

CHAPTER 13

CONCLUSION

Canadian ABE in a Time of Crisis

It is clear that illiteracy is intimately associated with the dynamics of class inequality, and that educational responses to it have had, implications for the course of on-going class struggles in Canada. Central to this link between adult literacy education and these larger struggles have been the perspectives through which educators have viewed illiteracy. As Freire has so persuasively argued, the work of literacy education has in addition to the technical aspect of encouraging the development of the cognitive skills of reading and writing, a socio-political one, that of shaping class-based world views and identities. In his view, the two functions are indivisible, and how they come to be carried out in classrooms and program settings depends to a large degree on the particular perspectives on illiteracy which provides the assumptions upon which educational activities, methods, and materials are based. As we have seen, they can be ones that help shape a setting in which illiterate adults, who are frequently among the most oppressed members of the working class, become more aware of inequality and develop means of collectively dealing with it, or conversely, a setting in which the underlying phenomena of class and class domination are implicitly "out of bounds" as objects of analysis, and these adults are merely helped to become better integrated into the class structure which subordinates them. From this point of view, perspectives on illiteracy, both dominant and alternative, have important implications for the practical fortunes of particular social classes. Adult basic educators have always been political actors, whether they have been conscious of this fact or not, and the various perspectives on illiteracy have been some of the most important ideological raw materials from which their roles have been fashioned.

However, the prevalent view among adult educators of their role in the development of literacy and basic education opportunities in Canada is an essentially uncritical one: the humanitarian struggle to sway a well-meaning but uniformed public, and its governmental representatives, about the need to support their work with adults who suffer from a handicap, illiteracy, which helps to keep them in poverty. As we have seen, when the missing class dimension is inserted, the picture which emerges is quite different: adult basic educators as professionals who, despite their humanitarian intentions and frequently genuine contributions, often serve class interests far removed

from, and opposed to, those of the illiterate adults whom they aim to represent, and whose actions in certain ways and in certain critical historical moments have helped to guarantee the survival of the very economic institutions which periodically require and reproduce an ill-educated and impoverished surplus population of wage laborers.

Basic Shift

It is particularly important at the present time that adult basic educators reach a critical understanding of the political and economic implications of literacy education and their role in it. When we survey the three periods of responses to illiteracy, we find that they were ushered in by basic shifts in the nature of the capitalist accumulation process: the rise of the factory system, the development of monopoly capitalism, and the rapid economic changes after World War II. The outstanding political economic fact of the present time is a chronic crisis in capitalist economies, including Canada's, in which there is the unprecedented simultaneous occurrence of economic stagnation--involving unemployment and lagging output--and ruinous inflation. In the view of many Marxist economists, the present crisis will only be resolved in the long term through a shift in the accumulation process as fundamental as any of the three that we have explored in our historical survey.¹

Different outcomes to this crisis are possible, and no one can foretell which one will prevail. One is foreshadowed in the present conservative offensive, in which the ruling class is attempting to intensify exploitation of the working class (particularly of the large and growing surplus population stratum), through for example, the elimination of what are called "unproductive" government expenditures for education and social welfare. However, an altogether different outcome would result from the success of the working class and its allies in forcing a fundamental reorganization of the Canadian economy along socialist lines.

Each outcome would have profoundly different implications for the future of responses to adult illiteracy. Therefore, adult basic educators can be expected to face mounting pressure to choose in a politically explicit way between the conservative and critical perspectives as the advancing crisis causes the safe 'middle' ground of 'neutrality', as represented in the liberal perspective, to increasingly erode from beneath their feet.

Of course, we must not underestimate the enormous potential recuperative powers of liberalism, as evidenced in its reemergence from the shambles of the Depression in the form of the "New Deal" in the United States. It may yet provide an as yet unglimped alternative, perhaps in the form of a transformed welfare capitalism perspective. However, even if this were to be the case, we cannot look to it to supply anything other than what it has offered in the past--a sophisticated reformism which politically and ideologically incorporates the working class while leaving the foundations of capitalism intact.

Critical Perspective

It has been argued here that the critical perspective offers the best way forward for adult basic educators. It guides them away from the present strategy of seeking to ally with economic and political elites on behalf of, but in isolation from, illiterate adults as political subjects. It points the way to a strategic alliance of adult basic educators with progressive organizations and movements based in the working class, particularly that stratum of the working class which is most exploited and disproportionately suffers from illiteracy--the surplus population. The objective would be to integrate the struggle for adequate adult literacy and basic education opportunities with a larger democratic struggle to transform the structure of class inequality that produces and sustains poverty.

In the present crisis, this would necessarily include a strategy of defense against the conservative "politics of austerity" in Canada. It would mean exposing the class nature of the attempt of conservative political and economic elites to shift the burden of the failure of capitalist economic institutions onto the backs of the most exploited members of the working class, and mounting a fightback against policies which erode existing literacy and basic education opportunities and deny the establishment of new ones.

At the program and classroom level, the critical perspective requires that a coherence, or congruence, be developed between these larger political goals and the methods and content of adult literacy and basic education practice. Of primary importance here is the recognition that while illiterate and impoverished adults need literacy and employment skills, their need for critical understanding of their place in the world is just as great.

Implications for Further Research

It is with enormous difficulty that we shift our attention from the victims of illiteracy to the socio-economic context in which illiteracy plays a part. For example, there are many studies which attempt to ascertain with accuracy the number of illiterate adults in Canada, but few that study the precise social, economic and political forces that produce illiteracy. We can find many examples of studies detailing the personal characteristics and lifestyles of illiterate adults, including their poverty, their lack of "life skills", etc., but it is difficult to find comparably penetrating inquiries into the characteristics and actions of the rich and powerful whose business and industries depend on the cheap labour of ill-educated and otherwise 'excluded' adults, or into the nature and functioning of the capitalist state as it protects and advances their interests. The present study has dealt with some of these neglected questions, but a great deal of work could be done from a critical standpoint at this, the larger political economic level.

Of high priority is a class analysis of illiterate adults, involving a survey of their membership in the different fractions of the surplus population. This would necessarily, include their racial, ethnic and gender makeup, their location by region and community, their pattern of concentration in particular industrial sectors and occupations. In turn, this information would allow us to study their associated consciousness and their potential role in cultural, economic and political struggles, and in particular the role that a movement for literacy opportunities could play in relation to them.

Closely related to this is the need for a class analysis of adult basic educators, similarly focusing on their potential role in class struggles at various levels. This would include the identification of various segments within the profession, their relationship to the state and to dominant classes, their potential for conscientization, etc. Finally, another vital area of study at the political economic level is that of the specific nature of the present economic and political crisis in Canada, involving an identification of both obstacles and openings to collective intervention by democratic movements, particularly those embodying educational demands as part of their larger program.

The foundation of critical political economic assumptions that the above studies would provide would in turn strengthen the basis for research into objectives, methods and materials of ABE and literacy programs and projects. At a fundamental level, studies could focus on arriving at a materialist definition of literacy, examining language as an ideological form ², exploring the subject of class languages, ³ and ascertaining the manner in which ideology becomes materialized in our educational practices ⁴ and how all of these topics relate to ABE and literacy practice in Canada. Furthermore, a study could be conducted into the meaning of various theories of reading--psycholinguistic, phonetic, etc.--for the critical perspective. An interesting inquiry might be made into the history of literacy methods from a critical standpoint. As regards instructional methods, a critique could be mounted of the liberal-progressive ideology and practice of 'facilitation', and the elements which might be appropriated from it for a critical approach.

With these studies underway, various interesting possibilities are opened up for comparative study of literacy and literacy practice in Canada in relation to other countries, including other capitalist nations like the U.S. and those post-capitalist societies in which critical perspectives have been embodied in government policies and large scale literacy campaigns--e.g. Cuba, Nicaragua, etc. Such studies could identify models and precedents which could assist in the advancement of the critical perspective here and help build one with broad generality for movements in various nations.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 13

1. For example, see Manuel Castells, The Economic Crisis and American Society (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 255-263, and the articles in Union for Radical Political Economists, U.S. Capitalism in Crisis (New York: Union for Radical Political Economists, 1978).
2. Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, Language and Materialism (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977; V.N. Volosinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (London: Seminar Press, 1973).
3. Noelle Bissieret, Education, Class Language and Ideology (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).
4. Rachel Sharp, Knowledge, Ideology and the Politics of Schooling (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).