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ABSTRACT

In societies with rich oral traditions in which knowledge and wisdom are transmitted by way of mouth, through recitation, song and drama, the inability to read and write does not mean ignorance or lack of intelligence. Literacy is, however, essential for gaining legal and socioeconomic rights. Literacy campaigns should therefore involve changing the existing social, political, and economic structures. Literacy is also a women's issue. Although the world illiteracy rate has decreased from 44% in 1950 to 25% in 1990, the proportion of women in the world's total nonliterate population is increasing steadily (it had increased to 60% by 1980). Among the reasons for higher illiteracy rates among women are following: the technologies of goods production, the nature of human reproduction, and institutionalization of violence in the state. Literacy teachers working with women in developing countries must first convince women of their need for literacy. Women themselves should determine their literacy programs' objectives, and literacy's benefits in terms of empowerment and social change should be explained to them. Programs should emphasize knowledge over product, and teaching materials should be relevant to women's situation and give them legal, social, and political knowledge so that they can change their condition. As in developed nations, literacy programs in developing nations should be based on two-way flow of information between students and teachers. (MN)

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Women and Literacy: definition of literacy, the causes and manisfestations of illiteracy, and implications for the educator

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INTRODUCTION

I came to this course with an assumption about literacy, namely that the term meant being able to do some reading, writing, and enough math to enable one to get along in the grocery store or at the bank. However, this course has challenged me to look at the matter in greater depth, to consider alternative definitions, to alter my attitudes towards literacy and consequently to come up with ideas on how I can teach literacy in Canada or in a developing country.

This paper describes how I arrive at a definition of literacy that is acceptable to me as an individual. It also examines the causes and manifestations of illiteracy, and considers the implications for me as an educator.

DISCUSSION

Bhasin (1984) states that there are false assumptions about illiteracy. In India, where she works, campaigners for literacy use such statements as "illiteracy is an offence to mankind" and other statements giving the impression that illiteracy is the same as ignorance and the lack of intelligence (p. 37). Because illiteracy is widespread among the poor it is often taken as a cause of poverty, exploitation and the inhuman conditions of the poor. Conversely, literacy is expected to be the remedy for the removal of poverty and regarded as the magic word which will open all doors for the poor.

Stromquist (1990) echoes Bhasin's statement that illiteracy should not be equated with ignorance. She adds that literacy should not be seen as determining the acquisition of personal power or the attainment of national development. She defines illiteracy as a manifestation of the unequal distribution of power and resources in society. However, Stromquist see the ability to read and write in an increasingly technological society as a fundamental need. Literacy constitutes an essential tool for gaining legal and socioeconomic rights.

According to Ramdas (1990), literacy must be defined to include, but go beyond the skills of reading and writing. It must be seen as a process of empowering underprivileged people. It is linked with people's quest for, and attainment of justice. Literacy is to be conceived of as a "political, human and cultural process of consciousness-raising and liberation" (p. 31).

I agree with Bhasin and Stromquist that illiteracy should not be equated with ignorance and lack of intelligence. There are societies with rich oral traditions in which knowledge and wisdom are transmitted by word of mouth, through recitation, song and drama from generation to generation. In these societies, the inability to read and write does not mean that one is unintelligent or ignorant. There are also societies where wisdom is equated with age and where the inability to read or write have no impact on knowledge or intelligence. However, I agree with Stromquist that the ability to read and write is an essential tool for gaining legal and socioeconomic rights. For example, the tribal peoples of South America, who are losing their land and livelihood as a result of deforestation and environmental problems created by others, need the ability to read and write to express themselves to fight for legal and socioeconomic rights.

Thompson (1983) in her discussion on adult education and the disadvantaged points out that the term "disadvantaged" is used by some to describe individuals who suffer - almost like sickness - from a variety of social ills such as poverty, bad housing, low educational standards and unemployment. Their afflictions can be identified by a variety of symptoms: apathy or fatalism, lack of confidence, ambition or drive to get out or improve their situation; limited horizons, a tendency to live for the present; restricted use of language and a possession of a "residual hostility to the whole idea of education"(p. 42). According to Thompson, this definition of "disadvantaged" is based on middle class misconception about poor people. It is used as a means of distracting attention from the deficiencies of the educational, economic and social systems. Thompson proposes another definition for "disadvantaged": it starts from the use of a class analysis and from the recognition that social class is a social creation designed to institutionalize inequality in terms of economic rewards, power, status and opportunity.

Whether we use the term "illiterate" or "disadvantaged", and whether we talk about Western industrialized countries or third world countries, I see there is a link between illiteracy, status, power and wealth. Therefore a campaign for literacy should involve changing the existing social, political and economic structures.

Literacy is also a woman's issue. Ramdas (1990) cites some facts in this regard. The world illiteracy rate fell from 44% in 1950 to 25% in 1990. However, the proportion of women in the world's total illiterate population is growing steadily. In 1970, 58% of all illiterates were women, by 1980 this proportion had increased to 60%. Stromquist (1990) states that in 1985

the percentage of illiterates who were female had reached 63%. These figures lead me to conclude that, while the battle for literacy is being won for men, it is being lost for women. Indeed, the female illiterate bears the double burden of both the yoke of poverty and the misfortune of being born female. (Ramdas: 1990) She adds that even in advanced industrialized countries like Canada, there are similar connections between women, poverty and illiteracy.

In accounting for the reasons for women's illiteracy Stromquist (1990) cites historical reasons, some of them related to the technologies of production of goods and to the nature of reproduction of human beings, and others to the institutionalization of violence in the state. Men were therefore able to develop and sustain an ideology of women's physical and mental inferiority. According to Stromquist, men also controlled women's sexuality, a common belief being that women's honour needed to be protected and that men were simultaneously the enforcers and violators of this norm. Women thus face constraints in terms of time, space, and societal expectations. Stromquist adds that the rationality underlying women's subordination must be found in the stability it lends to social arrangements.

In considering Stromquist's comments I recall my own observations in Malaysia, a Muslim country in the developing world, where I lived for nineteen years. I observed that Muslim men treated the women as inferior. This was evidenced in the practice of polygamy and sexual division of labour by which women were assigned the roles of housework and childcare. At the time I was there, it was common for girls not to complete their primary education. They were taken out of school by their parents so they could take care of younger siblings or supplement

family income.

Having considered what literacy means, the reasons for it and its manifestations, I am now in a position to consider how I, as a teacher, can teach literacy in Canada or in a country in the developing world.

In considering what to teach, one needs to ask what kinds of knowledge women need. Stromquist (1990) refers to the fact that literacy is generally not a need felt by the poor and that they do not perceive it as being important. Poor women are too busy surviving to see the potential that education would have for them. This is a case where correction of this perception is necessary. I agree with Stromquist's comments in this regard. For example, I observed that in Malaysia, among the aboriginal tribes living in the interior, the women spent so much time clearing land, planting and harvesting, taking care of the children and doing household chores, that they never had time to consider the benefits of having an education.

According to Stromquist (1990), women need any knowledge that will enable them to negotiate effectively for legal, social and political rights. Women need information to increase their awareness of oppression (ie. the existence of patriarchal ideology) and exploitation (inferior pay and treatment in the labour market). Stromquist feels that programs for women's literacy must balance the knowledge that women seek with that which women need. Because of their poverty, some women are more interested in learning skills for income generation than for literacy and gender consciousness. Bhasin (1984) remarks that women need knowledge not so much to read

and understand the world but to read, understand and control their world. In my opinion, if women cannot read they would not know what is going on around them and what is affecting them. Therefore they are at the mercy of existing structures. If women cannot write, they cannot petition in writing for changes. Therefore, the first task of the literacy teacher is to convince women of their need for literacy.

The next task of the literacy teacher is to examine existing literacy programs with regard to their adequacy. According to Ramdas (1990), the question to be addressed is how and whether literacy programs enable and empower women to take their rightful place in society, and by so doing, attain the goals of justice - social, economic and educational. Literacy policy-makers argue that increased female literacy is the key to development, and will ensure better childcare, nutrition, the small family norm and promote a better climate for learning (Ramdas: 1990). This argument is faulty because it focuses on desirable national goals rather than empowerment and emancipation of women. Ramdas adds that the experience of educated middle class women in developed and developing societies shows that access to education and literacy does not automatically ensure justice. The middle class women often bears a double burden - whether as a breadwinner or supplementary earner, in addition to bearing the brunt of all the traditional female roles of child-bearing, mothering, nurturing and so on. I agree with Ramdas in this regard because literacy should not be a tool to oppress the oppressed.

Ramdas states that women, whether from the developing or developed world, want literacy, but on their terms (1990). They want literacy programs to be practical and relevant to their lives

and needs. However, I feel that its benefits in terms of empowerment and social change should be explained to them. I feel that the objectives of literacy programs for women should be determined by women themselves rather that being imposed externally by national leaders or foreign-aid agencies.

Thompson, in Adult education and the disadvantaged (1983), raises an interesting point concerning the notions of adult education programs. She states that the building of educational programs on notions of competitive individualism is not regarded as a good idea. Educational opportunities that merely improve the lot of individuals without significantly altering the life chances of entire groups and communities are a way of legitimizing inequality. She argues that the emphasis should be on the social aspects of learning. Education should be liberating for entire groups of women, men, blacks and trade unionists. This means working, wherever possible, with groups that are already organized and at the same time building on feelings of solidarity and common interest.

In my view, the emphasis on competitive individualism promotes the idea that there are winners and losers and that the winners become the elite in the social structure. Competitive individualism can be seen in the educational systems introduced by the British to countries under their sphere of influence, including countries in the Middle East and South East Asia. It contributes to class structure in these countries, a feature which is the opposite of equality.

With regard to the content of adult education programs, Thompson (1983) suggests that they

should concentrate more on process than on product and be knowledge useful to the conditions of people and to the struggles in which they are engaged at the workplace or in the community. It should be knowledge that can assist students, for example, to be more active in their trade unions, in neighbourhood politics and pressure groups and in women's action groups. I think this is a good point. Knowledge is more important than product because it empowers the oppressed to seek change.

It is also important to consider the teaching materials used in literacy programs. Bhasin (1984) analyzed seven primers used in Northern India to see what messages, information and values are given through them. These primers were produced by major government and non-government organizations who were pioneers of literacy work. According to Bhasin, the main content was housework, childcare and family planning. Although the primers were mainly for rural women, they were only shown in their housewife and mother roles. Of the seven primers, three talked about marriage in the first chapter. All ignored the fact that 50-60 per cent of rural women are also involved in agricultural production, and are farmers and labourers just as the men are. Bhasin questions the relevance and assistance of such primers to women who labour outside the house, who produce food, store it, look after animals and bring fodder and fuel. Bhasin makes a good point. Not only should the primers be relevant to the women's situation, but they should give women legal, social and political knowledge so that they can change their condition.

In considering the methodology of adult literacy classes, Bhasin (1984) notes that most classes are run like classes for children. The flow of information and knowledge is one sided: from the

urban to the rural areas, from literacy teacher to the learners. Bhasin adds that the village adult who knows so much about so many things, who knows how to survive in the most adverse conditions, is treated as a person knowing nothing. The messages that often come through literacy campaigns is that those who are illiterate are also ignorant, unwise and unintelligent. These attitudes towards illiterate people does not build self confidence and self-respect.

Thompson (1983), who describes adult education programs in developed countries, quotes Kirkwood as saying that the relationship between teacher and student has two clear sides: "those with needs, mindless incompetents, on the one hand, and the need-meeters, on the other, perceptive, enquiring, responsible, able to take a broad view and to make prescriptions". Thompson adds that this kind of provision for disadvantaged groups is really the application of the provider's model.

In my opinion the flow of information between the student and teacher should be two way, whether the teaching takes place in the developing world or in the developed world. Illiterate or disadvantaged students have a wealth of knowledge from life experiences that they can give the teacher. Literacy programs should be partnership programs between teachers and students as both parties can learn together.

In addition to the two way flow of information, Bhasin (1983) states that the teaching methodology should be participatory and democratic so that it increases self confidence, self respect, articulation, and democratic skills. I think that this methodology is a good idea because

it gives the students the skills to work for changes in the social and political structure.

Having considered the objectives, content and methodology of a good literacy program, it is timely to look at a successful experiment in Nepal and consider what lessons I can learn from it. Parajuli and Enslin (1990) described their experiment in Gunjanagar Village, Nepal. Here, according to the authors, the women's movement demonstrates the relation between social movements and popular education in the empowerment of women.

Parajuli and Enslin used key words, which not only taught the alphabet, but allowed explorations of contradictions in social reality, so that women could reclaim and redefine their powers. One of the key words was "taas" (card playing) which represented one of the greatest difficulties in the women's lives. Using these key words in their literacy classes the women discussed men's card playing, drinking and violence against women. These women recognized the need for them to develop solidarity with one another and intervene when husbands were beating their wives. Here we see a literacy program which goes beyond mere words to providing a forum for generating debates on gender relations, identities and other issues.

The women of Gunjanagar used two strategies to claim respect and identity (Parajuli and Enslin: 1990). They used the populist and legitimate rhetoric of development in order to establish literacy classes, discuss ecological and social problems and to demand a meeting place. They also argued for a regeneration of the public spaces and respect that had been undermined in the process of modernization. The women encountered resistance from male members of the

community including physical and psychological violence. Far from subduing them, male opposition angered them, led them to confront the sources of their oppression and spurred them on to further commitment and activity.

According to Parajuli and Enslin (1993) the lessons to be learned are that an empowering education is not one which imposes alien knowledge but one which critically generates the history and culture of its participants. Also, an empowering education should reveal the conflicting interpretations of knowledge between the dominant and subordinate groups. Literacy provided a forum for the women to discuss issues and generate action.

The Nepalese study by Parajuli and Enslin (1993) strongly supports the concepts and arguments of literacy forwarded by Bhasin (1984), Stromquist (1990) and Ramdas (1990). The application of culturally-sensitive literacy classes in the Nepalese experiment is generally consistent with the need for relevance and practicality in literacy programs.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores various definitions of literacy to arrive at one which is acceptable. It examines the causes and manifestations of literacy and considers its application for the educator. The lessons I learn from this is that literacy is more than teaching reading and writing. It is a process of empowering underprivileged people. As a literacy teacher, I should not impose alien knowledge on my students but assist them in critically generating their history and culture.

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