

# From Opportunity to Responsibility: Political Master Narratives, Social Policy, and Success Stories in Adult Literacy Education

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**Background and Context:** *The context for this study is the American legislative landscape covering the past 35 years, which witnessed a shift in political philosophies concerning the role of government in ensuring the social welfare of its citizens—from a focus on a “safety net” to a focus on “individual responsibility.” We frame these contrasting political philosophies as political master narratives; these narratives shape the ways particular groups in society are perceived, help craft social policy, and have a profound impact on “local narratives,” which are more restricted in scope, are more contextually bound, and seek to make sense of lived experience in a particular domain. The specific local narratives we considered in this study are the “student success stories” told in adult literacy programs, which are distributed to legislators in hopes of influencing policy and funding decisions. We sought to understand the connection between political master narratives and the local narratives of adult literacy education.*

**Research Design:** *Data consisted of 257 stories published from 1978 through 2005. We used Burke’s method of pentadic criticism to examine act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose within the stories. Of special interest was how these elements changed across time, revealing the impact of the dominant political discourse on the telling of those stories. Of particular*

interest was how actor and agency are portrayed, because political discourse is most visible in the construction of the individual and in how the individual is able to act.

**Findings:** Four of Burke's elements remain constant across both sets of stories—agent, scene, act, and purpose; the only one that changes is agency, or the means used to achieve the act. The agent is the adult literacy learner, and the scene consists of his or her particular life circumstances, which involve hardships of various kinds. The act is the achievement of his or her education goals. The purpose of the act is obtaining a better life, employment, and increased self-esteem. It is in agency, or the means used to achieve the act, that we see a distinct change between the two groups of stories. In the earlier stories, agency is clearly and unambiguously the program. In the later stories, however, agency changes dramatically. The programs recede into the background and often disappear altogether; instead, it is the learners who do the work and who are responsible for their own success.

**Conclusion:** We have shown how adult literacy educators have, in the stories they tell, embraced dominant political ideologies and are currently telling stories focused increasingly on self-sufficiency and the ability of adult literacy learners to “lift themselves up by their bootstraps.” This is a cause for concern because it works to undermine the practice of adult education itself. The challenge to us as a field is not only to understand how dominant discourses speak themselves through us but also, more important, to find ways to subvert them by putting ourselves back into our own narratives of educational practice, thus preserving and serving the interests of adult education.

Of course, people cannot contribute to the Nation if they are never taught to read or write, if their bodies are stunted from hunger, if their sickness goes untended, if their life is spent in hopeless poverty just drawing a welfare check. So we want to open the gates to *opportunity*. But we are also going to give all our people . . . the *help that they need* to walk through those gates.

— President Lyndon B. Johnson, Special Message to the Congress, March 15, 1965, emphasis added

We've actually changed the whole culture from *dependency to self-sufficiency*. And, by doing that, the welfare rolls have declined dramatically and the country's better off for it. But, more importantly, so are the human beings. It's so easy to get caught up in statistics, and forget about behind each number is a person. And today, I have the honor of talking about . . . the human stories, the real-life stories of people that have overcome incredible obstacles . . . Many people have been moved from dependency upon government to work . . . The system worked, but in order for that to happen, it requires a will, a *personal determination*. Some person has to say, I can do better and want to do better . . . The ability for somebody to realize kind of an *independent life*,

less dependent upon government.

— President George W. Bush, Remarks to the Chamber of Commerce, Charlotte, NC, February 27, 2002, emphasis added

The juxtaposition of the voices of the two presidents quoted above, arising from different historical eras, provides us not only with a dramatic example of how much the American political landscape has changed since 1965 but also with the articulation of two dramatically different visions of the role of government and the position of social welfare; they, in short, represent two different *political master narratives*. The liberal philosophy that drove Lyndon Johnson and gave rise to the Great Society—which can also be seen in President Kennedy’s social welfare policies, and in President Nixon’s proposed Family Assistance Plan—saw government as responsible for the welfare of all its people, with particular responsibility to help those in greatest need. In 1964, President Johnson argued that “the Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time” (Sticht, 2002, p. 33). In this political master narrative, government has an essential role to play and a moral obligation to be activist. The conservative philosophy of George W. Bush—which also crosses traditional party lines and appeared, for example, in social welfare policies championed by President Clinton—on the other hand, believes strongly in a limited role for government and expanded freedom for individual and private enterprise. In a recent speech, President George W. Bush stated,

Government doesn’t create wealth. Government creates an environment that encourages capital flows and investment. I really believe the most important aspect of government is to react to problems and encourage the entrepreneurial spirit. I really want it to be said, America is entrepreneurial heaven. It’s a great place to take risk and to realize your dreams. (Bush, 2007)

In President George W. Bush’s philosophy, government is portrayed as limiting personal freedom, and the market is relied upon instead to structure social, political, and economic life (Denzin, 1991; Giroux, 2003, 2004; McLaren, 1995; Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2004; Pozo, 2005).

We frame these contrasting political philosophies as master narratives because of the analytical value of this concept for understanding how societies function. As Mishler (1995) argued,

Master narratives define rights and duties and incorporate the values of dominant social and political groups. Their unexamined taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world is and ought to be conceal patterns of domination and submission. Like all narratives, these are selective representations, excluding experiences and views of some sectors of society while including and privileging others. (p. 114)

Master narratives thus seek to establish what constitutes normative experience, and their power, as Andrews (2002) noted, “derives from their internalization. Wittingly or unwittingly, we become the stories we know, and the master narrative is reproduced” (p. 1). Thus, narrative depictions, argued Gring-Pemble (2003), are *constitutive*, in the sense that they both imply an ideal audience and commit that audience to behave “in accordance with the narrative logic inherent in the depictions” (p. 10). That is, narratives embody certain ideologies and ways of acting in the world. Charland (1987) explained that “the form of an ideological rhetoric is effective because it is within the bodies of those it constitutes as subjects. . . . Ideology is material because subjects enact their ideology and reconstitute the material world in its image” (p. 143).

We focus specifically on political master narratives because they shape the ways in which particular groups in society are perceived, and they help craft social policy, which has both ideological and material consequences (Gring-Pemble, 2003). Political master narratives also embody and empower dominant social ideologies (Gring-Pemble). Political master narratives “create a particular kind of social world, with specified heroes and villains, deserving and undeserving people, and a set of public policies that are rationalized by the construction of social problems for which they become solutions” (Bennett & Edelman, 1985, p. 159). In addition, political master narratives help shape people’s views “of rationality, of objectivity, of morality, and of their conceptions of themselves and others” (p. 159). In short, these narratives help construct our subjectivities, that is, how we understand who we are.

Master narratives also have a profound impact on narratives that are more restricted in scope, or what we are calling “local narratives”; these narratives are more contextually bound and seek to make sense of lived experience in a particular domain. They are also more concrete, tied as they are to the here and now, to the stuff of everyday life. The particular domain we examine in this article is that of adult literacy education; we explore the connection between political master narratives and the local narratives of adult literacy education.

Whereas master narratives are abstract and somewhat diffuse, local nar-

ratives have characters and plots and settings, which is to say that they are recognizable and identifiable as stories. This is no small thing; story-making is a fundamentally human activity, as Fisher (1987) famously noted in his concept of humans as *homo narrans*, because narrative is how we create order out of the chaos of experience and render an interpretation of it. Likewise, the cultures within which we are embedded are constituted through narrative; Sarbin (1993) argued that we live in a “story-shaped world” that provides “libraries of plots . . . [that] help us interpret our own and other people’s experience” (p. 59). But it is Bruner (1986) who provides a way of conceptualizing the epistemological roots and thus the fundamental power of storytelling. He argues that there are two modes of thought, by which he means two ways of constructing meaning and understanding reality. The paradigmatic or logico-scientific mode of thought “deals in general causes, and in their establishment, and makes use of procedures to assure verifiable reference and to test for empirical truth” (p. 13). The narrative mode of thought, on the other hand, “deals in human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course” (p. 13). These two modes of thought are distinct and irreducible, and both can be used to convince and persuade, but “arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness” (p. 11). For Bruner, the power of narrative is located precisely in this “lifelikeness” because it engages the audience at the level of imagination, which is to say in the realm of lived experience. But Bruner cautions that stories are never innocent; they always have a specific purpose, a narrative intent embedded in the telling that is subject to interrogation and interpretation. Most compelling is the fact that stories convey a particular model of the world: “To tell a story was to issue an invitation not to be as the story is but to see the world as embodied in the story” (Bruner, 2002, p. 25).

The relationship between master narratives and local narratives is complex and multifaceted, and although many scholars of discourse analysis (see, for example, Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 2005) argue that language has ideological, political, and even moral intent, it is not our purpose to examine how those intentions are realized. Instead, our goal in this article is to illustrate the impact that political master narratives have on the production of local narratives in the context of adult literacy education and to explore the consequences of that impact. The specific local narratives we are considering in this article are the “success stories” told in adult literacy programs (Quigley, 1997). Such stories highlight successful adult literacy learners and are widely known throughout the field of adult literacy—almost every adult literacy educator has either heard these stories or has told them on occasion. Success stories chronicle the lives of

adult literacy learners who have been successful in literacy programs and have attained their personal, educational, or job-related goals. These stories are shared by keynote speakers at local, state, and national literacy conferences (often accompanied by appearances of the learners profiled in the stories), are printed on posters appearing as classroom decorations, are found in General Education Diploma (GED) promotional materials distributed to adult learners, and are used as examples in curriculum materials.

These stories are also distributed to legislators and other policy and funding decision makers through the medium of “legislative briefings” in hopes of influencing policy and funding decisions. Adult literacy programs, like most social programs, have to make a public case about their value and effectiveness. This need became even greater in recent years as the Bush administration repeatedly threatened to cut funding to adult literacy programs (Wedgeworth, 2005). Although statistics about adult literacy program productivity and educational outcomes provide quantitative evidence of program effectiveness and are persuasive at a rational level, they fall short of engaging people at the level of imagination and emotion (Quigley, 1997). That, instead, is the province of narrative. Stories are powerful modes of persuasion, and adult literacy educators have sought to use them to build the case for the effectiveness of their programs (Quigley).

However, these success stories are not neutral. Instead, like all narratives, they position adult literacy learners and programs in particular ways—with embedded ideological stances—for public and political consumption and scrutiny. These local narratives help to construct images of literacy education and of literacy learners that place “an indelible stamp on the entire field,” seep “into the consciousness of learners and practitioners” (Demetrian, 1999, pp. 163–164), and shape the ways in which the general public and politicians view adult literacy programs (Quigley, 1997). We argue that it is especially important to examine the connection between political master narratives and local narratives within the context of adult literacy education because these narratives are intricately tied to the struggle that adult literacy educators have long engaged in concerning how to position themselves and their practice vis-à-vis dominant ideologies enacted through adult literacy-related public policy (Quigley, 1997, 2001). Despite Quigley’s (1997) call for adult literacy educators to pay closer attention to how the field is perceived in society and how adult literacy educators help shape that perception, there has been little attempt within adult literacy education to critically examine the ways we portray ourselves and the learners in our programs. Quigley (1997) posited that the lack of critical analysis of these success stories is

tied to the taken-for-granted notion among adult literacy educators that these narratives help garner financial support from policy makers.

Furthermore, there has been little attention paid to the influences that political master narratives have on success stories. Researchers within adult literacy education have typically argued that political master narratives influence adult literacy classroom practices (Catalfamo, 1998; Gowen, 1992; Gowen & Bartlett, 1997; Katz, 1997; Sandlin, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2003–2004, 2004a, 2004b; Sandlin & Cervero, 2003; Sparks, 1999; St. Clair, 2004; St. Clair & Sandlin, 2004; Wickens & Sandlin, 2007), providing particular frameworks on the world and templates of what it means to be a good “student,” “worker,” “family member,” and “citizen.” What is lacking is research exploring the impact that political master narratives have on local narratives, such as the success stories that educators create and circulate within adult literacy education. In this article, then, we critically examine these success stories to illustrate the links between them and the political master narratives within which they are situated and to examine the consequences of this linkage. The purpose of this study is to explore the success stories told about adult learners by adult literacy educators. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) What is the nature of these success stories? and (2) How do these success stories intersect with political master narratives? Examining these stories will help illuminate the political master narratives embedded in the local narratives of adult literacy education and will help adult literacy educators critically reflect on their role in perpetuating or perhaps challenging these dominant political master narratives. To address those questions, we first track the impact of the shifting political master narratives on legislation in two related areas, welfare reform and adult literacy, and then discuss our research.

#### TRACKING THE SHIFT IN POLITICAL MASTER NARRATIVES

This study is located within the American legislative landscape covering approximately the past 35 years. The political master narratives of that period are, broadly, the shifting discourses concerning the role of government, particularly in ensuring the social welfare of its citizens. Although social welfare legislation throughout this period ultimately sought to help individuals become economically self-sufficient, we posit, following Abramovitz (1996a), that there are differences between legislation enacted 35 years ago and current legislation related to how self-sufficiency should be achieved. Previous legislation focused on helping individuals achieve self-sufficiency by means of the government providing a social safety net of resources and services, whereas more recent

legislation removes this safety net and places the responsibility for gaining economic self-sufficiency on individuals themselves, through independence and hard work. These different approaches to helping individuals gain more economic self-sufficiency are grounded in different ways of viewing social problems such as poverty and low educational attainment. More recent legislation is undergirded by the philosophy that social problems lie in “the flawed values and behavior of individuals” (Abramovitz, p. 22), whereas legislation in the 1960s and 1970s “did not hold individuals accountable for their failings; instead the legislation focused on providing opportunity to individuals” (Gring-Pemble, 2003, p. 61).

Although our focus in this article is on the impact of these shifting political master narratives on adult literacy education, we begin by examining the impact of this shift in the larger arena of welfare policy. We do so for two reasons. First, welfare policy is arguably the primary site of struggle between the two political master narratives, and adult literacy education is positioned, directly or indirectly, within welfare legislation. Second, the interrelationship between welfare legislation and adult literacy education is complex and fluid, and we must understand the changes in welfare policy to make sense of how political master narratives impact the construction of legislation in adult literacy education. (For a brief overview of welfare and adult literacy education legislation see Table 1.)

Abramovitz (1996a) traced the beginning of the modern welfare state—that is, a government that provides public assistance, social insurance, and social programs of all kinds—to the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935. This legislation provided a social safety net and transferred responsibility for social welfare for all Americans from individual states to the federal government (Abramovitz). The social safety net in the United States grew in the 1940s and 1950s, as Congress added public housing, mental health, and other services during this post-Depression era. In the 1960s, as part of President Johnson’s Great Society initiative, Congress passed legislation authorizing Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, and other legal, employment, and social service programs, expanding the social safety net still further (Abramovitz). All these programs had the goal of fostering economic self-sufficiency through these various support services. The Work Incentive (WIN) program of 1967, which also included job training programs, made this connection particularly clear by requiring recipients to “work off” their welfare grants through contributing their labor to nonprofit organizations and governmental organizations and to look for jobs for a given number of hours per week.

Table 1. Overview of Legislative History

Legislation	Date	Key Features or Major Focus
<i>Social Security Act</i>	1935	The federal government provided a social safety net for all Americans.
Various acts	1940s, 1950s	Added public housing, mental health, and other services.
<i>Social Security Act</i> amendments & other Great Society initiatives	1960s	Added Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, and other legal, employment, and social service programs.
<b>Title II B of the <i>Economic Opportunity Act (EOA)</i></b>	<b>1964</b>	<b>Provided educational and job training opportunities for all.</b>
<b><i>Adult Education Act (AEA)</i></b>	<b>1966</b>	<b>Offered educational services to adults with limited English proficiency.</b>
<i>Work Incentive Program (WIN)</i> , part of the 1967 amendments to the <i>Social Security Act</i>	1967	Provided job training to welfare recipients.
Talmadge Amendments to the WIN	1971	Increased work requirements, emphasized immediate job placement rather than job training.
<b><i>Workplace Literacy Program</i></b>	<b>1989</b>	<b>Promoted literacy education as a way to increase the competitiveness of the United States in the global marketplace.</b>
<b><i>National Literacy Act</i></b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>Replaced the <i>Adult Education Act</i> and strengthened the tie between adult literacy and workforce training.</b>
<i>Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)</i> , part of the <i>Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)</i>	1996	Limited welfare assistance and focused on “work first” and not job training or education.
<b><i>Workforce Investment Act (WIA)</i></b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>Subsumed adult literacy under the larger umbrella of workforce training, providing adult education services “in order to assist adults to become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and <i>self-sufficiency</i>.”</b>
<i>Personal Responsibility and Individual Development for Everyone Act (PRIDE)</i>	2003	Reauthorization of the PRWORA, including a continued focus on “work first.”

Note: Legislation in regular typeface is welfare legislation; legislation in bold typeface is adult literacy legislation.

Decreasing the size of the social safety net became a prominent goal for the federal government starting in the mid to late 1970s, in part because of pressure from business leaders (Abramovitz, 1996a). Although this shift toward decreasing the social safety net began under President Carter, it “went into full swing” with President Reagan, who began to “openly castigate the philosophical underpinnings of the welfare state, slash social programs, and create a huge deficit that would be used to justify cuts in social welfare for years to come” (Abramovitz, 1996a, p. 19). This shift continued under President George H. W. Bush, President Clinton, and President George W. Bush (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2004).

A major change in political philosophy accompanied the shrinking of the social safety net. A shift in welfare legislation away from government responsibility toward individual responsibility began appearing in the early 1970s. Emphasis was placed on getting people off welfare and into the workforce. In 1971, the Talmadge Amendments to the WIN program were passed, emphasizing immediate placement in jobs rather than job training (Piven & Cloward, 1993). By the early 1980s, the WIN program had lost credibility among conservative analysts, who argued that the program was being abused and that it was ineffective in moving recipients off welfare. Self-sufficiency and “work first” philosophies were firmly established in 1996, when Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), as part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, was enacted. In the 1980s, the conservative movement focused its critique on exposing the perceived fraud and wastefulness of the welfare system. However, during the welfare reform debates in the mid-1990s, public outrage began focusing on perceived dependency and lack of work ethic among welfare recipients as key factors that explained poverty (Abramovitz, 1996a, 1996b; Albelda & Folbre, 1996). In the mid-1990s, public and political discourse began focusing increasingly on reducing dependency on welfare programs and increasing self-sufficiency, personal responsibility, and independence.

In 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). The name itself aptly captured its focus on “responsibility” and its underlying assumption that poverty and joblessness “are caused by a failure of will, by the behavior of individuals, as influenced by their cultural beliefs” (D’Amico, 1999, p. 4). PRWORA “represents and embodies” a conservative ideological stance as it uses phrases such as “‘Personal responsibility’ (i.e., of the poor), ‘temporary assistance,’ ‘end the dependence,’ etc. Of course, any references to larger goals of eliminating, or even reducing poverty, that would be reflective of the War on Poverty era, are completely absent” (Action for

Boston Community Development, 2002, p. 6). PRWORA was reauthorized in 2003 as the Personal Responsibility and Individual Development for Everyone Act (PRIDE), which continues its focus on independence and self-sufficiency and continues to erode the social safety net by focusing on “work first” and decreasing access to social services.

The history of legislation for adult literacy education follows a similar path, at least at the outset. Adult literacy legislation was first introduced during the time period of President Johnson’s Great Society. In fact, the first piece of federal legislation to include adult literacy education was Title II B of the Economic Opportunity Act (Public Law 88-452), passed in 1964 by President Johnson (Johnson & Hartman, 1998). This was the centerpiece of Johnson’s War on Poverty initiative, and it focused on decreasing poverty in the United States through providing educational and job training opportunities for all.

The Adult Education Act (AEA) was passed in 1966 as part of President Johnson’s Great Society programs and was buoyed by the “activist government philosophy” prevalent in the 1960s (Johnson & Hartman, 1998, p. 30). The AEA expanded the Economic Opportunity Act by offering educational services to adults with limited English proficiency. The AEA was focused on helping eradicate poverty through providing educational opportunities. It also helped undereducated adults prepare for and obtain a high school diploma, which was often a requirement for work (Sticht, 1998). The WIN program of 1967, as noted earlier, provided employment and training programs. The idea behind WIN was that these real-life work experiences would help prepare recipients for employment (Piven & Cloward, 1993). In addition, support services such as how to conduct a job search and how to behave in a job interview sometimes were provided. Piven and Cloward stated that “education and training programs were sometimes made available on the theory that lack of skills prevented recipients from becoming self-sufficient through work” (p. 382).

Adult literacy education continued to be administered under the AEA throughout the 1970s and 1980s. However, by the mid 1980s, while other social welfare programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children were beginning to see a clear shift toward independence and bootstrapping, adult education began heading in a different direction. In the 1960s and 1970s, adult literacy education was enacted as part of a social safety net designed to help individuals become self-sufficient. However, in the mid-1980s, adult literacy education was promoted as a way to increase individuals’ human capital in order to increase the competitiveness of the United States in the global marketplace. Thus, in the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s, adult literacy was increasingly linked to

workforce training. Jurmo (1998) stated that “linking adult education to workforce preparation got its biggest boost beginning in the mid-1980s” (p. 2), when the federal government undertook several workplace literacy projects, including the Department of Education’s national Workplace Literacy Program (WLP). The WLP provided \$130 million between 1989 and 1997 to workplace literacy programs based in corporations across the country. In 1991, the National Literacy Act replaced the AEA and also established a formal link with the Department of Labor through the creation of a Workforce Literacy Assistance Collaborative, which further strengthened the tie between adult literacy and workforce training (Demetrian, 2005). By the mid-1990s, this link was firmly established; “preparing employed or unemployed adults for the world of work was commonly seen as a key purpose for adult basic education” (Jurmo, p. 3).

Another shift occurred in adult literacy legislation in the late 1990s, however, that resembled the changes that had been occurring earlier in welfare legislation. In 1998, President Clinton signed into law the new Workforce Investment Act (WIA), consolidating over 50 employment, training, and literacy programs, including the National Literacy Act, the AEA, and the Job Training Partnership Act (National Institute for Literacy, 1998). This law subsumed adult literacy under the larger umbrella of workforce training; prior to 1998, adult literacy education was a separate enterprise and was administered through the Adult Education Act of 1966.

The WIA and its reauthorizations clearly continue the trend of linking adult literacy with workforce development. However, the WIA, through its close ties to welfare reform legislation, also explicitly focuses on self-sufficiency and independence and thus became closely aligned with the shrinking of the social safety net. The WIA has “strong philosophical ties to welfare legislation” (Hayes, 1999, p. 6), because it advocates self-sufficiency and focuses on individual rather than collective empowerment. Indeed, the goal of self-sufficiency is highlighted in the first given purpose of the WIA, which is to provide adult education and literacy services “in order to assist adults to become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and *self-sufficiency*” [italics added] (National Institute for Literacy, 1998). As of July 1999, when WIA was first implemented, literacy programs were required to establish work-related outcomes for their education, including “placement in, retention in, or completion of, postsecondary education, training, unsubsidized employment or career advancement” (Workforce Investment Act, quoted in Jurmo, 1998, p. 4). In addition, the act encourages adult literacy programs to work with welfare-to-work programs to provide services to

welfare recipients seeking to improve their skills. However, these social services are not understood as part of a comprehensive social safety net; rather, they are seen as a stopgap measure designed to move welfare recipients quickly into the workforce. Welfare recipients are urged to find work quickly, but those who cannot are placed in short-term job training and basic skills programs. In many states, the training provided to welfare recipients focuses on job readiness skills, typically lasts from 1 to 6 weeks, and usually includes “instruction in preparing resumes, developing interviewing skills, and dressing appropriately for the work environment” (Fagnoni, 1999, p. 7).

This legislative history provides the political context for our current study. We turn now to the study itself, in which we examine the narratives of adult literacy educators, focusing specifically on those narratives—the “success stories”—that have a fundamentally political intent and that reflect the shift in political master narratives during this period.

## METHODOLOGY

Our data set for this study consisted of 257 stories published from 1978 through 2005 by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Adult, Basic, and Literacy Education (PA-ABLE), as part of its annual Success Stories project; Dr. Sherry Royce, the former director of this project, graciously provided this archival material. Each year, beginning in 1978, PA-ABLE has conducted a competition in which adult literacy instructors nominate learners to become an “outstanding student of the year.” Each year, 10–16 learners are selected by a committee consisting of representatives from Pennsylvania school districts, the Bureau of ABLE, local literacy councils, and other local service organizations. These learners are honored at a legislative luncheon, and their success stories are published in a booklet that is distributed to adult literacy programs and to state legislators and other influential policy makers.

To analyze the stories, we used Burke’s (1962) method of pentadic criticism. Underlying this approach is a theory of dramatism that assumes that “language use constitutes action” and that humans use rhetoric or language to “present a particular view of our situation, just as the presentation of a play creates a certain world or situation inhabited by characters who engage in actions in a setting” (Foss, 1989, pp. 335–336). The “pentad” in Burke’s pentadic criticism consists of five elements used by storytellers, or “rhetors,” to describe their situations. These five elements are the basic elements of a drama—act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose (Foss)—and they are used to discover the motive of a rhetor. The notion of motive takes us beyond the plot of the story and addresses the

fundamental question of what interests are being served in the telling of the story itself. Burke explained this pentad: “In a rounded statement about motives, you must have some word that names the *act* (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the *scene* (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also you must indicate what person or kind of person (*agent*) performed the act, what means or instruments he [or she] used (*agency*), and the *purpose*” (Foss, 1989, p. 337). To conduct a pentadic analysis, a researcher must accomplish three steps: identify in the narrative the five pentadic elements; determine which element is highlighted or emphasized the most by the rhetor; and determine the storyteller’s motive from an analysis of the highlighted element. Burke’s method is especially useful for analyzing public rhetoric because it reveals the intentionality of the teller and what political purposes that rhetoric is being designed to serve (Ling, 1970; Miller, 2004; Weldon, 2001).

Typically Burke is used to determine the motive behind the telling of the story. In our case, we already know the motive behind the success stories, namely to secure continued funding from the state legislature (for the most part, these are federal flow-through monies), and the adult literacy educators are explicit about this in the prefaces to the booklets. What is of interest to us is how the elements of the stories change across the period of 27 years, revealing the impact of dominant political discourses on the telling of those stories. We focus especially on the Burkian elements that remain constant and those that shift and change in any significant way across that period. Of particular interest is how the actor and the means of the action (what Burke calls agency) are portrayed, because political discourse is most visible in the construction of the individual and in how the individual is able to act (Brummett, 1993).

## FINDINGS

The elements of Burke’s pentad are readily identifiable in the success stories. The agent is the adult literacy learner, and the scene consists of his or her particular life circumstances, which uniformly involve hardships and obstacles of various kinds. The act is the attainment of an educational goal, usually passing the General Education Diploma (GED) or certification in a trade, though some ultimately go on to college, and a few to graduate school. The purpose of the act is usually better employment, but other things, like increased self-esteem and being a better role model for their children, are often cited. What is of most interest to us is the agency, or the means that the learners used to achieve their educational goals. Given the explicit motive behind the storytelling of securing

state funding, we would expect that the literacy programs would be the means used, and in the earlier stories, this is clearly the case. In the later stories, however, the means used becomes the independent actions of the learners themselves, and the programs in which they are enrolled become less and less visible.

In our analysis, we focused particularly on the two 5-year periods at the ends of the time span covered by the stories—1978–1984 (there were no booklets available for 1979 and 1980) and 2001–2005—so that we could note the extent of the change over the years. In what follows, we discuss each element of Burke’s pentad present in the success stories and describe how that element is portrayed. For each, we provide specific examples from both groups of stories, with the year noted; learner names are pseudonyms.

THE AGENT: THE ADULT LEARNER

<p><b>1978:</b> Lester Fannin, 73, helped other learners with their studies and encouraged them to persevere.</p>	<p><b>2004:</b> Dolores Herder, the mother of six, became a role model for her children and for younger learners in the program.</p>
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All the success stories have as their main character a person who is moral, hard working, and dedicated to the welfare of others. These are all admirable people deserving of our respect. Several categories of people appear across the body of stories: immigrants; single mothers; men or women who once were on welfare but who, through hard work, are now self-supporting; former drug addicts; those who are physically or mentally disabled; the incarcerated who are turning their lives around through education; and older adults who left school at an early age and are now returning to complete their basic education. Protagonists in these stories are presented as having a noble character—they are portrayed as likeable; they get along well with other people; they have friendly personalities; they are helpful to others, often expressed in terms of the assistance and encouragement they give to the other learners in their program and to their teachers; they volunteer in their communities; they are positive and optimistic in their attitudes toward life; they are good role models for their children; and they exercise common sense.

One example of this is Lester Fannin (1978) who, at 73, is considered the “wise old man” of his program. He has been in the program for 12 years and has worked hard at improving his reading skills. His priority, however, is being there for other students and helping them succeed. He also serves as an activity director of sorts, making sure everyone joins in

conversation during coffee breaks, especially those who are immigrants coming for citizenship training. And he actively recruits new students from his church and local community. Lester is clearly more concerned about others than about himself. Like Lester, the protagonists in these success stories are, above all, individuals with high morals, even if sometimes their “former lives” are portrayed as being riddled with alcohol or drug abuse. Dolores Herder (2004) was on public assistance for some time, and five of her six children had dropped out of school. Feeling her life was going nowhere, she turned to alcohol and drugs. She was able to turn her life around, however, by ending her substance abuse and enrolling in a GED program. She also persuaded her husband and two of their children to join the program, and they all obtained their GEDs. She became a role model for younger students especially, encouraging them to make education, family, and work their priorities. We see throughout all these stories that in all respects, these adult students are highly sympathetic characters whom readers will find attractive and likeable.

#### THE SCENE: THEIR LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES

<p><b>1982:</b> Norma Posada dealt with physical and emotional abuse, as well as major depression. Getting her GED enabled her to stabilize her life and get a job.</p>	<p><b>2004:</b> Paul Walker recovered from a massive heart attack. He earned his GED and got a job so he could provide for his family.</p>
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Good stories require some form of dramatic tension, and in these success stories that tension comes from the obstacles and hardships the adult learners endure and overcome. Each story features a protagonist who has had to face difficult situations or life circumstances, and typically the harder off the learner has been, the more compelling his or her story is, and the more “hard-earned” the success is portrayed. The difficulties encountered in these success stories often include learners becoming pregnant at a young age, having to drop out of school because of pregnancy or having to go to work, having to care for a sick parent or child, being abused by a parent or partner, having learning disabilities or physical disabilities, being homeless or jobless because of being laid off, having a low sense of self-worth, or being a single parent without a network of family and friends. Some, like Paul Walker (2004), have overcome major health problems. He and his two children lived with his grandmother while he recuperated from a massive heart attack, but during that period, he learned everything he could about computers. When his health improved, he enrolled in a GED class, where he worked diligently

and finally passed the exam. He went on to get a job so he could provide for his family, and he also enrolled in a community college computer technology program. Despite his busy schedule, he serves as a volunteer tutor in the adult education program, encouraging and inspiring other students with his positive attitude. Some difficulties derive from the category of the agent—for example, the immigrant must adjust to a new culture, learn a new language, secure employment, and establish a new social network in this country. However, other obstacles are more broad. Poverty is probably the most pervasive obstacle, and many adult learners in these stories struggle to provide for themselves and their families. Being on welfare is not uncommon, but in every case, education is viewed as the way for welfare recipients to leave the welfare rolls and find jobs that will enable them to be self-supporting and contributing members of society.

Many of the women in the stories are survivors of domestic violence, both physical and psychological. Norma Posada (1982) tells such a story. Seeking to escape an unloving home, she got pregnant and married when she was 14, but then had to endure physical and emotional abuse from her husband, including death threats when she tried to leave him. Ultimately she was able to divorce him. Afterward, though, she and her children had to live on welfare, and she became seriously depressed, attempted suicide, and almost died. She subsequently went into therapy, and once she was stable, she returned to school to get her GED, and then went on to earn her beautician's license and get a job. Many of the adult students were raised in dysfunctional families where they were exposed to and drawn into criminal activity and drug and/or alcohol addiction, and as adults, they have overcome these major difficulties. The overcoming of these and other obstacles makes the agent a heroic figure, which is a characteristic of all the success stories.

#### THE ACT: ACHIEVING THEIR EDUCATIONAL GOALS

<b>1978:</b> For Gail Owens, getting her GED was a major turning point in her life. She went on to train in nursing and was hired by a local hospital.	<b>2002:</b> James Foley enrolled in a GED program after he was laid off and received his diploma just before he turned 60.
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The adult literacy programs producing these success stories offer various classes ranging from adult basic education to GED preparation. Many programs focus on preparing learners for the high school equivalency examination that results in the GED. Learners are required to pass a

series of challenging exams in various subject areas, so successful completion of the GED is a major accomplishment. Also available are programs in English as a second language (ESL), life skills classes, and vocational education programs. The success stories we examined have happy endings, because protagonists achieve success. The successes achieved in these stories typically consist of getting the GED, getting off welfare, and finding employment, but they can also include more profound life transformations.

Gail Owens (1978) is a case in point. Overwhelmed by grief at the death of her husband, she was unable to do anything. However, in the midst of her emotional chaos, she realized that she had to do something other than cry and that she had few opportunities without a high school diploma. She enrolled in the adult literacy program, and getting her GED became a major life turning point for her. She went on to train as a nurse was hired by a local hospital. She went from five valium a day and a life that was meaningless to no valium a day and a career that has brought her personal fulfillment. She attributes her success to, as she says, “that piece of paper,” the GED. Another example is provided by James Foley (2002), who left school in 12th grade and worked as a manual laborer for more than 30 years. When he was laid off from his job as a furnace worker, he knew he needed more education to get a better job; he enrolled in a GED program and received his diploma the day before his 60th birthday. Through the process of achieving their educational goals, the protagonists in these stories usually are also depicted as undergoing some change in self-perception such as increased self-esteem. In James’s case, that meant seeing himself as an example for his 29-year-old son, who was himself searching for a stable career; James took pride in showing his son that anyone, at any age, can succeed.

THE PURPOSE OF THE ACT: A BETTER LIFE

<p><b>1978:</b> Helen Chee is a Native American who battled severe alcoholism and serious mental problems. Completing a drug treatment program and getting her GED enabled her to stabilize her life.</p>	<p><b>2003:</b> Cecilia Wooten was divorced twice and was in and out of homeless shelters. She obtained her GED, and she is now financially stable and has her own apartment.</p>
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In the success stories, attainment of the GED is a major milestone, but it is also the means by which learners are able to achieve other goals: job training, certification in various trades, and college and even graduate

degrees. The GED is usually viewed as a means rather than an end in itself. The same is true for ESL programs because increased proficiency in English is essential for immigrants to assimilate successfully into American culture and ultimately to obtain citizenship. Achieving their educational goals also increases adult learners' self-esteem and self-efficacy, and enables them to be better role models for others, and especially for their children. Not only are these successful learners portrayed as gaining a better life, but they are also portrayed as being enabled to improve the lives of others.

A good example is provided by Cecilia Wooten (2003), who quit school in ninth grade to get married, had two children, and was divorced by 22. Having no educational or vocational skills, she worked as a cocktail waitress. She remarried to help make ends meet and had two more children, but an abusive husband provided little support. She left him and was in and out of homeless shelters for several years. At that point, she realized education was her only hope for independence, so she enrolled in a GED program, passed the exam, and went on to take computer classes and find a job. She is now financially stable, has her own apartment, and spends evenings helping her children with their homework. Helen Chee (1978) offers a different example. She is a Native American who grew up on a reservation, married at 15, and had three children. During all those years, however, she battled severe alcoholism and serious mental problems that resulted in two suicide attempts. Persuaded to enter drug treatment, she completed the program and remains sober thanks to the support of her therapist and Alcoholics Anonymous. While working on her GED, she counsels others and gives talks at her children's school about her heritage.

**THE MEANS USED: FROM THE PROGRAM TO THE INDIVIDUAL LEARNER**

<p><b>1981:</b> Sheila Evans said, "This would not have been possible without the help and encouragement of the teachers and the GED program . . . I give most of the credit to the teachers of the adult education program. They encouraged me and helped me to build my self-confidence. They obtained more information which encouraged me to go forward with plans to attend college."</p>	<p><b>2005:</b> Linda Thomas is quoted as saying, "I'm a very intelligent woman who's doing nothing with my life. It's about time I did something with it. . . . Don't let anyone or anything stand in the way of achieving your dreams. Before, I was afraid to succeed. Now I am hungry to achieve more and more!"</p>
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As we noted earlier, all the previous elements of Burke's pentad are unchanged across the two groups of success stories, but in this final element—that of agency, or means used to achieve the act—we see a major shift. In the earlier stories, the means is clearly and unambiguously the program. In the prefaces to these booklets, this is made explicit: The 1978 award citation reads in part, "In recognition of achievement in reaching a more personally fulfilling life and a significant standard of service to others through dedicated participation in an adult basic education program." In the early stories themselves, the programs are very visible. Teachers and staff are frequently mentioned, sometimes by name, for their dedicated service and the encouragement and support they provide to the learners. The plotlines of these early stories include the progress that the learner makes within the program. Finally, it is not uncommon for learners to be quoted praising their teachers.

In the later stories, however, agency changes dramatically. The programs recede into the background and sometimes seem to disappear altogether. Instead, it is the adult learners who do the work and who are responsible for their own success. The emphasis is placed on what learners do and what they achieve, with the implication that they do this largely on their own. The picture drawn in these later stories is of learners who achieve on their own through a type of bootstrapsism. While they are enrolled in literacy programs, they succeed because of their own efforts, not because of anything the programs do.

To illustrate this focus on individual agency in more depth, next are two contrasting stories in their entirety. The first is from 1978, and the second is from 2004.

### ***Story of Rebecca Jackson, 1978***

*Rebecca is 25, the wife of a policeman, mother of two young boys, and she came to our one-to-one literacy tutoring program after several false and discouraging starts in an ABE classroom. Rebecca was too nervous, too needful of attentive support, to survive in a classroom. Happily, her motivation to learn was strong, and she found out about one of our library learning centers. After a year or so of tutoring from a volunteer, Becky appeared one day, literally shaking with fear, in my creative writing class for new readers. She insisted she couldn't write or spell, and was extremely dependent on my encouragement. That was six months ago. This month, Becky has a hilarious, original story written from the point of view of her six-year-old in our tutor newsletter. Better still, she is soon to appear before the Psychology Club of Drexel University to help us initiate a cooperative tutoring-for-credit arrangement with the school. She will be addressing 40 college students, persuading them to tutor one adult student like herself.*

Becky said to me, “I stood in front of my mirror all day Sunday wondering why my teacher picked me to do this.” Why did I? There are the obvious reasons: she is a highly persuasive, almost evangelical speaker—this talent blossomed in the writing class. She is charming and well spoken. But Becky exemplifies the fulfillment of our agency’s objectives. She was an adult, reading below a fourth-grade level, for whom a classroom was too threatening. She initially leaned heavily on her volunteer tutor—they became friends—for encouragement. Since that time of dependence she has undergone a beautiful transformation. She is, as she says, “fighting” for what she deserves: the decent education she never got, a future for her children, participation in her church (previously she was too afraid she would be asked to read or write), eventually employment and increased independence.

The timid, frail woman-child I once knew is now a fighter. Becky will leave our program long before she achieves the height of her educational life. She will go on to gain her GED, perhaps she will go further. But we gave her what she needed, when she needed it, and now she is equipped to “take it from there.” Becky has been an inspiration to me. That why I chose her to speak to the Drexel students, and that’s why I chose her for this honor.

#### **Story of Julio Navarro, 2004**

When Julio Navarro first started classes at the Chester County OIC, he had to read slowly out loud, pointing to each word. Little by little, his speed picked up, and his vocabulary and comprehension increased. After a while he was able to read silently. With extra time, Julio thought he could pass all the reading sections of the GED. Having dyslexia qualified Julio for that extra time. The staff pursued GED accommodations for Julio’s learning disability, but the required testing and paper-work threatened to delay his goal of joining the Armed Forces.

In January, Julio marched into the test center and took the entire GED with no extra time. He did not pass the GED test that day, but the language arts writing test was the only one he had to take over. For the next two months, he worked on language arts writing like an Olympic athlete would train just before the qualifying trials. He had to learn ways of dealing with his dyslexia. He developed innovative approaches to avoid chronic misspellings, and he found ways to control his sentence writing. He studied all the rules of English and wrote countless essays.

Julio wanted to write an essay that would receive a passing score of two. He could get a two by writing clearly and concisely. He also had to get a high percentage of the multiple-choice writing questions correct in order to pass the test. According to his instructor, Julio had to answer 40 out of the 50 questions correctly. To his credit, Julio worked incredibly hard in the multiple-choice content area of the test. The Center provided extra books and materials. He passed the language arts test and got a high percentage of the writing questions correct.

Julio has been a great inspiration to students and staff at Chester County OIC.

*He enthusiastically encourages his friends to begin their GED studies, saying "If I can get my GED, anybody can!" He recently retook the language arts writing test, passed with forty points to spare, and reached his dream of joining the United States Armed Forces.*

The contrast between these two stories is clear. In Rebecca's story from 1978, we hear the strong voice of the literacy program making the claim that it is responsible for her dramatic change from the "timid, frail woman-child" to the "fighter." There is much in the story to support this claim. Becky first tried an ABE classroom program, but she needed more support than could be provided in a group context, so she turned to the one-on-one tutoring program and worked with a volunteer for more than a year. Even when she was ready to try a classroom setting again, she could not succeed without significant support from the teacher, and that she is a much more capable learner after only six months suggests that the teacher did in fact give her a great deal of support and encouragement. We know of her success in terms of what she has accomplished in and for the program: publication of a story in the tutor newsletter, and being asked to speak at the local university to help the literacy program begin a new initiative there. She is an active agent here, but the context for her action is the program itself. The teacher goes on to say that Becky "exemplifies the fulfillment of our agency's objectives," and it is clear that those objectives are to move learners from dependence to independence. The function of the program is to give learners what they need, when they need it, and that will enable them to be successful. And we see the program's success in Becky.

Julio's story from 2004 is very different, even though, like Becky's, it is a success story. Here the teacher attributes success to the learner rather than to the program, and in fact the program stays very much in the background. The story begins with Julio starting his classes and slowly making progress in his reading, but no one is given credit for his improvement—it is almost as if the teachers are not there. The first mention of the program staff is their effort to obtain accommodations for him in taking the GED exam because of his learning disability. Significantly, though, Julio refuses the accommodation because it might delay his enlistment in the military. Instead, he takes the GED without assistance and passes all but one of the tests. Particularly striking is the language the teacher uses to describe Julio's preparation for retaking the language arts test. He is likened to an Olympic athlete in training, and all the action is located within himself: *He* figured out how to deal with his dyslexia, *he* developed strategies to improve his spelling, *he* "found ways" to construct proper sentences, and *he* learned to master the rules of English grammar. The

way this is written suggests that he accomplished all this without any assistance from his teachers. The only thing the program does is provide “extra books and materials”; there is no mention of any instruction. Even the inspiration Julio brings to other learners is focused solely on his own efforts: “If I can get my GED, anybody can!”

When we consider the other Burkian elements in these stories, though, we see no differences. Both learners are depicted as agents who are admirable and hard working. Their life circumstances—the scene—involve hardships that they overcome. Rebecca triumphs over her low self-esteem and neediness; Julio wins out over his learning disability. Both act, achieving their educational goals. Julio obtains his GED, and although Becky has yet to achieve that goal, she now has the strength to do so, and her teacher is confident that she will go even further educationally. As for the purpose—attaining a better life—both accomplish that. Julio enlisted in the Armed Forces, and Becky’s personal transformation has gained her the promise of independence. What sets the two stories apart is the means used to achieve the act. In Becky’s case, the literacy program is instrumental, whereas Julio’s success is his own, and the program is virtually invisible.

## DISCUSSION

In this research, we sought to understand the nature of the success stories told in adult literacy education and how these success stories intersect with shifting political master narratives. In this section, we further address these two issues; we also discuss the implications arising from adult literacy educators embracing the current political master narrative and, drawing on Burke’s notion of dramatism, point to some potential ways forward.

The findings presented provide insight into the nature of these stories. In general, these stories all follow a similar narrative storyline. In terms of Burke’s pentad, the agent, the scene, the act, and the purpose remain the same in the stories of both time periods we examined. In each group of stories, the agent is the adult learner who must overcome the difficulties of his or her life circumstances to achieve his or her educational goals in order to have a better life. The earlier and later stories differ, however, in terms of agency, or the means used to achieve the act. In the earlier stories, the literacy programs and teachers play an essential role in helping learners achieve success. In the later stories, the programs fade into the background, and the learners are depicted as essentially accomplishing their goals by themselves.

To further understand the nature of these stories and to explore how

they intersect with political master narratives, it is revealing to consider these success stories in terms of McLaren's (1995) discussion of the socializing function of narrative and in terms of Gring-Pemble's (2003), Bennett and Edelman's (1985), and Andrews's (2002) discussions of the construction of political master narratives. McLaren argued that narratives "introduce individuals or groups into a particular way of life through their authorial voice and legitimating functions. Theories, ideologies, and social and institutional practices—and our relationship to them—are all informed by narratives" (p. 91). And Bennett and Edelman, Gring-Pemble, and Andrews argued that political master narratives help to shape individual subjectivities and local narratives. The narratives promoted in the success stories thus serve the ideological purpose of selecting for us one way of looking at the world, while hiding or distracting us from other possible ways of viewing the world. We find evidence of two different master political narratives concerning the role of government and social welfare shaping these success stories. We posit that the shift of agency—from the program to the individual learner—that we see from the early stories to the late stories reflects the shift in political master narratives from a perspective that sees such educational services as an obligation of government, to a perspective that believes government should be limited and that the responsibility for attaining an education rests with the individual.

The more recent narratives draw on two main ideologies to create their worldview: meritocracy and individualism. Meritocracy can be defined as "a social system in which status is achieved through ability and effort (merit), rather than ascribed on the basis of age, class, gender or other such particularistic or inherited advantages. The term implies that the meritorious deserve any privilege which they accrue" (Marshall, 1998, p. 410). The stories assume that everyone has the same chance; what separates those who succeed from those who do not is a matter of individual effort and determination. Individualism is a set of ideas "emphasizing the importance of the individual and the individual's interests" (p. 304). Self-reliance is a form of individualism that, as an "oppressive ideology," helps "transfer blame for failure from the system to the individual" (Shor, 1992, p. 61). These stories promote the view that "win or lose, the individual is to blame. Each human being is a lone entrepreneur who succeeds or fails on the basis of her or his character, ingenuity, and talents. If you fail to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, blame only yourself" (p. 63).

Through promoting meritocracy and individualism, the current success stories thus uphold a political master narrative that highlights particular types of desired individuals and that shows how these individuals "personify the sacred values of religion, hard work, health, and *self-reliance*

[italics added]” (Denzin, 1991, p. 150). The ideology of self-reliance found in these more recent stories is linked to domination and unequal power relations because it legitimates a social system that is systematically dismantling a social safety net. Increasingly, individuals are called upon to be “personally responsible” for their own welfare; current political discourse calls for “self-reliance,” which Giroux (2004) argued betrays “an eviscerated and refigured state” that fails to provide “adequate safety nets for its populace, especially those who are young, poor, or racially marginalized” (p. 496). We thus believe that this current political master narrative works against both the best interests of adult literacy learners and the best interests of literacy programs themselves.

Quigley (1997) argued that although educators enter the field of adult literacy education because they have a deep sense of caring about learners, they have often been complicit in the perpetuation of negative images of adult literacy learners and the field of adult literacy; thus, literacy educators need to pay closer attention to how the field is perceived in society and how they help shape that perception. Our examination of the success stories told by adult literacy teachers leads us to conclude that the more recent success stories, shaped by the current political master narrative, also work against the best interests of learners and programs. These more recent stories potentially undermine the motive of their telling, namely securing government funding for adult literacy programs. Through writing adult literacy programs out of the story, these more recent narratives in fact provide a counterargument for continued funding, which is reinforced by the ever-increasing threats to federal funding of adult literacy education. Quigley (2000) wrote, “if we continuously assume we have no significant role to play in society, we can hardly expect that we will be given one” (p. 215).

One of the biggest challenges for the field of adult literacy, then, is how to create a counternarrative (Andrews, 2002) that works in the field’s best interests. One important step in crafting a new narrative involves adult literacy researchers and practitioners embracing what we do as important. Quigley (1997) posited that adult literacy practitioners need to recapture the belief that “literacy education is worth doing” (p. 32) and that they need to communicate this message more clearly when they craft public images of adult literacy education. In fact, if adult literacy programs are going to be successful and continue to secure federal funding, “the way people see programs must first change” (p. 244). Research indicates that adult learners and their families benefit when adults participate in literacy programs. These benefits include increases in self-esteem, improvement in reading, math, and writing skills, and more involvement in their children’s education (Wedgeworth, 2005). Although we certainly do not

advocate a return to uncritically embracing a “maternalistic” view of adult literacy learners (Quigley), we do believe that adult literacy programs and practitioners should highlight how they can help the learners meet their goals. We thus need to begin crafting narratives wherein we write ourselves back into the action and in Burke’s terms *reclaim agency*. Quigley thus encourages us as a field to “write more and speak more about our rich heritage” (p. 243) and believes we should “take greater pride in our field” (p. 243). To build a stronger and more effective adult literacy system, Quigley argued for “new perceptions,” “belief in our purpose,” “awareness of historical context,” and “the power of knowledge to change what is into what should be” (p. 240). He made a similar point when he argued that “our field needs to understand its sources of strength and build on them at the policy and public levels” (p. 94).

However, creating narratives that subvert the dominant discourse to preserve and serve the interests of adult education is difficult, especially when adult literacy educators are attempting to use local narratives to influence policy makers’ decisions. Research in political communication has shown that, although policy makers often rely on narrative depictions in policy-making decisions, narratives are adopted by policy makers not because of their logic or empirical verifiability but when they match what legislators already know and believe about the way the world works (Gring-Pemble, 2003). When lawmakers express agreement with local stories, they are at the same time subscribing to the political master narratives suggested by those stories. What policy makers look for, then, in the narratives they ultimately choose to subscribe to, is a high degree of verisimilitude between the narratives provided by those attempting to influence policy, and the beliefs they already hold. Thus, the local stories told to politicians are shaped by political master narratives and in turn help to reinforce legislation upholding political master narratives.

Gring-Pemble (2003) argued that “policy makers who tell the best stories and who paint a vivid picture of problems and solutions that is consistent with their audiences’ experiences are more likely to achieve their desired goals” (p. 210). Our challenge as adult literacy advocates, then, is to create stories that are faithful to learners’ and programs’ experiences and that at the same time can influence policy. This involves not only crafting new narratives but also creating a new social discourse—a new context—within which the new stories make sense and resonate with policy makers’ expectations and experiences. Gring-Pemble (2003) described this challenge:

Policy advocates who wish to counter current . . . legislation need to construct alternative rhetorical contexts favorable to their

arguments. . . policy advocates interested in producing counter-hegemonic discourse must craft depictions that serve as examples for establishing a new set of legislative premises, rather than illustrations for reinforcing existing rules. (p. 210)

Bennett and Edelman (1985), in their discussion of political master narratives, stated that in order for a new narrative to gain voice, proponents of that new narrative must be able “to frame their analyses in ways that yield new insights, identify new points of struggle and consensus, and lead to new actions” (p. 158). They also argued that new stories need to be presented “in ways that open up the mind to creative possibilities developed in ways that provoke intellectual struggle, the resolution of contradiction, and the creation of a more workable human order” (p. 162). We believe that Burke’s (1962) notion of dramatism could be helpful in creating such a new and more effective narrative. As Foss (1989) noted, “through rhetoric, we size up situations and name their structure and outstanding ingredients. How we describe a situation indicates how we are perceiving it and the choices we see available to us” (p. 336). We have argued that it is useful and necessary in these stories to recast adult literacy programs, rather than the individual learners, as the means used to achieve success. We also posit that the field of adult literacy needs to structure new stories that serve a different purpose. We need to create compelling stories that emphasize the broader scene in which we and our learners labor, stories that foreground the structural and cultural contexts that constrain and limit possibilities for human growth. We need stories that unmask political realities, such as welfare policies that prevent the poor from gaining an education and force them to remain economically and socially disadvantaged. Charles Dickens wrote such stories in his day to expose the searing consequences of poverty in England. Today we have journalists like Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) writing compelling stories about the plight of the working poor in America. Our challenge as adult educators is to construct narratives about our learners and the challenges they face, stories that capture the imagination and argue persuasively for social and political change.

## CONCLUSION

Through this research, we hope to contribute to a more thorough understanding of how dominant discourses impact the field of adult literacy education. We have shown how adult literacy educators have, in the stories they tell, reflected dominant political ideologies and are currently telling stories focused increasingly on self-sufficiency and the ability of

adult literacy learners to “lift themselves up by the bootstraps.” This current ideological narrative is a cause for concern because it works to undermine the practice of adult education itself. We hope that seeing political master narratives as infused into local narratives within adult literacy education will be a starting point for engaging the larger challenge, that of crafting narratives that will subvert and resist this dominant discourse and ultimately better serve the interests of adult learners.

Although our focus has been on the specific arena of adult literacy education, the point that we have made about the power of political master narratives to impact practice applies to all arenas of education, or indeed to any field. To be unaware of this dynamic is not only to risk serving interests that may be in conflict with the values and goals of education, but also—more damaging still—to unwittingly be complicit in undermining education itself. We have argued that there is no innocence in narrative—it always has intentionality, particular work to accomplish—and we have also tried to show that the intentionality of narrative is not necessarily benign. What is essential, we believe, is that as educators we develop a kind of narrative consciousness that will ensure that we understand the narrative forces that shape our culture and impact our practice, as well as enable us to respond effectively with powerful narratives of our own.

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