



**education review**  
a journal of book reviews

[reseñas educativas \(Spanish\)](#)  
[resenhas educativas \(Portuguese\)](#)

This review has been accessed **409** times since May 14, 2008

**Willis, Arlette Ingram. (2008). *Reading comprehension research and testing in the U.S. Undercurrents of race, class, and power in the struggle for meaning*. NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.**

Pp. xxxii + 374 \$35 ISBN 13:978-0-8058-5052-9

**Reviewed by Margaret-Mary McGivern**  
**York University**

**May 14, 2008**

Picture this: Your six year old child is required to participate in a test at school. One of the questions requires that the student look at two pictures. One is of a white person. One is of a Mexican person. The question your child must answer is: Which is prettier? Your child will be deemed more or less intelligent depending on their choice of answer (p. 212).

Arlette Willis provides this example from the 1973 Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test in her book, *Reading comprehension research and testing in the U.S. Undercurrents of race, class and power in the struggle for meaning*. She challenges the reader to feel the injustice of posing such a question to a child under the guise of intelligence testing. Throughout this volume she barely contains her anger and indignation at what she claims is the thinly veiled attempt of American educational psychologists and researchers to maintain the status quo of white, middle-class superiority in intelligence and reading comprehension tests. All at the expense of minority children. Her argument is systematic, thorough and well documented. Her underlying conceptual framework is clearly stated, and lies in the philosophical heart of the Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci's theory of political and cultural hegemony. Gramsci wrote extensively on how dominant groups maintain power within a culture, with the conscious or unconscious support of subaltern groups (Gramsci, 1971). Willis uses Gramsci's theoretical analysis of the control and maintenance of power by the dominant group in her exploration of the historicity of the testing movement from its beginnings. "...understanding why and how reading comprehension was conceived, defined, and measured is the first step in dismantling its power to control the thinking of U.S. school children" (p. xviii) . She hopes that understanding the historical trends will lead us to forge " a revolutionary alternative that embraces issues of difference, especially race, class and power" (p. xix).

Willis' purpose is clear. She outlines her goal of showing throughout the eight thoughtfully laid out chapters that racism, scientism, and classism are all components of western philosophical assumptions that underpin much of the research on reading comprehension and testing. Inherent

racism in minority education is a topic that Willis has addressed in previous work (Willis & Harris, 1997). In *Reading comprehension research and testing in the U.S.*, she claims that, "...children of colour are used as fodder to bolster claims of White children's intellectual superiority" (p. xxxi). If you are an individual who happens to be white and middle class, your apprehension may be justified. Especially if you spend your days working to educate or improve the education in general of, as Willis rightfully refers to, the "underserved children" of America. Herein lies her strength. She is willing to prod the reader into an uncomfortable zone, where entrenched underlying beliefs in the superiority of western philosophical traditions are challenged and found wanting.

Chapters 1 and 2 are composed of a significant discussion of the historical foundations of western philosophical thought which engendered positivism, social Darwinism and biological determinism and how these philosophies fostered notions of intellectual inheritability based on race and class. These notions influenced early theorists such as James, and even Dewey who is often considered the "pre-eminent educational philosopher of his time" (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). Willis credits Dewey with insightful thinking in regard to the insidious nature of hegemony in education. She points to Dewey's progressive thinking and respectful views of the child, in support of her own arguments. However, Dewey's view of education and its close connection to democracy were not enough to stifle the onslaught of scientism underpinning the testing movement. Scientism, which Willis defines as the strong belief that science and scientific methods will always lead to greater knowledge and even truth, was the theoretical base of the testing movement. It affected virtually every discipline it touched yet Willis implies that this overwhelming trend may have been prevented in education had the counterviews of some early African-American thinkers such as A. J. Cooper and E.B. Du Bois been heeded. Willis emphasises the laws in the southern U.S. forbidding the teaching of reading to slaves and how this foundation in illiteracy established a long-term trajectory of poor achievement. This, just at the time when the push for education of all (white) children in America had also become politically motivated. Hence while education was being promoted as a social good for white children, educators of black children risked severe punishment.

Chapter 3 takes the reader through the early standardization and measurement of reading comprehension tests and how reading comprehension itself was viewed by teachers and researchers. Here, Willis details how the process of hegemony works in practice. Cultural practices in education and materials such as schoolbooks "...reflected the beliefs and values of the ...dominant class especially with regard to culture, religion and morals" (p. 71). Chapters 4 and 5 leave no doubt in our minds of the inherent racism of some prominent and highly influential educational psychologists. Willis notes that dissenting views were prevented from influencing trends in reading comprehension and intelligence testing because of their tight control of research and research grants and substantial influence in Ivy League and other prominent universities. Chapters 6 & 7 show how reading comprehension research and testing was, and continues to be developed with only the dominant group of white middle-class learners as a focus. Minority children of any aspect, race or class, are marginalized in these efforts. Willis forcefully brings to our attention the "ideological and cultural imperialism" (p. 179) of this thinking. She shows how some extensive work on the part of researchers outside of education, for instance psycholinguists such as K. Goodman, and F. Smith, were politicized and labelled as undemocratic, their influence effectively stifled in the process.

Willis spends Chapter 8 showing how the current American government's efforts to address the achievement gap in the form of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policies will fail. She accuses the current government administration of censoring dissenting views and supporting the status quo. For instance, she cites the Rand Reading Study Group and their 2001 published list of what "is known" about reading comprehension. She wonders why what is known about African American Vernacular English is not included. "The failure to include scholarship critical of the mainstream as an alternative perspective is what helps to keep the dominant ideology intact" (p. 293). In her view accountability measures embedded in government policy will never improve the

achievement of minority children. Fundamental assumptions about reading comprehension and testing must change significantly to account for differences of race and class.

Throughout the 374 pages, there is little of the reality of the day to day endurance of “the underserved” children of America that we find in such painful and compelling reading by authors such as Johnson & Johnson (2006). Willis is not appealing to our sense of humanity, but to our reason. She forces the reader to see through the eyes of an academic, the calculating entrenchment of political and cultural hegemony at work and convinces us we are all complicit in the “achievement gap”. In her view, educational research and testing continues to be construed in order to keep white middle-class children at the head of the pack.

What Willis does differently in this book is give us the minority perspective through an academic lens. This is an important point of view, given that the achievement gap affects such a large proportion of this population in the U.S. and in some quarters, is directly implicated in socio-economic inequality (Harris & Herrington, 2006). What she does well is present her case, usually with tight referential back up, albeit with a peppering of anecdotal commentary directed at the establishment. What she does not do is give a clear alternative or direction where research around reading comprehension and testing should be headed in order to effect significant change.

One may accept Willis’ strong argument or not. She expresses her desire to allow all students “the opportunity to become proficient readers based on the instructional methods best suited for their learning style” (p. 305). When coupled with her vague references to the need for an accounting of underlying differences in class and race we don’t get a clear picture of how we should approach the elimination of the achievement gap, especially in reading comprehension and testing. Perhaps specific ideas for real change will be found in a sequel.

This book will be of interest to educators at all levels, but especially researchers in educational psychology, or assessment and achievement. It should be of particular interest to those who work in educational governance and a priority for anyone who is currently addressing differences in achievement based on race and class.

## References

- Dimitriadis, G. & Kamberelis, G. (2006). *Theory for education*. New York: Routledge.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks Antonio Gramsci*. In Q. Hoare & G. Smith (Eds. & Trans.), N Y: International Publishers.
- Harris, D., & Herrington, C. (2006). Accountability, standards, and the growing achievement gap: Lessons from the past half-century. *American Journal of Education*, 112 (February), 209-238.
- Johnson, D. & Johnson, B. (2006). *High Stakes Poverty, testing, and failure in American schools* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.
- Willis I. A., & Harris, V. (1997). Expanding the boundaries: A reaction to the first grade studies. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 32(4), 439-445.

## About the Reviewer

Margaret-Mary McGivern is a Doctoral Candidate in the Faculty of Education at York University, Toronto, Ontario. She is also a Grade 7/8 Teacher in a Public School north of Toronto. Areas of interest and study include student achievement, motivation, and the nexus of school board

practices, government policy and university based research and how this plays out in the classroom.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.



**[Editors: Gene V Glass, Kate Corby, Gustavo Fischman](#)**

~ [ER home](#) | [Reseñas Educativas](#) | [Resenhas Educativas](#) ~  
~ [overview](#) | [reviews](#) | [editors](#) | [submit](#) | [guidelines](#) | [announcements](#) | [search](#) ~