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Working with learners with (dis)abilities: How New Literacy Studies challenge the Ontario government's policy focus on employment for adult literacy

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The three of us met in 2014 through our shared interest in adult literacy. We are colleagues as practitioners and as researchers; altogether, we have been in the field of adult literacy in Canada since the 1980s. Our experiences working with learners come from our role as volunteer tutors and paid staff in provincially funded programs and grassroots initiatives funded only through private donations. Over the years, we have worked with learners who have diverse physical, mental and cognitive abilities. For many of these learners who have to contend with day-to-day challenges and discrimination stemming from their (dis)abilities, their learning is further compounded with their struggle with poverty due to the paltry financial support from the government. As we develop and evolve our approaches to support learners in their goals, we put into practice the principles

from New Literacy Studies (Gee, 2020; Papen, 2023; Street, 1997) to connect literacy education with the social and historical contexts and to support learners in defining their own literacy. In this paper, each of us shares a story from our own practice to highlight how we offer a learner-centred approach to build a social practice of literacy for both the learners and ourselves as educators. While we use our stories to challenge the dominant narrative of literacy education for employment as seen in government policies (Elfert & Walker, 2020; Elias 2023; Walker & Rubenson, 2014), we also share our own learning, unlearning and relearning of how we define adult literacy as educators. The learner-centred approach in literacy education may not appear especially radical on its own; however, under the increasing pressure from the state to use adult literacy as a labour market tool, the possibility of pursuing learning outcomes other than employment could challenge the deficit narratives that are far-too-often attached to literacy learners with (dis)abilities (Elias et al., 2021).

Keywords: adult literacy, practitioners, policy actors

Introduction

It is not news to say that many adult literacy learners are faced with multiple barriers and obstacles making not only their access to education difficult, but also day-to-day living challenging (Jacobson, 2021). For learners who have physical, mental and/or cognitive impairments, the lack of infrastructure and support in adult literacy policy further adds to the already difficult situation as they are often considered as unsuitable to participate in adult literacy programs (Elias et al., 2021; Pickard, 2021). Despite the difficulties, learners continue to pursue literacy on their own terms, sometimes pushing back against negative narratives of who they are (Bacon et al., 2022). Their travails and experiences as played out in education and community spaces are witnessed by adult literacy practitioners who are or should be part of the collective process for change through reflections and understanding of the systems of oppression (Babino & Stewart, 2020; Elias et al., 2021; Tett & Maclachlan, 2008).

As practitioners in the field of adult literacy in Canada with experiences

spanning over the last three decades, we have observed many instances where the education system does not meet the needs of learners. In the Canadian province of Ontario, where we all work as practitioners, adult literacy programming known as Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) is funded through Employment Ontario. Under the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF) released in 2011, adult learners choose to work on goal paths towards employment (MTCU, 2011). In addition, LBS includes a performance management system for adult literacy programs to serve suitable learners who are more likely to gain employment (Government of Ontario, 2016). Learners with disabilities who typically seek opportunities to improve their reading and writing could be left out as a result (Lynch, 2013). We see all this as an ongoing shift of adult literacy to being seen and used as a labour market tool for global competitiveness and human capital (Elias et al., 2021). This shift towards the economic focus has implications both at the policy level and also for individual learners, as the social justice aspect of adult literacy is increasingly marginalised within government policy (Elfert & Walker, 2020). For adult learners, the literacy-for-employment model continues to devalue their contributions in society and place them in lower hierarchical positions in society (Elias et al., 2021). The accountability measures tied to program funding lead to the selection of learners who are deemed as more likely to succeed, leaving out others as unsuitable (Elias et al., 2021; Pickard, 2021). As we witness the oppression facing adult literacy learners, and as we reckon with our contradictory role in supporting and resisting government mandates, we hope that the stories we share in this paper offer a further understanding of how practitioners work with learners in order to push for policy change that challenges the status quo. We also hope that our stories spark future research on the experiences of learners and practitioners to fill in the growing gap in academic literature (Babino & Stewart, 2020; Belzer, 2022; Crooks et al., 2021).

Our stories

New Literacy Studies

Before we get into our stories, we would like to first talk about the framing of our stories through New Literacy Studies (NLS). We want to frame our stories through NLS because it connects the activities of

our work with learners to the social structures, making literacy a social practice instead of a cognitive process (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1997). NLS also recognises that literacy is something that is socially and culturally constructed based on our individual and collective past as well as the relationships between learners and practitioners which also change over time (Bacon et al., 2022; Barton & Hamilton, 2012). In sharing our stories, we follow the ideological approach to literacy by making visible who we are as practitioners and also our power and privileges in the relationships (Power-Carter & Zakeri, 2019; Tett & Maclachlan, 2008). After sharing our stories, we will loop back to NLS and discuss the connections of our stories with NLS and our call to action for practitioners and researchers in the adult literacy field.

Judy's story

My introduction to adult literacy came in the summer of 1981 when I was hired by Frontier College (which was renamed as United for Literacy in 2022) for a project coordinated by Marsha Forest and Marilyn Collins (Forest & Morrison, 1988). It was a project specifically focusing on adults who were living with an impairment, be it intellectual, physical, emotional and/or mental. The tutors in the project included a diverse group of university students, some with visible physical disabilities while others were seen as able-bodied. The summer job appealed to me because of the opportunity to use my second language, American Sign Language. Although I was already comfortable working with Deaf people and I never saw Deafness or any other impairment as an impediment to learning, I was keen to learn more. This summer program showed me how literacy is much more than the written word, and it continues to inform my work to this day.

From Marilyn and Marsha, we received a crash course in both disability rights and learner-centred literacy. One of the concerns back in the early 1980s was that many adults with impairments were stuck in long-term care facilities or hospitals for disabled children with little access to learning opportunities. They were defined by their impairments more than anything else. The learners I worked with that summer were marginalised by their (dis)abilities and also by their low literacy skills. Many of them felt neglected throughout their schooling, characterised by a system that did not expect them to learn much. The tutoring approach I learned that summer meant that I learned to meet learners

where they were at – both literally and figuratively –sometimes literally in their homes, in an institution where they lived or at the Bob Rumball Centre of Excellence for the Deaf and also meeting them at their skill level.

This practice of meeting learners where they are – using a method of communication that they prefer and moving with them towards their goals – has stayed with me through my years of literacy practice. While the Ontario government continues to see literacy as an employment focused program, I still do not. For me, literacy skills, defined as reading the word and reading the world, are about leading an engaged life – especially with a larger community, a larger world. One of the effects of low literacy coupled with (dis)abilities that I have observed is that learners often prefer to stay close to home or only visit familiar places. One of my goals as an instructor is to take class groups to places in the city that they would like to visit but have not such as museums, markets or transit hubs. For example, when working in the northwest region of Toronto, the learners told me that they had never taken a train. They had taken the subway but never a commuter train or an inter-city train. With a commuter train station close to our classroom, I organised a field trip to take the train downtown and explore a major train station. The learners were able to see that nobody on the train knew or cared that they lived in a low-income neighborhood in the city; in fact, they realised that the people on the train and in the station were not paying attention to them. This was poignant because the learners had been concerned that people would know they had never been on a train before. The class trip gave them the confidence to take the train on their own, which one family did that summer.

I can credit Marilyn and Marsha's teachings that summer with setting a solid base for me to ground my work over the past 40-odd years. Literacy is not just for some of us, not just for the able-bodied but a right of being alive. Literacy is not just for the workplace but is an essential part of our lives wherever we are, something I think most learners know regardless of what the provincial government says.

Annie's story

I first started working in adult literacy in 2006 as a volunteer tutor. Unlike Judy, I never received much training. I vividly remember that

on my first day, the program coordinator told me about the different resources in a filing cabinet, but I was never told who the learners were and what their challenges might be. As little training as I did get, there was one workshop on dyslexia which was presented as a learning disability and something common among adult learners coming to literacy programs. However, there was no discussion on how society shapes our understanding of conceptualisation of (dis)ability.

Since no one in my family or I have anything that society considers a disability, I have to admit that disability was not something that I had thought about a lot. But since 2017, I have been working with the same learner who is on the provincial disability support program. He would be quick to say that yes, he is on government support, but he does not identify as having any disability. By the time I started working with him, I had been tutoring for more than ten years so I was comfortable and confident with my learner-centred approaches (such as looking for materials that would be of interest to the learner and also at the level of complexity that would be appropriate). Meeting where the learner is at requires some back-and-forth and some trial-and-error. This perhaps is the result of learners' past learning experience where they might have been expected to be passive students; therefore, the shift to active learners with a say in various aspects of a session can take some time.

Throughout our sessions, I have witnessed how poverty demeans our humanity and our dignity and thus compounds the effects of the impairments. While the government does offer support, the many different and convoluted steps required to access such support are simply mind-boggling. For example, it was unclear whether the learner could access the provincial eyecare benefit to get some desperately needed eyeglasses. So, we looked it up on the computer; however, the information on provincial websites was far from clear or up to date. We ended up phoning his support worker together to get some clarification. After getting confirmation that he was eligible, we then started looking for a place to get an eye exam. As we searched for possible places, he mentioned that not all places like dealing with people getting an eye exam through social assistance. This example shows that while the learner and I worked together to decipher the written text and discussed at length to understand how government policy regulates individuals with (dis)abilities, he was showing me how he often tried and managed to persevere on a day-to-day basis.

Literacy as a social practice to me is to be able to navigate through these extremely complex steps while maintaining a modicum of dignity. The financial support programs from governments make people's impairments something to be ashamed of because the program separates them from others, which is usually part of the schooling experiences of learners as well. The othering effect is chilling and denigrating. What I try to do in my work is to point out the learners' individual experiences are related to the broader societal attitude towards those with (dis)abilities. From my perspective as a tutor, I see (dis)abilities as something that society has chosen not to accept even though government support may exist. Their (dis)abilities are inextricably intertwined with their literacy and their assigned positions in mainstream society. Using a learner-centred approach allowed me to push back on the province's employment focus and gain a better understanding of how the learner actually uses reading and writing in a critical way.

Phylicia's story

I was first introduced to adult literacy in 2008 when I volunteered as a tutor with St. Christopher's House (which was renamed as West Neighborhood House in 2014) in their adult literacy program. I was a few months out of university and wanted to continue the community work that I was involved in when I did an internship in Washington, DC a year before. I was paired with a 44-year-old man from Jamaica who worked as a cook at a restaurant in Rexdale. We worked together to improve his literacy for approximately two years, and it was this particular experience that fueled my passion for adult literacy work. It was also the realisation that there was no such program in my own Scarborough community of Kingston-Galloway-Orton Park (KGO), where in 2012, over 50% of its residents struggled with low literacy. With the encouragement of the East Scarborough Storefront and Action for Neighbourhood Change, I wrote a proposal and received a microgrant of $5,000 in 2013 to start a grassroots program called KGO Adult Literacy Program (KGO-ALP). Now approaching its 11th year, the program continues to support adult learners with their reading, writing, math and computer skills.

In 2014, I started working as an Instructor Coordinator with Frontier College (which was renamed as United for Literacy in 2022, as

mentioned earlier in Judy's story) to help grow a satellite site in Scarborough, which presented an interesting dichotomy in contrast with my grassroots work with KGO-ALP. Among the participants in both programs, and like the learner Annie has been working with, many receive financial support from the Ontario government. My experiences of supporting learners with (dis)abilities require a deeper understanding of the socio-economic and systemic challenges these individuals encounter on a daily basis. It also makes me question how our education system often leaves children, youth and adults with (dis)abilites behind and disenfranchised. Working within the provincial framework that heavily focuses on literacy-for-employment, I found it difficult to support learners with (dis)abilities without feeling the pressure to move them through the program quickly. In contrast, at KGO-ALP, although we work without the stability of provincial funding, we are able to support learners with (dis)abilities without the pressure of metrics, such as meeting or exceeding the target number of learners recruited, served, referred or exited. This means we can meet learners where they are at in terms of their skills while acknowledging their challenging mental health and socio-economic realities.

In 2016, a learner in her late 50s was referred to KGO-ALP after not having much success in two previous literacy programs. Despite having developmental impairments, this learner set her goal to improve her reading comprehension. From our conversations, it was apparent that she has lived many years in isolation because the previous literacy programs were unable to support her to stay engaged within her community. This year marks her eighth year with KGO-ALP, and she is still engaged and committed without the worry of being exited from the program, which in turn has built her confidence and connections in the community. For me, literacy is multifaceted, interconnected and implicitly and explicitly embedded in our society. Meeting adult learners with (dis)abilities where they are at is vital, especially in ensuring that they are receiving the needed support not only to learn and understand the material, but also to gain more confidence in their skills.

Discussion and Call to Action

Our stories and experiences show that using the guiding principles of NLS, practitioners are still able to make space for and support learners with (dis)abilities and their needs on their terms, just as Jacobson

(2021, p.55) wrote, "there is no 'hard-to-serve' learners, only 'ill-served' ones". However, such learner-centred practices could run the risk of missing service metrics that are tied to funding (for example, by keeping learners on the program longer than deemed appropriate). As a result, the funding pressure connected to the government's literacy-for-employment model inevitably creates a gap between practitioners' desire to provide a learner-centred space and the financial need to comply with government funding. From learners' perspectives, access to adult literacy programming that places learners in the centre may be limited and dependent on individual practitioners. As such, they continue to be marginalised and disabled by the barriers to learning. The stories and reflections in this paper echo Tett and Hamilton (2008) that it is important for practitioners to act collectively and in solidarity with learners to push for broad policy level shifts that recognise each learner's own agency in directing their learning and also each practitioner's expertise in designing learner-centred programming.

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