education as a neutral, value-free, apolitical endeavor is precisely what most citizens seem to want to think schools accomplish. We want to believe that schools are fair, or at least potentially fair. This is the impetus behind the science-based or the evidence-based education movements of the last decade or so. And you know, I want that too. I want schools to be places bereft of politics, free from wounds, violence, and the inequalities that are rife in any society. As much as I wish this were the case, I know it is not the case. Children bring their lives to school and these lives provide the material out of which they fashion their literacies. Whether or not they are standardized, educational practices always work out within the context of what Annette Lareau (2003) calls "unequal childhoods."

Rurality is code for geographic isolation and for economic disadvantage. But these locations can also be rich with embodied knowledge of natural places and complex ecologies. These socioeconomic and geographic realities have a profound influence on educational attainment and achievement. This much I think you and Engelmann/Stockard can agree upon. The question is, what is the best way to do something positive about it, which is really the

age-old question about how we can harness the unwieldy machinery of the school system to confront or even assuage the seemingly intractable problems of social inequality. In the end, this is a political question and not a technical one, which is the point I think you were perhaps trying to make in your response to Stockard's original article.

As a final note, there is an additional question of standpoint (Smith, 2005). As my narrative illustrates, I live and work in a rural place and in my everyday relationships I see discourses and epistemologies around literacy play out in the lives of my friends and family members. I have many family members who were not successful in school and who have been taught to define themselves as less than educated even though they have deep funds (Gonzales, Moll, & Amante, 2005) of cultural knowledge and of place. For me, this debate is not about other people's children (Delpit, 1996). While the standpoint of Stockard is less clear, Engelmann has a clear commercial interest in the promotion of a reading program that I think you have critiqued very well in terms of its effects on pedagogy and teaching practice. I want to reemphasize and agree with what you have said above that rural spaces represent an important market for programmed instruction in an age of standardized testing and policies without borders.

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