

**Refereed Article**

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***Adult Literacy and Poverty  
Alleviation: From Workforce  
Investment to Community Organizing***

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**Abstract**

The authors of this paper agree with critics that it is unrealistic to expect adult literacy programs (indeed any educational program), by themselves, to alleviate poverty. But it seems reasonable to expect that adult literacy has an economic contribution to make. Grounding our work in an analysis of adult literacy programs that are funded by the United States Workforce Investment Act of 1998, this paper offers three strategies that might expand adult literacy's role in poverty reduction: turning literacy programs into community organizations; creating networks of community organizations; and focusing on doing, not learning.

**Part I: Introduction**

The paper is divided into three parts. This section (Part I) outlines a theoretical framework for examining the relationship between literacy and poverty reduction. Part II describes and assesses the impact of a federally-funded literacy program (i.e., programs funded by the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) on poverty alleviation. We conclude that as a poverty reduction strategy, WIA-funded programs are a miserable failure. Part III offers suggestions to improve literacy's impact on poverty reduction.

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Several theories have been advanced to explain the relationship between education and economic mobility. Two conventional rivals are human capital (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1975) and the screening hypothesis (Berg, 1972; Arrow, 1973; Layard & Psacharopoulos, 1974). In its early formulation in the 1960s, human capital theory used to posit that education serves only or mostly a qualifying function; i.e., its primary function is to confer on individuals' skills needed by a society and economy. By contrast, advocates of the screening hypothesis believe that education is a filter, or screen, by which innate talent is identified. Accordingly, the purpose of education is seen as confirmation of an individual's capacity to be trained on the job rather than the conferring of skills to a worker. Human capital theory was seen as an alternative to the screening hypothesis, and vice versa. Marginson (1993) contends, however, that in its current formulation, human capital theory has incorporated elements of the screening hypothesis—i.e., contemporary human capital theorists give credence to the screening function of education.

It seems to us that education can and does serve both functions (screening and qualifying). The extent of its qualifying and screening functions depends on the nature of the job, the nature of the particular educational enterprise, and prevailing social and economic conditions. Moreover, we suspect that any attempt to fit particular educational practices into one or more of these theories would lead to a form of reductionism that would conceal more than reveal. So in the pages that follow, we take a different tact. We identify three broad sets of issues every educational practice must address if it were to alleviate poverty.

In order to lift the poor out of poverty, an economy must produce an adequate supply of good-paying jobs (adequate labor demand), there must be an adequate pool of quality persons to fill those jobs (adequate labor supply) and proper mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that individuals get what they deserve (allocation and legitimation). In modern societies such as the United States, it is possible to find pockets in which the labor demand (job supply) outstrips labor supply. However, more often than not, total labor supply tends to outstrip total labor demand—resulting in constant (if fluctuating) unemployment and underemployment. In fact, so pervasive is the unemployment phenomenon just described, that the United States government defines full employment as 95% employment (Rizzo, 2006). But five percent of the U.S. labor force is a lot of people. For instance, the Census Bureau (2005) estimates that there were 147 million people in the civilian labor force in 2005; 5% of that would be 7.35 million, a number greater than the entire population of the English-speaking Caribbean (CIA, 2006). Moreover, employment by itself

does not guarantee escape from poverty. According to the American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005), there were approximately 8.5 million people (5.8% of the labor force) who were employed and living below the poverty threshold (working poor) in 2005.

Increasing the supply of qualified labor without increasing the supply of good-paying jobs would result in merely changing the faces of the poor (Bluestone, 1977; Paci, 1977; Thurow, 1977). Furthermore, increasing the supply of good-paying jobs without tackling the issues of allocation and legitimation may result in rampant job discrimination practices. Any policy that hopes to alleviate poverty must therefore attend seriously to the structural features of the economy just described. To ground the rest of our paper, we turn now to an analysis of literacy programs that are funded by the United States federal government.

## **Part II: Adult Literacy and Poverty Alleviation in the United States**

In the United States, public funds for adult literacy are provided under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA, 1998). WIA replaced the Jobs and Training Partnership Act (JTPA), which expired in July 2000, and specifies separate funding streams for three categories of participants: adults, dislocated workers and youths (Frank, Rahmanou & Savner, 2003). This study focuses on the group defined as adults, i.e., persons 18 and older. Under WIA, members of this group are eligible to receive three levels of services—core, intensive and training. Core and intensive services are intended to provide job readiness and job preparation attitudes, knowledge, skills, and opportunities. Training includes on-the-job training and adult basic education (see Table 1 for a break down of services).

To analyze WIA's performance, we drew upon data from the *PY 2003 WIASRD Data Book* produced by Social Policy Research Associates (2005), and the *PY 2003 Annual Report* produced by the U.S. Department of Labor (2004c). Data on poverty were drawn largely from *A Profile of the Working Poor, 2003* (U.S. DOL, March, 2005); supplemented by U.S. Census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004b, 2004c) and by information obtained from the web site of the Center for Law and Social Policy (Frank & Minoff, 2005; Frank, Rahmanou, & Savner, 2003). Most of these sources provided raw data which we analyzed<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Inquiries regarding the detailed methodology may be directed to the first author.

Table 1  
Services Provided Under Workforce Investment Act of 1998

| Category of Service | Assistance Provided   | Eligibility Requirements   |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Core                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Job search and placement assistance</li> <li>- Labor market information</li> <li>- Initial assessment of skills and needs</li> <li>- Information about available jobs</li> </ul>   | None: Available to all adults  |
| Intensive           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Comprehensive assessments</li> <li>- Development of individual employment plans</li> <li>- Group and individual counseling</li> <li>- Case management</li> <li>- Short-term pre-vocational services</li> </ul>   | Unemployed adults who to find employment with core services alone            |
| Training            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Training services which are directly linked to job opportunities in their local area</li> <li>- Occupational skills training</li> <li>- On-the-job training</li> <li>- Entrepreneurial training</li> <li>- Skill upgrading</li> <li>- Job readiness training</li> <li>- Adult education and literacy activities</li> </ul> | Unemployed adults who are unable to find employment after intensive services |

Source: Workforce Investment Act of 1998

Based on our analysis of those data, we estimated that approximately 66,648 adults with less than a high school diploma<sup>2</sup>, from low-income families enrolled in WIA adult streams in 2003 (that's roughly 2 in every 100 of the eligible 2.73 million). Most of those who entered the program received job readiness and/or job preparation services (core and intensive services). Only 46% of those who exited the program receive training; and for the vast majority of those receiving training (92%) the focus was occupational or on-the-job training. Only a small minority (9.4%) received additional basic skills training (general education). Of those exiting the program, 64.2% received employment, and of those receiving employment, none seemed to have earned enough to pull a family of four *half way* out of poverty<sup>3</sup>. Add to this story that the program was able to enroll less than 0.2% of the targeted population, and a pretty dismal picture is painted regarding the program's current contribution to poverty alleviation. Our assessment supports the findings of other researchers and commentators (Cheng, 2002; Hawkins, 2005; Lafer, 1994; Sheared, McCabe, & Umeki, 2000). For example, a comprehensive examination of the JTPA program—the predecessor of WIA—revealed that the program “had no statistically significant results whatsoever” for workers in the bottom two-thirds of the labor force (Lafer, Para. 18; Orr, 1994).

### ***Explaining the Failure of WIA-Funded Programs***

Human capital investment is the strategy employed by WIA-funded programs to reduce poverty. It is a strategy which treats poverty as largely a literacy crisis; requiring the poor to simply gain marketable skills—defined as skills, attitudes and dispositions that employers want (Baptiste, 2001; Lafer, 1999). Assuming an adequate supply and equitable distribution of good-paying jobs, the strategy is to recruit and train individuals to fill *existing* vacant positions. In many cases, these individuals are required to travel to centers (and workplaces) outside of their communities to receive training. We shall discuss three problems associated with this human capital investment approach: (1) obstacles to enrollment are not adequately addressed; (2) the curriculum is too narrowly focused; and (3) the program ignores structural economic constraints (related to the supply, allocation and legitimation of jobs and wages).

<sup>2</sup> We focused on persons with less than a high school diploma because, as an educational category, they tend to experience greater and longer periods of poverty than other educational groups (U.S. DOL, March, 2005; Carrington & Fallick, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The 2003 federal poverty threshold of \$18,660.00 for a family of four was used to calculate poverty rates.

### ***Inadequate Treatment of Obstacles to Enrollment***

Based on his review of empirical research, Quigley (1997) has concluded that “even the ‘hardest to reach’ do want an education” (p. 191). Moreover, Quigley contends that “after decades of continuous literacy campaigning and recruiting, . . . we must conclude that the vast majority of low-literate adults [in the United States] are no longer unaware of program opportunities” (p. 192). Why then have so few eligible adults enrolled in WIA-funded programs in 2003? To begin to address this question, let us consider more closely some of the features of our target population—members of the labor force, 18-64, with less than a high school diploma, from low income families. Regarding recruitment, Quigley divides members of our target population into three types of resisters<sup>4</sup>: personal/emotive, ideological/cultural, and older resisters. Personal/emotive resisters are adults who still bear the scars of personally traumatic experiences with schooling. In addition to the general trauma experienced by the first group, ideological/cultural resisters also experience issues related to their marginal status. African Americans, for instance, refer to the school as “a white world” or “for white men.” Older resisters are persons over 50 who regard literacy as a matter of little significance. For this third group, the valued-added is questionable (Quigley, 1997, pp. 210-214). The only systematic recruitment strategy offered by WIA-funded programs is subsidized child care and transportation. Through group and individual counseling and case management some programs provide additional moral and social support (Sheared, McCabe, & Umeki, 2000) but no systematic attempt is made to tackle the institutional and psychological barriers described by Quigley. It is not surprising, therefore, that so few prospective participants show up.

### ***Curricular Myopia***

Recall that only 46% of our target population who exited the program received training; and for most of them (92%) the focus was occupational or on-the-job training; only a small minority (9.4%) received additional basic skills training (general education). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that workers between ages 18 and 38 change jobs on average 10 times during their lifetime (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). A job change is defined as “the switch from one employer to another or a

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<sup>4</sup> The term “resisters” seems inappropriate to describe persons who, by Quigley’s admission, want an education. But, so as not to be sidetracked, we will stick with the term for now.

switch from one occupation to another while working for the same employer” (ibid). If the screening hypothesis has any validity, it seems reasonable to conclude that a good general education would go a long way in serving WIA participants who, in all likelihood, would change jobs several times during their lifetime. Indeed, this case has been strongly made by critics of WIA-funded programs (Amstutz & Sheared, 2000; Martin & Fisher, 1999a; Martin & Rogers, 2004; Sandlin, 2004). To increase job prospects, these critics argue for an increase in the length of training; an expansion of the curriculum objectives to include a solid general education and critical literacy; and a restructuring of the curriculum to seriously incorporate the personal, cultural and historical contexts of the learners. Building on the works of Paulo Freire, critical literacy educators have provided valuable suggestions on how to broaden, deepen, and make more culturally relevant the literacy curriculum (Freire, 1970, 1973; Dirkx, 1999; Guy, 2004; Isaac, 2004; Martin, 1999b; Martin & Rogers, 2004; Rogers & Hansman, 2004).

#### *Ignoring Structural Economic Constraints*

The design of WIA-funded programs does not include any systematic attempt to tackle the structural features of the economy described in our introduction. No provision is made in the program’s design to address the creation, allocation, or legitimation of jobs or wages. One reason for this seeming negligence is a market fundamentalism which leaves the structural regulation of the economy up to the forces of supply, demand and price (Becker, 1976). Under market fundamentalism, education’s role is merely that of a supplier of labor. But empirical evidence suggests that when matters are left up to the invisible hand of the market, the economy tends to produce a limited supply of good paying jobs, and parcels them out on the basis of race, class, gender, and luck (Bluestone, 1977). Looking back over a 15-year period (1984-1996), Lafer (1999) has noted that the number of U.S. residents seeking non-supervisory jobs consistently outstripped the supply of decent-paying jobs—by estimates ranging from 7:1 to 25:1 (para. 11). Moreover, his research shows that non-supervisory jobs (i.e., those that do not require a college degree) are estimated to make up close to 70% of all jobs in the coming decades. In fact, it was estimated that in 1995 approximately 10% of college graduates were working in jobs that did not require a college degree. This trend is expected to continue (para. 13). Lafer’s analysis leads him to conclude that education’s role in the structural transformation of the economy is

insignificant at best. For meaningful structural change he turns to political mobilization instead. On the matter he writes:

We all know how wage increases were achieved in the “old” economy – workers organised and went on strike, child labour was banned and the minimum wage established, discrimination was outlawed and comparable worth pursued. While education certainly played an important role in the rising standards of living, the most important wage gains were won through political battles over the institutions of the labour market (para. 34).

Critical literacy educator Jennifer Sandlin (2004) was only a tad bit more optimistic regarding education’s role in the structural transformation of the economy. Drawing upon findings from a case study of two welfare-to-work educational programs, Sandlin cautions that although education has some role to play in economic opportunities, it should not be promoted as the sole answer to economic troubles. Moreover, argues Sandlin, simply problematizing the literacy-earning relationship will not solve the problem of structural unemployment. “Education alone cannot be expected to solve problems that are fundamentally structural in nature. Along with education must come changes in the structure of employment and access to social and economic capital” (Sandlin, 2004, p. 102).

We agree wholehearted with Lafer and Sandlin that education, by itself, cannot effect the structural changes in the economy need to significantly alleviate poverty. Both authors seem to imply, however, that education could only affect the supply of labor. That is to say, education could only serve to increase or decrease the pool of qualified job applicants, but it could do nothing to change the pool of available jobs, or the allocation and legitimation of jobs and wages. In short, education may serve only to increase the stock of human capital (Schultz, 1961) but it has no role to play in job creation or political mobilizing. In the concluding section we suggest a more expanded role for education.

### **Part III: Alternative to Human Capital Investment**

Our discussion of alternatives is guided by three questions: (1) How useful is the current conceptualization of poverty and what are reasonable alternatives? (2) What is education’s role in a new conceptualization of poverty and poverty alleviation? (3) Given education’s role, how might adult literacy professionals and practitioners proceed?

***How Useful is the Current Conceptualization of Poverty and What are the Alternatives?***

The way in which a problem is defined determines, in large measure, what solutions are sought. In the dominant conception of poverty (what we shall refer to as the economic view) an entity such as a person, household, family, city or nation is considered poor if its earnings fall below a certain monetary threshold. Within this economic camp there are serious differences over how to measure the monetary threshold, but the validity of monetary thresholds as indicators of poverty is not seriously challenged (Fisher, 1992). Measures to increase earnings are, quite naturally, the primary solution to poverty offered by proponents of the economic approach.

A competing camp (which we shall refer to as the human development camp) questions the validity of monetary thresholds as sufficient indicators of poverty (Nussbaum, 1999; WHO, 1986). This camp prefers indices that provide more substantive information about people's basic need for health, safety, and human dignity. Two important features distinguish the human development approach from the economic approach: (1) income generation is not viewed as the only poverty reduction measure. Non-monetary activities that would sustain health, safety, and human dignity are also considered. (2) Unlike the economic approach that advocates a one-size-fits-all measure, the human development approach seeks contextually-grounded measures. The authors of this paper subscribe to the human development approach because they believe that it not only offers more options to poverty reduction; moreover, the options it offers are also more realistic and sustainable.

***What is education's role in a human development approach to poverty reduction?***

Most educational economists subscribe to the narrow, human capital investment role of education. Indeed, in the economics of education literature, education is often used as a synonym for human capital (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1976). Adult literacy professionals and practitioners also seem to accept this limited view of education's role. Disagreements exist over what forms of human capital education should produce (e.g., whether to provide a general basic education—such as reading, writing and arithmetic, more job specific skills, or a more critical literacy that involves the ability to “read ones’ world”); and over where education should “sell”

its commodity (e.g., to the paid workforce, to the government machinery, to social service agencies, to religious institutions, and so on). But few adult literacy professionals and practitioners see a role for education beyond that of labor *supplier*. Dykstra and Law (1994) see a narrow definition of education as a compelling reason for the limited role education is accorded. Writing on this issue in relationship to education's role in popular social movements, Dykstra and Law (1994) have noted that,

Although adult educators usually try to define [education] in ways that extend beyond the limits of schooling, they are nevertheless inclined to restrict its use to activities that are somehow recognizably 'educational' in form as well as intent (e.g., Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). In other words, 'schooling' remains, even if at times quite subtly, as the implied norm or main point of reference (p. 121).

Dykstra and Law remind us that this narrow conception of education is not warranted. Citing Raymond Williams they point to a broader conception with which adult education has long been associated. This broader notion, rooted in a radical democratic tradition, conceptualizes education as something that is 'ordinary' (Dykstra & Law, p. 121). Education is conceived as a "process of human formation in society" and is understood to work in two ways:

First, it recognizes that the world in which people live and all the activities that take place within it are inherently educative; thus the terrain of education encompasses all sites of 'formative influences' (Simon, 1984, p. 37): the family, the school, the church, the club, the workplace, the union, and so forth. Second, it recognizes that within the context of everyday life there are specific activities through which a society and groups within it intentionally try to influence the way others learn to interpret the world and to develop the skills to live within it or to change it (Dykstra & Law, p. 121).

Education, so conceived, is an important factor in any political struggle. Indeed, it is safe to assume that "ordinary education" was integral to the success of the political struggles mentioned by Lafer and alluded to by Sandlin, e.g., the establishment of organized labor, minimum wages, and comparable worth; or the outlawing of discriminatory labor practices. The question then is not whether education has a role to play in the

structural transformation of the economy and society, but rather what is education's role; and, given prevailing conditions, how might education best fulfill this role? We cannot provide a definitive answer to these questions but we offer suggestions to guide literacy scholars and practitioners.

### *The Role of Education in Structural Transformation*

To address this issue we must distinguish different forms of capital. To do so requires a discussion of the relationship between poverty, earnings (income) and wealth. We agree with Fisher (1906) that wealth refers to objects that are *owned* and that are exchangeable for goods and services, whereas earnings (or income) are benefits derived from ownership. Both wealth and earnings are owned, but an important distinction between the two is that wealth is a means of production; productive in the sense that it always has the potential to yield services (e.g., earnings or income) in the future. In other words, wealth is needed to create earnings. According to Fisher, the term capital refers to a stock of wealth existing at an instant in time. So what is true of wealth is also true of capital: it is needed to create earnings.

There is a disagreement regarding the number and types of capital that exists. For instance, Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) each identify three forms, but only social capital is common to both. Bourdieu's typology consists of economic, cultural and social capital, whereas Coleman identifies physical, human and social. Their categories, however, overlap. For instance, there are elements of physical capital in Bourdieu's notion of economic capital; and elements of cultural capital in Coleman's notion of social capital. Both authors agree that capital is a means of production, and that the forms are inter-convertible, i.e., each form may be converted to the others. Bourdieu also stresses that capital is accumulated labor, highlighting both its symbolic and material aspects, its subjective and objective dimensions.

Adapting both typologies, we discuss four forms of capital: physical, human, social, and cultural. Our aim is not to produce a comprehensive typology, but to hint at how education might be employed to produce multiple forms of capital. For us, physical capital refers to land, air, water, machinery, technology, money, etc., that people own or have access to. Human capital refers to knowledge, skills and attitudes people possess. "Social capital is the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized

relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition—in other words, to membership in a group” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). It refers, not merely to the connections that people inherit or foster, but also to the resources, power and privilege those connections bring. Coleman reminds us that social capital is lodged neither in the actors themselves (that would be human capital) nor in physical implements of production (that would be physical capital). Unlike physical and human capital, “social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors” (Coleman, p. S98), and these actors may be individuals or groups. Social capital creates opportunities for us to use our physical and human capital. Without access to social capital our physical and human capital remains barren and/or under-utilized.

Cultural capital refers to mechanisms of legitimation. These mechanisms afford (or deny) individuals and groups the power to legitimate their artifacts, i.e., the fruits of their collective labor. Those artifacts include that group’s language, music, art, indigenous knowledge and practices, and so on. Not all languages are created equal; not all music, not all art, not all social practices are created equal. For instance, European classical music is deemed superior to soul or calypso, not because it is demonstrated to be functionally superior—but because it is created by a group of persons whose legitimating mechanisms render their artifacts, ipso facto, superior.

Whereas social capital increases or decreases access to existing sets of resources and power relations; cultural capital changes the definition of resources and the source’s power. Social capital has the potential to change the quantity and distribution of resources in society; but it does not alter what counts as a resource or the worth of that resource. Put differently, social capital can change the size of the pie and the way the pie is distributed, but it cannot alter the pie’s essential ingredients or the esteem in which a particular pie is held; changing the ingredients and altering the esteem are the domains of cultural capital. To illustrate, social capital (along with physical and human capital) may help to increase the amount of goods and services available to particular groups of individuals; it may also help to redistribute those goods and services. But social capital cannot change the definition of what counts as good or a service, nor can it alter the worth of particular goods or services. We believe that “ordinary education” has always played a role in creating and distributing all four forms of capital.

***A Role for Education Beyond Human Capital Formation***

Educational institutions know how to help learners produce human capital. The challenge is to help them produce human capital that holds the greatest productive potential; and to help them produce the other forms of capital as well. In the remainder of the paper we discuss three broad strategies that literacy professionals might pursue to broaden education's role beyond human capital formation: turning literacy programs into community organizations; creating networks of community organizations; and focusing on doing, not learning. We stress that our suggestions are strategic, not tactical.

*Turning literacy programs into community organizations.* Research shows that organizations that are organically tied to local communities (i.e., community organizations) are more effective at recruiting, retaining, and meeting the needs of the "hard to reach" than organizations that are mechanistically and instrumentally linked to the community (Assoc. of Community Based Education, 1986; Isaac, 2004; Quigley, 1997; Sandlin, 2004). "Organic" is used here in the Gramscian sense (Gramsci, 1971/1949). Organic programs spring from, and are culturally and historically tied to, the localities in which the programs operate. Although local residency is desirable, it is neither a necessary nor sufficient indicator of an organic tie. To be an organic program, the owners and managers must not merely live in the locality; they must be culturally and historically tied to the locality. To be organic, residents of the local community must view their well-being and the well-being of the program's owners and managers as integrally related. Because organic programs spring from the experiences, interactions, and needs of local residents, they are ideally suited to recruiting, retaining and meeting the needs of local residents.

*Creating networks of community organizations.* In the war on poverty, expectations of sweeping programmatic and policy changes (i.e., revolutionary changes) at the state and/or national levels seem a bit unrealistic (Fox & Starn, 1997). For one thing, such large scale interventions assume that the problems of poverty are homogeneous across state and nation—resulting in cookie-cutter responses that ignore important local differences. Moreover, the political power needed to change state and national policies and practices has to be built from the ground up; it cannot be imposed from on high. Single entities (whether they be individuals or organizations) cannot, by themselves, effect the

structural changes needed to reduce poverty because individual efforts ignore structural impediments—resulting in responses that blame the victims. Between individual resistance and mass revolution are a range of possibilities for organization and organizing (Fox & Starn, 1997). A crucial task, then, in the war on poverty is to build and strengthen networks of local organizations. In addition to leveraging resources and power, these local and regional networks help to decrease competition among literacy providers for resources and students.

*Focus on doing, not learning.* Recall that the human development approach to poverty reduction raises substantive questions relating to people's need for health, safety and human dignity. Reframed this way, concern for participants' health, safety and dignity takes precedence over concern for income generation. Income-generating activities are pursued to the extent that they promote health, safety and human dignity. The focus is on developing a program that would help participants: a) think critically about what constitutes health, safety and dignity in their particular locale; b) identify resources, opportunities (including accessible groups and organizations) and challenges to the sustenance of their well-being; and c) devise strategies to take advantages of these resources and opportunities. All four forms of capital are needed to achieve these objectives; and the community organization acts as a conduit through which these resources are mobilized. Learning is an inevitable outcome of this process; certification may also be an outcome, but neither learning nor certification is a primary goal. Improvement in the health, safety and dignity of community residents is the driver.

### Conclusion

With human capital theory as our framework, we have argued that literacy programs framed as workforce investments are an inadequate strategy for alleviating poverty, particularly for persons who are severely economically disadvantaged. Such programs are based on the false premise that sufficient well-paying jobs exist for any person with the right set of skills. The federally-funded WIA program provides a good illustration of the inadequacy of workforce investment programs in assisting disadvantaged adults gain employment with wages high enough to get them out of poverty. We propose that for literacy programs to contribute to poverty alleviation, they have to play a role in transforming economic and political structures through community organizing.

The challenge then for professionals and practitioners is to transform literacy programs into robust community organizations—i.e., organizations that are organically connected to their communities; organizations whose focus is on doing something—i.e., on solving local problems (learning is a byproduct of such activities, not its goal); and organizations that appreciate their limitations, and therefore seek to build coalitions within and beyond their borders.

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