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## Other People's Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy

Ryan Shadle

*Urban Appalachian Council Educator*

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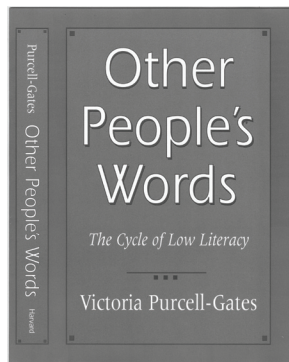
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*Other People's Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy.*  
 Purcell-Gates, Victoria. Cambridge: Harvard  
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Reviewed by Ryan Shadle  
 ryanshadle@yahoo.com  
 Urban Appalachian Council Educator,  
 Cincinnati, Ohio

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*“They ain’t gonna do my kid like they done me and his dad!” she protested. “They know he can’t read, but they’re just gonna pass him on. That don’t do no good, I know!”*

These are the words of Jenny, mother of Donny who, despite being able only to read and write his name, had just been promoted to the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Jenny and husband “Big” Donny possess what Victoria Purcell-Gates calls “low literate ability” and are effectively unable to communicate with the school through print. When Jenny tries to communicate orally with Donny’s teachers, they react harshly, as the author recalls a particular interaction in which the instructor exclaims, “I knew she [Jenny] was ignorant as soon as she opened her mouth!” (37). Thus, Jenny turns to the local university literacy center for help, which at the time was run by Purcell-Gates. This scenario reflects a familiar situation in which literacy workers are often faced with assisting community members in adapting to the literacies of mainstream institutions.

As this special issue of the *Community Literacy Journal* commemorates the work of Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways With Words* (1983) and her work in the Appalachian region, it is fitting here to revisit a similar study concerning a group that shares a similar cultural identity yet does not reside in the actual physical boundaries of Appalachia. Victoria Purcell-Gates’ *Other People’s Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy* introduces us to a cultural group named urban Appalachians, which some have labeled an *invisible minority*.

While many tend to think of a space defined by its boundaries as home to Appalachians, one cannot overlook the phenomenon referred to as the Great Migration. From 1940-1970 the Appalachian region witnessed an exodus of nearly seven million residents who migrated to Midwestern cities such as Cleveland, Detroit, Columbus,

and Cincinnati. The social impact that would be felt in these destination cities would test many social institutions and communities in their ability to assist and coexist with these newcomers. One city in particular, Cincinnati, would define its urban Appalachian population as a *social problem*. While most of these urban Appalachians would navigate their way out of the city's traditional port-of-entry for migrants and immigrants alike and into middle-class suburban areas, a significant portion established themselves in surrounding lower-income communities. Many of these families would enter a public school system that would fail (or perhaps refuse is a more fair assessment) to acknowledge any cultural difference among a population that seemingly resembled the majority group. School dropout rates have continued to plague the future of many urban Appalachian community members. The fourth edition of the *Social Areas of Cincinnati* report by Michael E. Maloney and Christopher Auffrey reported specific data about education in Cincinnati urban Appalachian neighborhoods: "If the city wide dropout rate now approaches 40-50 percent, we believe that rates in some areas must be approaching 100 percent."

Purcell-Gates tells the story of a family living in one of Cincinnati's urban Appalachian communities. All members of this family are what she calls "a low-caste group and virtually non-literate" (1). They surprise Purcell-Gates, and she is nearly in disbelief that the family possesses almost no literate ability. She claims, "Although I had devoted over twenty years to helping children and adults who have experienced problems learning to read and write, I had never before encountered a totally nonliterate family" (14-15). After confirming the family's "non-literacy," she initiates a socio-cultural research investigation to understand this family's worldview to see what has caused their low-literacy. Purcell-Gates recognizes that because Jenny and her husband cannot read, they are unable to communicate with the school through notes and homework sent home with Donny. Jenny explains to the school that she cannot read, yet the school does not alter its communication pattern with the family. Purcell-Gates acts as a liaison at times to communicate on behalf of Jenny at the school. For example, when they try to pass Donny on to the third grade while he is still far behind the others, the school ignores Jenny until Purcell-Gates talks to the school, and they decide to hold him back.

To help the family, Purcell-Gates takes on the role of both teacher and researcher. She agrees to work with both Jenny and Donny at the University of Cincinnati's Literacy Center, which she directed at the time. In turn, the author hoped to identify what factors contribute to low-literate ability in lower socioeconomic communities. Purcell-Gates explains, "The case of Jenny and Donny helps us look at the phenomenon of low literacy achievement of peoples from poor, minority, low-literate communities" (179). She detects that for Jenny's family, a lack of print in their home contributed to Donny's inexperience with its use as required by the educational system. As an emergent literacy researcher, Purcell-Gates notes that "literate abilities and stances emerge developmentally as children observe and engage in experiences mediated by print in their daily lives" (7). She goes on to suggest that perhaps the differing values that various segments of the population place on exposing preschool children to print may help explain the disparities in education that exist between various socioeconomic classes.

Purcell-Gates insists that both past and present efforts to explain the inconsisten-

cies in literacy levels among various socioeconomic groups can no longer be viewed from a deficit perspective. In other words, it is unproductive simply to view these discrepancies from a deficit perspective which attempts to explain the “overall failure of low socioeconomic status minority populations” because of deficient cognitive abilities, poor motivation, deficient language, devaluation of education, or poor parenting skills, to name a few (2). Instead, she tells us that we must view these groups through a *sociocultural* lens. This perspective holds that varying language patterns between socioeconomic groups reflect community use and norms and that the resulting “dialects and registers must be judged by their effectiveness in varying contexts” (4). She explains, “By employing a sociocultural lens that allows us to see them as cultural beings whose identities and perceptions reflect the nested cultural contexts of ethnic heritage, education/literacy level, gender, and socioeconomic status, we gain insights into the ways they perceive the literate world and the world of school” (179). It is through this sociocultural approach to literacy that one hopes to alleviate the ethnocentricism which seemingly dominates our educational system, as represented by policy makers and teachers alike.

This book supports the idea that while community literacy seeks to assist individuals outside of mainstream institutions in developing their literacy skills, it should not be ignored that oftentimes the learner’s purpose is to utilize these skills to function in mainstream settings. As Purcell-Gates’ work with Jenny and Donny takes place in a literacy center, which is considered out of the mainstream, her goal is to get Donny up to the level he needs to be according to formal educational standards. As previously mentioned, Jenny, who was also of “low-literate” ability, needed to be able to decode written forms of communication from Donny’s school as well as be able to help her son with homework. Thus, she needed to understand the institution’s form of literacy to help him achieve the acceptable level of reading and writing expected of children his age. Jeffrey Grabill tells us that “community literacies cannot be separated from the literacies necessary to be successful in more structured social institutions like workplaces and schools” (3). Again, while the argument over what constitutes literacy persists, what we cannot overlook is the fact that to function in a world where institutions create their own forms of literacy, individuals must be able to navigate through various social contexts such as schools, workplace, or social service agencies. Grabill further asserts, “It seems clear that certain communities and groups of people lack the literacies necessary to function successfully within various social institutions like schools, government agencies, and workplaces” (6).

Although we commonly understand “community literacy” as the domain for literacy work that exists outside mainstream educational and work institutions, it is important not to overlook the fact that mainstream institutions overwhelmingly dictate or create their own literacies. What we learn from *Other People’s Words* is that in order for people of *any* socioeconomic level to be able to function within these institutions, it is vital that all be able to adopt multiple literacies. Purcell-Gates’ work asks us to reflect on the following question: If those in the field of literacy studies are to help promote effective social change in an era that is witnessing an even more standardized practice of measuring literate ability (e.g., No Child Left Behind), then why shouldn’t we be obligated to make sure that community members are able to adopt the literacies of the institutions that greatly affect the day-to-day activities of life in the U.S.? This is where

Purcell-Gates' work becomes an important mouthpiece. Expecting people to become familiar with the literacies of even the most hegemonic institutions is not ethnocentric. We could argue that in order to begin to reverse these forces one must, as they say, "know thy enemy."

## Works Cited

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