

I

Development, Literacy, and Women

The realization that women constitute two-thirds of the world illiterates and the rich research evidence that women's education produces substantial socioeconomic benefits across diverse cultures, makes literacy programs for women a tenet most people would accept. Yet, few large-scale literacy programs exist and, for the women served through them, even fewer seek to offer what might be considered the *raison d'être* for literacy skills—exposure to knowledge that helps them to understand micro and macro forces shaping their lives and to visualize alternative realities.

This book focuses on a literacy program with explicit emancipatory objectives. The MOVA (Movimento de Alfabetização de Jovens e Adultos) literacy program sought, through the medium of literacy, to enable individuals to become active agents in the process of sociopolitical change. Though the program was open to both women and men, this study focuses on women participants and, more precisely, it probes the experience of a small group of them—nineteen women—as literacy students and as beneficiaries of the knowledge provided by such a program. MOVA, a city-wide literacy effort in Sao Paulo, Brazil, under the aegis of a progressive political party, sets the context and provides the data to examine in some depth how literacy concerns play in the lives of poor women and how literacy as a social objective is seen by collectivities in marginal residential areas, by progressive political sectors, and by their counterforces.

MOVA was alive for four turbulent years. Its large scale and openness to scrutiny, its vibrant energy and strong commitment, and its political rationale are elements seldom crystallized so clearly in a single literacy effort. Of particular importance to those interested in literacy was MOVA's basis for engaging in the massive effort: the desire to enable the large number of disenfranchised and passive poor to see themselves as individuals with rights (and duties) upon the state, to position themselves as citizens with legitimate demands for social change and for a life that recognized their claims as individuals regardless of social class, race, and gender differences.

Noble and ambitious claims are not uncommon justifications for literacy. What is less common is the examination of the confrontation of these claims against the grounded realities of program implementation. This book seeks to provide an example of such examination. We bring many actors to the fore, from the women who joined as individual participants, to the grassroots groups which wanted to create more informed militants, to the political parties that both made MOVA possible and destroyed it. In examining literacy, therefore, this book proposes to link micro- to macro-level events, showing how they are unavoidably intertwined. To cover both focuses, it also becomes clear that a multidisciplinary approach, combining pedagogical concerns with contributions from sociology and political science, is indispensable to capture in full the complexity of adult literacy programs.

This book is organized around four major rubrics: the role of literacy in development, particularly in the creation of individuals with claims upon the state; the various ways in which MOVA enacted gender dynamics either in participation, classroom experiences, or uses of literacy spaces; the individual outcomes from literacy in terms of cognitive and psychological gains, and the individual's incorporation into literate habits; and the forms that linkages between grassroots groups and the state take as literacy programs focus on emancipatory objectives. The book reviews the program from a feminist perspective and concludes by pointing out the powerful and sometimes inevitable tensions between being an adult woman and access to literacy, between attempting to create critical consciousness and providing social spaces, between conducting literacy programs for the elimination of socioeconomic inequalities and coexisting in an unmodified capitalist mode of production. As in life, however, all experiences are valuable. MOVA is found to make insightful conceptual, strategic, and practical contributions to our expanding understanding of literacy.

1. Literacy and Development

Most people are in favor of enabling the young to attain literacy. They see reading and writing skills as crucial to develop educated and informed members of society; therefore, advocacy for free and compulsory public schooling is practical universal and officially endorsed by most governments. Literacy for adults receives less of a unanimous endorsement. Some think that investments in adult education are less certain than those in young people; others think that adult illiteracy is a remnant of the past whose reproduction will be avoided by greater attention to primary education. The much stronger attention given to early literacy (that of children) is reflected

in the developments following the Education for All Declaration (EFA), agreed upon by countries in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand. EFA set up a set of specific activities that are to be implemented in order to promote access to basic skills for all persons. Its implementation, however, has taken a different path; it now appears that the priority by most nations and international agencies supporting this program centers on primary education.

Those who see adult literacy as a fundamental provision by either the state or society present two different arguments. For the modernists, the inability to read or write in increasingly technological societies is thought to place individuals in disadvantageous positions vis-à-vis the labor market, their political environment, and interpersonal relations. In cities, much more than in rural areas, the lack of literacy handicaps the individual in relation to others, and although life without literacy is quite possible, it tends to be a diminished existence.

Theories of national development based on modernization theories impute a large and positive role to the presence of literacy in a sizable part of the population. Modern attitudes are considered to be facilitated by access to knowledge in printed form, and institutions such as the school and the factory—both predominantly urban institutions—are considered to foster modern values and norms. The city itself is supposed to contribute to the emergence of literacy skills: population density, proximity to mass media, and constant exposure to a print environment foster the need for communication and create an atmosphere where print is available and influential (McLelland 1961; Lerner 1964; Inkeles and Smith 1974).

In the city, the mass media—newspapers, magazines, brochures, in addition to TV and radio—flourish and with them the possibility of reinforcing literacy skills. Ferreira, a well-known authority in literacy cognitive development, notes that “writing is part of the urban landscape and urban life constantly requires use of reading” (n.d., p. 3). Observers of urban influences contend that the city “constitutes an educating machine through daily contact.” The city, by virtue of its resources—architecture, library, museums, cultural events, and recreational facilities—is expected to be naturally multicultural and to provide rich educational experiences (Ajuntament de Barcelona 1991).

For a second set of individuals, the social transformers, literacy is crucial to develop a critical mind, capable of understanding its socioeconomic environment, seeing the linkages between poverty, oppression, and ignorance, and willing to engage in collective action to bring about social changes. The social transformers subscribe to the philosophy of Paulo Freire (1972) and are found among many of the popular educators in Latin America and other developing regions. In their view, literacy should serve a major political role in creating and maintaining a strong civil society.

The literature on modernization sets positive expectations about literacy. Sometimes these expectations are so great and so unrealistic that critics—particularly anthropologists of education—have responded by saying that the notion of literacy sometimes serves more to divide people than to help them. These critics have also argued that attributing many good results to literacy (greater access to jobs, larger incomes, persistent political participation, lower mortality, greater health, etc.) shifts the nature of crucial problems from structural obstacles to individual deficiencies. And so it creates a myth of social change predicated solely on individual agency.

As to literacy being fostered in the city, it has been observed that large pockets of illiteracy exist in cities. These pockets are usually associated with inter-regional migratory movements, but in many cases urban illiterates can reside in the city for years without any development of literacy skills or habit. Persons especially likely to become trapped in conditions of illiteracy are those who must work intensively to survive in the city; not surprisingly, women are overrepresented in this group.

1.1. The Concepts of Literacy and Illiteracy

“Literacy” and “illiteracy” are commonly used terms. They accompany descriptions of large populations as well as policy statements. Yet, these terms are extremely hard to define with precision. Most measurements of literacy use *de facto* definitions that are based on global assessment (some undetermined combination of reading and writing skills in a given individual) and self-perceptions of literacy ability. UNESCO’s current definition of illiteracy as the inability to “read and write and understand simple written messages in any language” (1993, p. 47) has not generated much improvement because the “simplicity” of the text is not spelled out in the definition, nor is clear the degree of “understanding” being sought. The application of individually-administered tests makes the counting of illiterates extremely time consuming and expensive; therefore, the UNESCO concept, beyond its own imprecision, remains underutilized.

Literacy statistics for most countries derives from census data. These data, in turn, rely on statements made by the key household respondent; only in a few cases do countries use better indicators, such as the years of formal education completed. As will be seen later, even years of schooling is a poor proxy for the actual measurement of literacy skills. Some progress has been made in the careful measurement of literacy. Such progress assumes no threshold for literacy but rather different levels of literacy (for instance, ranging from “having difficulty dealing with any printed materials” to “meets most everyday reading demands”). The emerging measurement of literacy necessitates extensive and individually-administered testing;

because of its costs it has been conducted only in a few countries (e.g., Canada and the U.S.) and through a small sample of the population.

What makes the binary terms of "literate" and "illiterate" so slippery when applied to adults is that over time individuals increase initial levels of heterogeneity. Experiences, skills, interests, challenges, environmental conditions, and support systems in their lives all contribute to differential paths and pace of literacy development. Further, these set of forces not only affect literacy skills but affect reasoning processes as well (Scribner and Cole 1981). In other words, our capacity for reasoning is developed independent of our literacy skills, although it might be strengthened by it.

Individuals who enroll in literacy programs bring different levels of proficiency, deal with the printed word in different contexts, and have developed various social mechanisms for gaining access to print. Anthropologist Erickson (1988) argues that literacy is best conceived as a practice in which knowledge is developed for specific purposes and which operates under specific contexts of use. Commenting on the two terms, Kaestle states:

The categories "literate" and "illiterate" are neither precise nor mutually exclusive. Some individuals learned to read but then forgot how. Some were literate but read only rarely. Some perceived themselves to be literate but were perceived by others as illiterate, or vice versa. Furthermore, individuals who were unable to read participate in literate culture by listening to those who could read; the worlds of literacy and oral communication are interpenetrating (1991, p. 3).

"Illiteracy" is indeed so fuzzy that Charnley and Jones (1979) propose an intriguing definition, "Illiteracy is an adult who thinks he[*she*] has a reading or writing problem" (p. 171). Practitioners also find it difficult to define illiteracy. Horsman (1989), who conducted literacy programs among rural women in Canada, discovered that women who had only grade two or three education could read many items. Alternatively she found women with eight or nine years of schooling who had difficulties reading basic material. After interviewing these women and identifying what they could and could not read, Horsman found herself unable to decide who was literate and who was not. She concluded: "The depiction of a dichotomy between literacy and illiteracy does not contribute to understanding the way in which different skills become important for different purposes at different times in one's life" (1989, p. 369).

Several scholars, particularly from anthropology and social psychology (Scribner and Cole 1981; Fingeret 1991; Street 1984, 1991), argue that it is meaningless to assume a great divide between literate and illiterate people and to create polar categories as there is wide variation in the way literacy is used, perceived, and mastered. Further, they argue, some functions such

as problem-solving and computation are dependent on the context of the situation of use and purpose. This context may not call for written communication, so it is possible for human reasoning skills to be attained by both literate and nonliterate individuals.

The understanding that variability in literacy skills is shaped by context has also alerted several scholars to rely on certain research methodologies, especially ethnographic approaches, as best suited to detect patterns of variation among individuals. Fingeret is a qualitative researcher who disputes the deficit perspective of illiteracy—i.e., that illiterates are less capable individuals. She posits instead the existence of an “oral subculture”—an interpretive community comprising family and close friends who negotiate meaning face-to-face through verbal behaviors (cited in Newman and Beverstock 1990). Whereas the deficit model would lead to the conclusion that illiterate persons are incapable of facing the demands of everyday life, the oral subculture model calls attention to the existence of inner (usually family-based) and extended networks in which other actors provide their assistance and skills to non-readers, often through some informal barter system. In this barter arrangement, “illiterates” provide resources others need in exchange for help with print communication.

Many definitions of literacy obviously exist. One that we consider adequate for our work is proposed by Kaestle et al.: “the ability to decode and comprehend written language at a rudimentary level—that is, the ability to say written words corresponding to ordinary oral discourse and to understand them” (Kaestle et al. 1991, p. 3). This definition puts emphasis on comprehension in ordinary life and sets a basic level as the minimum standard. This definition also does not preclude the subject’s rating of his/her own competence.

1.2. Literacy as a Socio-Cognitive Process

Adult literacy acquisition is an unfolding and complex process not yet well understood. While some adults can become proficient readers in a relatively short time (i.e., six months to a year), most others take a long time to develop reasonable skills. It is not clear why many adults take long to become fluent readers and writers. Is it living in the space of a nonliterate culture, the existence of many adults with major psychomotor difficulties, the scarce availability of time for learning, the burden of prejudice, and negative experiences with schooling? Is it that the task of translating message to print and vice versa is indeed a more complex cognitive process than we are willing to admit? Or is it a function of the quality of most literacy programs and their teachers? Often, indeed, literacy teachers are

volunteer persons with low qualifications, operating in extremely heterogeneous classes, and facing a lack of educational materials (Haddad 1992).

One view of literacy that is gaining considerable ground sees it not as a simple set of decoding and encoding skills but as communicative practices that develop to the extent they are used by the people themselves in their respective communities (Scribner and Cole 1981; Fingeret 1983; Street 1984, 1993; Cook-Gumperz 1986). These practices affect the development of literacy *skills* as well as *attitudes* and *beliefs* about literacy.

Adding an important dimension to the understanding of literacy as social practices is Street's notion of "autonomous" and "ideological" approaches to literacy. Although his labels are not the most felicitous, Street terms an "autonomous" approach to literacy those views of literacy as a technical skill to be attained independent of its social environment. Considering "autonomous" views of literacy to be erroneous, Street advocates the conceptualization of literacy as "ideological" in nature. He states that literacy is,

. . . not just a set of techniques to be easily and quickly acquired but part of a complex ideology, a set of specific practices constructed within a specific infrastructure and able to be learned and assimilated only in relation to that ideology and infrastructure: the acquisition of literacy is, in fact, a socialization process rather than a technical process (1984, p. 180).

Street argues for an "ideological" approach to literacy—one that recognizes that literacy practices are embedded in deep social locations and interactions as they are shaped by gender, class, and ethnic social markers and identities (Street 1984, 1993).

Heath (1983) introduced the concept of "literacy event" to mark social situations in which the production and/or comprehension of print is involved. This concept proved to be most helpful as a strategy both to operationalize observations and to link literacy skills to specific functions and uses. Street (1991), however, prefers to use the concept of "literacy practice" to increase our analytical powers and to include the uses and the meanings behind literacy events. Street describes literacy practices as: "the combination of actual behavior and underlying conceptualization of what is involved in particular uses and meanings of literacy" (p. 45). Street insists that we must understand the subjective meanings of literacy before we may examine literacy habits in different cultures and at different times.

Marginally literate adults have restricted views of reading and writing. They often believe that a literate person is someone "who knows a lot of words, who can spell these words without problems, and write them down" (Scheffer 1993). They confine literacy to its technical and mechanical

aspects. Referring to U.S. groups, Scheffer traces this belief to their mechanistic and fruitless schooling experience:

Many low-literate adults while in school when they were children, ended up in the lower reading level groups. In these groups the majority of time was spent on working through worksheets and practicing their spelling in a drill-and-practice fashion. Over time, this practice instilled in them a view that reading and writing is all about correct spelling and grammar. What to read and to write was always decided by the teachers and the student's work would be returned full of red markings for spelling and grammar mistakes (Scheffer 1993, p. 21).

Significant advances are taking place in our understanding of the cognitive process involved in literacy through the contributions of the fields of cognitive psychology and situated cognition. Yet, the majority of studies concentrates on early literacy, i.e., the development of literacy among children. Research on the cognitive processes of adult literacy students is quite scarce. An unusual study of persons with expertise in reading has noted that, unlike other skills, reading is not an expertise in itself but is intimately linked to other competencies—usually related to modern occupations. This expertise develops over time and is highly associated with frequent and continuous practice. However, it is apparently not “practice” per se but the ability to interact in a knowledge-transformative manner (Scardamalia and Bereiter 1991). This being the case, it could be reasonably anticipated that people whose occupations do not bring them into immediate and constant contact with printed materials will achieve levels of reading competence proportionate to their literacy practices.

Some of the most exciting contributions are those coming from social or situated cognition approaches to knowledge. Applied to literacy, these perspectives maintain that literacy skills and eventual literacy practices emerge not merely as a function of the acquisition of coding and decoding skills, but as the byproduct of a constant process of social interaction in various contexts. That literacy depends on people's knowledge of the content as well as on their language and reading skills was first observed by Stich, borrowing from contributions of social learning posited by A. Bandura (1972, cited in Newman and Beverstock 1990). Continuing the same line of reflection, ten years later Heath proposed that literacy is culture specific: people make sense of literacy within the context of their cultural practices. Literacy learners make sense of text on the basis of what they see and hear; orality thus is intimately linked to literacy (Heath 1983). Cook-Gumperz (1986) introduced the notion of “situated meaning” to highlight that our understanding of literacy is shaped by verbal messages and practices in the

home and local environment. In fact, she noted that some of the family and community practices are not always conducive to literacy.

Sociocognitive views of learning tie well with constructivist views of teaching. Although there are various strands of constructivism (some paying more attention to the ongoing individual construction of cognitive structures and others emphasizing meaning as a product of the interaction of individuals with language and symbolizing practices in their communities), the common thread in these approaches is to view knowledge as constructed by individuals when making sense of their world. Constructivism sees knowledge as a combination of the learner's background and purpose for learning. Under constructivist approaches teaching allows a great deal of discovery and experimentation among learners and gives them an active role in the creation of their own knowledge. Constructivism calls attention to the natural diversity among students and considers this diversity a useful opportunity for learning, as students in interaction with each other increase their own understanding of the literacy process.

Two main pedagogical consequences flow from constructivist approaches: greater consideration is given to the social purposes for which students seek literacy and more attention is paid to the structure as well as content of tasks students undertake so that "direct instruction in needed skills will be provided as part of the task, at points where it is needed" (Langer 1991, p. 18). This sociocognitive view also calls for a goal-embedded context, moving away from segmenting the content into parts. It aims to provide a holistic approach where instruction takes place during "meaningful reading activity" and where "social interactions play a prominent role in learning" (Palincsar and David 1991).

A major authority in constructivist approaches to literacy in Latin America is Emilia Ferreiro, whose work has centered mostly on children. She sees literacy as a process of successive hypothesis testing about the rules governing the connection between sound and meaning in a given language. Ferreiro and Teberosky are very much against what they call "deciphering" (engaging in letter-by-letter or word-for-word recognition) and copying (reproducing someone's "markings" without understanding their structure), explaining:

We must let children write, not so they invent their own idiosyncratic system but so that they discover that their system is not the conventional one and in this way find valid reasons to substitute their own hypotheses with our conventional ones" (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1979, p. 277).

A critical pedagogical principle accepted today in cognitive development science is to consider the experiential knowledge of students (Raizen

1991). Under the current framework, a crucial role for the teacher is to facilitate the process of discovery and connection-making by the learner (Gomez-Palacio 1993).

At present, there is a greater willingness to recognize adult learners as very different from young literacy learners. Both manifest heterogeneity within their groups. Children arrive at school at different stages of the reading process. Some are at the very beginning, others are able to read out loud. Adults also evince heterogeneity, but because of their longer life trajectory, the range of their diversity is greater. Not only is the diversity of literacy skills greater among adults, but the uses of literacy among them is different from that of young children. With the various uses there may be stronger reasons for acquiring literacy skills; simultaneously, because many of these adults depend on their own efforts for economic survival and the welfare of others, literacy goals compete with numerous ongoing daily routines and demands.

1.3. Obstacles to Literacy

Generally, only a small proportion of those individuals considered in need of help with literacy skills enroll for literacy programs. Mass campaigns under revolutionary regimes such as those in Cuba and Nicaragua boast a large number of literacy students—something which is possible in cases of widespread social mobilization and a spirit of economic-political transformation. Under non-revolutionary conditions, literacy efforts mobilize very few people. Even in Tanzania, whose former socialist government displayed considerable seriousness in its literacy objectives, only one-fifth of the total 2.5 million individuals eligible enrolled in the literacy campaign (Mundy 1993).

There are three different interpretations of “barriers” to literacy. Two provide explanations at the individual level and are compatible with what Street would term autonomous conceptions of literacy. The other provides explanations at the social system (structure) level and is strongly linked to the conception of literacy as ideological. At the individual level, one set of explanations highlights the adult’s difficulty in acquiring coding and decoding skills at a later age, noting that these cognitive processes are complex and take time to become established. The other set identifies many logistic and situational problems that impose demands on poor adults and make both their participation in literacy classes and their use of literacy skills a tenuous activity which constantly competes with other time demands and priorities in the lives of low-income social groups.

The structurally-based interpretation posits that contemporary socio-economic structures need to differentiate among people in a socially ac-

ceptable way. While in the past it was easier to discriminate against people on the basis of their physical characteristics ("race") or language patterns and social manners ("class"), in a society that increasingly upholds meritocratic norms, it is possible to discriminate against "illiterates." "Illiterates," from this perspective, refers to a widely varied group in which ability levels can be different regarding both "intelligence" and "reading/writing" skills. The wide nature of this definition enables the category to serve as an effective social marker. Further, the social system needs this category because it enables it to place a group at the bottom of the social ladder. To move out of this location is very difficult because individual changes are very few and because the "good things" associated with literacy such as a better job and income will not become a reality for poor people who do not have the social networks to assist them. Endorsing the ideological perspective of literacy, Street (1984) argues that literacy in different societies "is more often restrictive and hegemonic, and concerned with instilling discipline and exercising local control" (p. 4).

The phenomenon of limited participation in literacy programs has prompted research on obstacles to this participation; the notion of barriers or deterrents has often been examined (Valentine and Darkenwald 1990). These obstacles, it should be noted, have been investigated by looking at individuals who enrolled in literacy programs and subsequently discontinued; it has seldom been examined by looking at the larger pool of those who did not avail themselves of the literacy offerings. Newman and Beaverstock note that "we know very little about illiterate adults, only about those who are literacy students" (1990, p. 123). This is an important observation because those who do not participate are often the large bulk of the illiterates.

A frequent barrier to enrollment in literacy programs has been that of motivation. Proceeding almost tautologically, the literature has asserted that if individuals did not become students or had dropped early, they were not interested enough and thus lacked motivation. An example of this line of thought is reflected in King's argument:

The emphasis on commitment, participation and mobilization underlines very powerfully the fact that the problem in literacy work is motivation, not just of the government but of the illiterate population. This again makes literacy very different from most mainstream education, for it would seem undeniable that literacy is the one level of education in the Third World where people are not clamoring for more education (King 1991, p. 151).

Gradually, research is showing that motivation as an explanation invokes psychological forces while ignoring practical and logistical obstacles

that poor people—the most likely to be the illiterates—face in their everyday life. Wikelund et al. observe:

Adult participation in literacy education is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, influenced by numerous interrelated forces in individuals' personal makeup, their families, their lives, and the environment and society in which they grow, learn, work, and live (1992, p. 24).

Most literacy programs are characterized by low attendance. A study of the literacy programs in Kenya (Carron et al. 1989) found that attendance ranged from 42 to 72 percent. Similar rates have been reported in several UNESCO-funded projects, particularly the Experimental World Literacy Program, conducted in 1960–65 in eleven countries (UNESCO/UNDP 1976).

Participation and retention have often been investigated through survey methods. However, this methodology fails to inform us as to how barriers to participation and retention operate and how obstacles interact with one another to produce specific intensities and frequencies. Rockhill notes that, for instance, age is well known to affect participation in adult education, yet we do not know how age is interpreted and experienced in the lives of different people (1982, p. 6). There is still very limited research on what it means to adult learners to be participants in an adult education program. Research on the interaction among program, student, and environment is also scarce.

There are few longitudinal studies of literacy learners. Longitudinal studies are certainly more difficult and expensive than cross-sectional ones. An added problem is that individuals in adult literacy programs live transient lives. In this context, some observers consider that even six months of study can be termed "longitudinal."

One of the few studies looking at the connection between poor readers and others in their social networks found that illiterate adults become quite dependent on people such as friends and relatives (Flecha 1990). Poor readers also have a very limited geographical space; many of them consider going downtown a major enterprise. Flecha, a well-known Spanish adult educator, states that for the literacy student, "the widening of the area for action and the points of reference will be one of the main conquests of literacy" (1990, p. 116).

Horsman (1989) identifies barriers to women's participation in literacy programs such as unemployment, poor housing, poor food, and lack of childcare. Her study of rural women in Canada identified that the cost of fuel to drive to town for classes and the cost of childcare were major obstacles. Important obstacles were also presented by husbands either through physical violence or more subtle actions such as tampering with the car, or not allowing the use of the car, or refusing to babysit for their wives.

Rockhill's study of Hispanic women enrolled in English literacy programs in the U.S. found that they faced problems in terms of obtaining or bypassing spousal approval, fulfilling responsibilities derived from their household and family duties, and attaining linguistic fluency in English due to their limited exposure to the public sphere (Rockhill 1987). Studies of women in literacy programs in Quebec revealed a very common experience among illiterate women: many had to quit school between twelve and sixteen years of age because of family pressures (De Coster 1991).

Time constraints operate as powerful deterrents. Among women, these constraints are particularly severe as they are linked to family and childcare responsibilities. These tasks must be performed constantly and their interruption would require the provision of childcare services by literacy programs (extremely rare) or shifts in the sexual division of labor at home (a possible but infrequent arrangement).

2. Women and Literacy

Many are the advantages that accrue to women's literacy and education. There have been relatively few studies measuring the impact of literacy per se (as opposed to levels of schooling), and even fewer studies focusing on literacy while controlling for other confounding variables. Because the existing studies usually consider schooling rather than literacy, some observers have raised the issue that perhaps literacy per se is not helpful. In this respect, the response by Eisemon is incisively appropriate:

Objections to the benefits claims for literacy instruction rest on the difficulty of separating literacy and schooling effects. This is a significant *non-issue*. It is a non-issue in the sense that literacy can never be separated from the circumstances of its acquisition and use. It is significant for that such objections reveal about how literacy is often understood, i.e., as a decontextualized cognitive skill (1992, p. 2).

In numerous countries, documented in multiple investigations, education is so strongly associated with reduced fertility and decreased infant and child mortality that it is accepted now as a causal factor (LeVine 1987). Educated mothers tend to produce fewer children, a healthier family, delayed marriage, less infant mortality, lesser maternal mortality, and greater male life expectancy (a very complete summary of the literature is presented in King and Hill 1993). Educated women also exhibit greater participation in the labor force, which results in more income, which women—more than men—tend to spend more on their children.

Despite unambiguous individual and social benefits derived from women's literacy and education, women constitute two-thirds of the world's illiterate. In the developing regions of Asia and Africa there is a sizable gap of 32 and 36 percentage points, respectively, between the literacy rates of men and women. This is not the case for Latin America, where the regional gender gap is about 5 percentage points (UNESCO 1988). Intraregional differences can be quite marked, however. In Latin America literacy rates among Indian populations and rural populations in areas such as the Brazilian northeast are persistently lower than those for urban areas; within those groups, women's literacy rates in general are much lower than for men. It has been observed that high illiteracy rates in general are associated with large gender gaps in literacy.

Because of domestic responsibilities and the passive roles they are expected to play in society, girls are often not available for schooling. And when they become adults, practical and logistic constraints linked to wider domestic roles hinder their participation in literacy events and literacy programs. The end result is that the proportion of women who are illiterate is larger than that of men. Current events, such as the economic crisis affecting many developing countries, is causing the proportion of women illiterates to increase over time. As educational budgets are reduced and parents have to cover more of the educational costs, and as families face the need to have more working members, girls are not being enrolled in school and when they are, early withdrawal becomes common.

A frequent occurrence in adult literacy programs throughout the world is the predominance of women, both as students and as teachers. Women students predominate because more women than men are illiterate. They outnumber the men also because women are less reluctant to admit publicly (via their participation in literacy programs) that they have problems with reading and writing. Men might participate less in some cases because more than women they tend to be employed outside the home and are thus subject to less flexible schedules or to demanding jobs that require much physical labor and drain their energy. On the other hand, the retention rate of women in literacy programs is poor and often women participants do not attain as high levels of literacy proficiency as men because of they withdraw earlier from literacy classes. Women also predominate as literacy teachers because adult literacy teaching is usually a part-time, low-paid job thought to require low levels of education and even no teaching experience (see Lind and Johnston 1990).

While attention has been paid to the question of women's access to and retention in literacy programs, not enough concern has been placed on the question of content. To be more precise, it has been assumed that the knowledge that women need through literacy programs should concentrate

on information and skills that women need in their role as mothers. Thus much emphasis in literacy classes, from India to Peru, prepare women to address needs of children in terms of health, nutrition, and hygiene (see Patel 1987, Ekstrand 1989, Dighe 1989, Bhasin 1984, for accounts of literacy program in India; Gaborone 1989, for Botswana and Kweka 1989, for Tanzania; see also overviews by Stromquist 1990 and 1992).

Another weakness in literacy studies focusing on women has been the scant coverage of the meaning and uses of literacy for them (Rockhill 1982, 1987; Street 1991). "Illiterate" women have been found to engage in literacy practices such as purchasing goods, paying the bills, dealing with social service agencies, and communicating with teachers about their children. Yet, these forms of literacy are not recognized because of women's subordinate role in their families (Rockhill 1987). Husbands have reacted with fear to the possibility that their wives may acquire more skills and status than they; likewise, wives have manifested fear of presenting a threat to their husbands (Rockhill 1987). De Coster's study in Canada (1991) found that a strong motivation for women to participate in literacy classes was to break with the past; many who enrolled had recently divorced, had children who had left the home, were widows, or were unemployed. The women's interest in literacy activities, therefore, reflects a variety of personal agendas and their initiatives create a number of responses among close members of their families, particularly husbands.

The lifecycle is an important component of the individual's position in any society. This is particularly so for women, since their role in reproduction is emphasized culturally. The heterogeneity of women's experience lies not only in wealth and status, but also in whether or not they have given birth, and the number and gender of their offspring (Pankhurst 1992, p. 139).

Gender affects the conceptualization of motivation. Theories of motivation, it should be noted, have been framed in the context of schooling, and in reference to majority language and children, adolescents, or young individuals. In the case of adult women, gender affects family roles, the desires women have for themselves, their availability for class, the objectives they pursue, the childcare needs they must satisfy, and the meanings of the literacy space. Rockhill argues that the gendered perception of literacy that the women themselves develop usually entails "framing literacy in terms of desire, not rights" (1993, p. 170).

Rockhill (1987) and Street (1991) hold that literacy is gendered in the sense that there are gender distinctions concerning the models of literacy people develop. Because, especially in conditions of poverty, women have a marginalized role in society and concentrate on domestic tasks, their literacy skills and practices tend not to be recognized. In Rockhill's study of

immigrant Hispanic women in the U.S., these women mediated the print communications from the school, the social services, and the welfare system, even though their mediating role did not lead to their recognition as possessors of literacy skills. Literacy is gendered also in that many women associated literacy with becoming different persons, radically different from what they were, with better jobs that would enable them to become "somebody." Rockhill's study found that these representations of literacy coexisted at the same time with very traditional practices in literacy programs, which by content and form end up "reinscribing" women in domestic literacy, i.e., made women literate mostly for their roles as family caretakers and home managers.

The literacy functions and uses of literacy seem to vary among women depending on their economic status. Women from upper and middle social classes can use literacy for relaxation and self-edification purposes. Poor women usually have very practical and precise uses of literacy. Although studies on the uses of literacy by women are limited, several are available. A study of thirty autobiographies of women who grew up between the 1870s and the 1920s in the U.S. produced four categories of purposes for reading: reading for entertainment (novels, short stories), reading for information (catalogues, newspapers, magazines), reading for self-improvement (Bible, self-help books on personality, success, childrearing, and family), and reading for cultural maintenance and critical perspectives (combining mainstream literature with socialist and anarchist pamphlets, articles, and books). This study unfortunately did not identify the order of predominance of each category nor the social class of the readers (Tinsley and Kaestle 1991).

The study by Cumming and Gill (1991) is one of the few that look into the dynamics of literacy participation among adult women. This study examined the participation of women immigrants from India in ESL literacy programs in Canada. It reported that very supportive husbands were a prerequisite to program participation, as was having children of school age or about to begin school. The latter reflects that women who participate must also satisfy childcare needs prior to becoming available. Cumming and Gill interpreted the effect of the children's age on the women as one that involved "pressures to communicate with their children's teachers, incentives from children to read to them or talk about their school activities, and assistance from the children with the women's studies in English" (p. 10). Women with young children, however, face serious constraints of childcare. Paradoxically, these women, who could benefit their children under their tutelage, are also the ones most precluded from participation in literacy programs. In the program observed by Cumming and Gill childcare services were provided, which greatly facilitated the participation of young women (the ages of the participants ranged from eighteen to thirty-two,

with a mean of twenty-seven). Cumming and Gill also reported that locating the programs in the student's neighborhood served as a major incentive.

Because of their often harsh economic conditions and limited bargaining power within the household (as power tends to be gained mostly through education or economic independence), many of the women in literacy programs have been found to have stories of domestic violence. These painful experiences create needs for special support among women students, and have lead a number of observers to recommend literacy classes only for women because,

It is essential that they exchange freely comments on their problems and their experience, something they would not do because of timidity or fear within a mixed group. To meet with other women from the same social environment and facing the same conditions, to share that lived experience, sets them free and develops their self-confidence (De Coster p. 24).

In women-only programs, personal anecdotes have, through the elaboration of a collective text, been found to be a very useful means to incorporate the women's experience and words into the literacy training to help the group move forward.

When women seek literacy it is not uncommon for them to focus on narrow tasks, such as improving their performance with their own children (Horsman 1989). Reporting on a six-year experience with a popular education program for women in a low-income Mexican neighborhood, van Dijk and Duron (1986) discovered that an important reason for women to join educational programs was to learn useful things to perform their domestic management roles better. Many of the women were interested in learning how to treat the sick, take care of children, cook well, and plan and administer the family budget efficiently (i.e., how to save in daily expenditures and how to use inexpensive home remedies). Van Dijk and Duron also noted that issues regarding the women's children generated "greater ease to speak and discuss themes related to the relation between human beings" (p. 253). These interests expressed by the women are not surprising given the existing sexual division of labor in most households.

Among poor women, literacy is not always their first priority. They may find it more urgent to improve the quality of the products they sell in order to increase their incomes more quickly. In many instances the women themselves give health as their first priority. In slum areas the housing conditions may call for immediate action (van Es-Scheffer 1992, p. 31).

Ironically, while literacy is advocated as a crucial resource for women, it is also the case that literacy incorporates women into well-established forms of feminine and feminized literature. When women learn to read, the

institutions of literacy—schools, libraries, and publishing companies—behave as instruments of social consolidation. Damon-Moore and Kaestle (1991) found that top-selling magazines for adults in the U.S. sort themselves by gender. This division fosters the maintenance of cultural stereotypes, including gender stereotypes. Luke notes that when women read texts such as soap operas, they are working at rehearsing gender relations in marriage, sexuality, and work. Literacy brings the potential for change but also the likelihood of reproduction of gendered identities.

Gender and class conspire in the production of illiteracy. Poor women work more in the household, thus they are less available for educational programs. Poor women also have fewer economic resources to acquire printed media. Thus, although they may obtain literacy skills they may not be able to turn them into literacy habits.

Rare are the literacy programs that consider women's needs. Most previous non-revolutionary and revolutionary literacy programs were intended to serve both men and women, but one could suspect they intended to serve mainly men since these programs usually referred to the need to create "a new man." A notable exception to this is the current National Literacy Program in Namibia, which is sensitive to gender issues. It will examine all literacy materials from a "gender perspective" to ensure that they "meet the tenet in the Constitution of encouraging positive discrimination in favor of women" and will include monitoring and evaluation activities that will give attention "to facts that prevent women from participating" (Ministry of Education and Culture 1992). Significantly, this guide was jointly developed by governmental ministries, political parties, churches, and NGOs.

3. Grassroots Groups in Literacy

Much more knowledge is needed on the implementation of adult literacy programs, especially regarding their organizational and pedagogical processes (Lind 1988). This statement is true for work done by governmental agencies and even more applicable in the case of NGOs.

The importance of NGOs in the provision of literacy programs arises for various reasons: First, governments—unless under special circumstances—have given only lip service to the need for literacy programs for marginal adults. Given its wider coverage and access to resources, the state is in the ideal situation to conduct literacy programs; but the state is seldom interested. Second, with the current severe economic constraints facing governments in developing countries, it is unlikely that the state will become active in the supporting, much less reform, of adult literacy programs. Third, given

the widespread nature of illiteracy and the necessity to make literacy programs easily accessible to marginal adults, grassroots groups (GRGs) have begun to be recognized as agencies with a strong potential for effective performance. Last, and critically important, GRGs tend to combine literacy efforts with philosophical positions that seek to improve the socioeconomic condition of the populations they serve. Often these improvement goals are accompanied by visions of social justice and equality.

Few governments pay attention to adult education. A major exception was Nyerere's "First Development Plan for Tanzania" (1964-69), about which he said,

First we must educate adults. Our children will not have an impact on our economic development for five, ten or even twenty years. The attitudes of the adults . . . on the other hand, have an impact now. The people must understand the plans for development of this country; they must be able to participate in the changes which are necessary. Only if they are willing and able to do this will this plan succeed. (Quoted in Bhola 1984, p. 138.)

Tanzania's commitment to literacy was strong, reducing illiteracy from 72 percent in 1967 to 15 percent in 1985. The Tanzanians found that an unexpected effect of the literacy campaign was the growth of parental support for formal schooling (Mundy 1993).

GRGs conduct many activities involving adult learning. Unfortunately, relatively few embark on literacy programs. When they do so, their programs are very fragile in that they do not last many years. Those literacy programs active for about four years can be considered "old."

Moreover, the work of grassroots is seldom systematized. Many of them have experiences in literacy which are not even recorded. An exception is the case of the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) mass movement in Kerala state in India. The KSSP initiated a "total literacy program" in 1988, with some 500,000 volunteers. A massive undertaking, it involved some 1.72 million of the identified 2.85 million illiterates. By 1991 the program had added 5 percent to the literacy rate of Kerala, raising it to nearly 94 percent. This work was done in cooperation with the state government, which was then in the hands of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (Zachariah and Sooryamoorthy 1994). Two insights can be gained from this experience: Literacy tends to be promoted by leftist political parties. And, in the absence of a concomitant social revolution, even committed volunteers make a small dent in literacy rates.

GRGs offer promise for the creation and implementation of extensive, persistent, and even emancipatory literacy programs. At the same time, they

are not known for being very gender sensitive. Van Dijk and Durón (1986) note that in Latin America often the analysis of gender problems is considered of little relevance in efforts of popular education seeking social transformation because they emphasize almost exclusively social class analysis.

3.1. Emancipatory Literacy

Moving beyond a concern for barriers to participation in literacy programs, several scholars have called for an understanding of illiteracy as a byproduct of poverty and exploitation. The writings of Paulo Freire have continuously called attention to illiteracy as a consequence of oppression. Within this approach, literacy must be of the “liberatory” kind; that is, a literacy process that is not only dialogical (calling for substantial teacher-student and group interaction) but one whose content addresses the current inequalities in society and explores their causes. The typical Freirean principles call for (1) the use of “generative” words that deal with the most crucial aspects of the learners’ lives, (2) the understanding of and practice with syllabic families drawn from these words from which learners learn to read and write other words, (3) a dialogical process by which the teacher and learners share experience and knowledge, and (4) conscientization, or the examination of the environment around the learners that they may discern cause-effect relationships accounting for their disadvantaged social and economic position. The literacy program experience should thus be emancipatory, i.e., able to create consciousness-raising experience in the learners. Providing further specification of emancipatory literacy, Freire and Macedo (1987) state that this concept implies two dimensions:

On the one hand, students must become literate about their stories, experiences, and the culture of their immediate environment. On the other hand, they must also appropriate those codes and cultures of the dominant spheres so that they can transcend their own environments. There is often an enormous tension between these two dimensions of literacy (p. 47).

This type of critical education, one that examines and contests the socioeconomic environment of marginal(ized) individuals has been widespread in Latin America, where it is known as “popular education.” It is decidedly political in nature, seeking social transformation to eliminate injustices and inequalities. It clearly identifies with the low-income and poor segments of society.

Fingeret is another educator who calls for considering literacy within its sociopolitical context. She deplores that literacy continues to be seen as nonpolitical and separate from social issues such as racism, sexism, class inequality, and poverty. Within this perspective, illiteracy is seen as an in-