

Literacy: Charitable Enterprise or Political Right

Prepared by the Literacy Working Group, The St. Christopher House, 84 Augusta Avenue, Toronto, Ontario October, 1977 (Co-written by Sidney Pratt, Naldi Nomez and Patricio Urzua)

“Literacy work, like education in general, is a political act. It is not neutral, for the act of revealing social reality in order to transform it, or of concealing it in order to preserve it, is political.” Declaration of Persepolis

The International Symposium for Literacy, held at Persepolis in September, 1975, made the above statement and added that it considered literacy not only to be the process of learning how to read and write and arithmetic skills but as a contribution to the liberation of man and his full development. “Literacy is not an end in itself. It is a fundamental human right.” (Declaration of Persepolis)

Political act, human right, contribution to the liberation and development of people; all these connotations of literacy deal with the social and economic environment in which people develop their own history. It is a social, political and economic context that each day is more and more sophisticated and complex. A conflictive and oppressive context, where we need more than to be literate to cope with our reality in order to develop our lives as human beings capable of mastering our own history, not being passive and oppressed pieces of an economic and political system that condemns us to poverty and exploitation.

In such a context the skills of reading, writing and basic math are just the skills needed to function as labourers, an anonymous material to be exploited: politically, economically and socially. If our goal in literacy is to contribute “to the liberation of man and his full development,” we can see that learning only the skills of reading and writing is insufficient and dangerous. If we are truly committed to the liberation of man we must develop the skills to make the “illiterate” aware of the problems of the society where they live as well as the means of solving those problems playing a real and active role in their solution.

Two important points

1. Since literacy is considered a political act and a human right it is no longer

possible to consider it only as a problem of methods and techniques (the problem of how we teach.) It becomes the problem of what we are teaching (the problem of content.)

2. Literacy as any other means of education in our society has become another means of spreading information within the society and therefore is susceptible to being used politically and economically by power groups.

The first point deals with the problem of content. The Persepolis International Symposium declares: "It is true that all social structures give rise to the type of education which can maintain and reproduce them, and that the purposes of education are subordinated to the purposes of the dominant groups."

When we are talking about content we are dealing with a vision of society, the problems in it, the needs of the people we are teaching, and how we are depicting these to the participants in our classes. The materials that are in use, books - through stories, phrases, character illustrations - do not seem to have a political or social content. This assumes an ethical position related to the role of education in the society and as a sort of proof of the morality of the author. We are not saying that authors or publishers act in bad faith or that they are cynical when they claim that there is not or even should not be any political bias or content in their educational materials. But we do believe that any intellectual product (and educational materials are intellectual products) reflects the society in which it was produced, and with an intent, whether conscious or unconscious. The author takes a position, has a point of view.

In giving information about "reality" to the innocent reader, the author is proselytizing for or against the present social, political and economical system by hiding or revealing the real conflicts that exist within each of these systems. It is very difficult or impossible to be "objective" when all of us form part of and have interests in these established systems. Even when we are using fantasies - animal tales, fables, legends, science fiction - we are still reflecting our reality and transferring our proselytizing in a metaphorical way. Thus education (there is no education without content) can be used either to maintain the way our society is working by hiding (obscuring) reality or by promoting the development of a critical consciousness.

Literacy: Political Right

To finish with this first point and to introduce us to the second, we should say that since literacy has been seen as a human right and as a political act, it must be seen as well as a political right: the right to be informed and educated properly by society to develop the skills that permit us a critical and active approach to our reality which enables conscious and equal participation in making social decisions that affect our lives.

The second point we want to make here is inferred from the first one. Because we are considering literacy as a political act, a human right and consequently a

political right, illiteracy can no longer be considered as personal failure, but as social failure. Rather than a personal problem of lack of ambition, it is the whole social system that has failed and not the individual when he or she is illiterate. Literacy is a social need as well as an inalienable social right. Therefore, it can no longer be confronted as a non-political problem on an individual or private basis. It must be faced in a political way. That means that public policy must address itself to solutions on the municipal, provincial and federal levels of government.

We do not want to say that private efforts have been useless or that governments have not taken the problem seriously. What we are trying to say is that since literacy is a political right, involved with social life, and since it has become a means of public information and citizen formation, the policies and programmes related to it, including the contents of the materials used, should become a matter of public policy. Once there is a public policy in the matter, with programmes and priorities, then private action within the framework of that policy could be helpful and welcome.

An Analysis of Some Materials

Perhaps a brief analysis of what kind of materials in what kind of programmes currently at work in Canada can give us a notion of the importance of why literacy programmes and materials should be a matter of public policy. We have analyzed various materials used in literacy, English as a second language and adult up-grading - Laubach materials, *Canadian English*, *Adult Reader* and the Bare Facts series. Each has a very clear world view which it impresses upon the Canadian illiterate, the immigrant and the up-grading student. These books contribute to the formation of a "Canadian identity" among these students.

Most of the literacy materials in Canada come from the United States. The Laubach method is the best sample. The Laubach literacy crusade is a typical example of private efforts to eradicate illiteracy. Based on the idea of illiteracy as a personal failure, they attack the problem as a matter of charitable enterprise more than as the subject of social right and the political duty of governments. The one-to-one basis of teaching illustrates how illiteracy is perceived as something shameful: a personal failure.

The illiterate cannot demand the right to reading, writing and arithmetic skills, but has to wait for kindly good-willed) missionaries of literacy to get into his prison, his hospital or his neighbourhood to help him learn to read. It never assumes that one participant has an active role in the process of learning other than to repeat what is given. It does not end there. The other problem is in the contents of this material. Since the material is American, the material is full of references to the Capitol, American history, American culture. In this way it is absolutely predictable that the Canadian student will first learn the importance and history of an event like the Fourth of July, the date of American Independence, before knowing about similar Canadian dates, heroes, or history. All the cultural situations in the books reflect the American reality rather than the Canadian one. It can be said that the Laubach method is the best way to get a very American society among the Canadian illiterates, and since the Laubach materials also cover the teaching of English as a Second Language, the hopes for a Canadian identity among those who use this material are poor if not zero.

This is the same in the case of the *Adult Reader* by M. Robertson. It is an American book, used in Canada in up-grading programmes. As in the Laubach materials, again the student learns a lot about the United States and nothing about Canada.

Whether the content is American or Canadian, in all the materials reviewed the relation between the social and economic reality is hidden if not disfigured. When we remember that most of this material is used in the teaching of working class people, we have to say that something is very wrong with this

situation.

Most of the characters in the books are white collar workers, running their own businesses or in the service area of work, never in production. Only the agreeable and successful side of their lives is discussed. They never have problems. Everyone is good and happy: the government always helps them. Their employers are always good and charitable.

Women have a defined role in the books: they are in charge of the house and take care of the children, always passive persons, dominated by their husbands, who bring in the money which the women spend. In the only case of a woman asserting herself, the case of "The man who was short on time," Marsha orders George (this again poses the dominant-dominated roles) to go to the store, the man happens to be stupid, feeble-minded, his only interest in life being to polish his car.

The only time when a woman appears as a central character, and much more, as a "worker," is in the case of poor Sue who had to go to work because her parents died. Her problems are solved, however, when her lawyer proposes to her and marries her, and puts her back in her natural place: the home.

Whose Reality?

Working class people in productive areas of the economy, the relation between bosses, managers and workers, the existence of unions, the reality of different interests in society never appears. The texts create the impression through the characters they use that success is equated with self-sufficiency, such as owning one's own business, being a professional rather than working in a factory or "working" for the U.I.C., by being on unemployment insurance. "Getting ahead" by means of one's abilities is touted as the model for the students. These attitudes, coupled with the emphasis on being the best (see Laubach) create strong needs for competition and individualism among the readers.

Students using these materials will never be able to recognize their own realities. REALITY is the world where the "others" pictured in the texts, are successful, live as good and happy families. The student's own world, full of problems and doubts, is a sub-reality, something to be hidden. None of the contents studied give the tools for understanding the reality of the working class, rights, or any real problems that face us in our daily existence.

This lack of reality of the world shown in the materials analyzed, as well as the lack of elements that permit us to learn and know the world where the readers are placed and the whole world view shown in these books have led us to believe that there is a need for a total revision of literacy policies in Canada.

It is impossible that we permit foreign materials to alienate our identity. It is impossible that we permit in our democratic society that an essential right such

as literacy be less than a public mandate, where decisions are made in public rather than private. The political implications in the vision of society described in materials currently in use cannot be ignored. It is the time that literacy be taken seriously by the governments and that they convoke a planning entity to design policy necessary for a national literacy programme.

Searching For An Alternative

As we have seen, teaching reading and writing is not an objective task, empty of content. At the same time that teaching the alphabet and the sound of the letters is going on, a particular vision of the world is being transmitted. The vision of society reflected in the materials currently in use in Canada is that of a static, uni-dimensional, individualistic, upwardly mobile and American-dominated society. This society is based on avoidance of conflict (consensus) and authority.

Since 1972, a group of concerned people has been working towards the production of curricula for literacy and up-grading classes, as well as English as a Second Language classes. These curricula are based on the recreation of the Freire methodology.

This methodology presumes a different view of human beings, society and education. The human being is seen as a subject, acting upon the objective reality, responding in multiple ways to challenges, creating and transforming reality in relationship with other human beings. Society is seen as historic, cultural and dynamic. Historic, because it is relative to time and space so that it is also human being. Dynamic, since humans are acting upon society as subjects, society is always changing. Education perceived as a historical dialogue where situations are posed as problems and analyzed.

With this framework in mind, the curricula are being developed as tools for naming and interpreting the surrounding world in a “literate” and sophisticated society.

Specifically, in Toronto, various groups have attempted to use methods. In 1972, Joao Medeiros, at the West End Y.M.C.A., pioneered both literacy classes for Portuguese immigrants, using Freire-type code words and phonetically generative words, and English as a Second Language class, utilizing the ideas or situations represented by a selection of twenty-six words as themes for use in the English language classes for Portuguese.

The PISEM team of The Saint Christopher House (Isabel de Almeida, Sidney Pratt, Claire Richard) with Joao Medeiros worked to put the words into eight general categories and to provide for these themes to be recycled four times, whether in literacy or E.S.L. classes, from the most basic level to the most advanced.

1. Identification

In the first cycle, the beginner is given a basic vocabulary of the theme. The participants are encouraged to describe their own situation in relation to the general theme. The coordinator is encouraged to interview one or two of the participants before the introduction of each theme and to extract from these interviews four or five lines describing the situation of those interviewed. These lines can be used as first reading texts.

TRA BA LHA

TRE BE LHE

TRI BI LHI

TRO BO LHO

2. Information and Problematizing

Having gone through the first cycle of eight themes, the participants already have a basic vocabulary. In the second cycle, each basic theme is reviewed, then amplified both to gain more general information about the theme and to discuss questions raised within it.

3. Alternatives and Contradictions

The third cycle provides for a vision of the other two, then a progression into the possibilities within each theme, contradictions inherent, alternatives to particular situations. The participant is encouraged to identify the particulars of his situation in an entire system and to identify the range of his action within it.

4. Generalization

The most advanced students will be encouraged to think beyond their own situations and to mobilize around issues which they have designated as problematic. Questions are asked, such as these: Should Portuguese solve problems as a Portuguese community or with other ethnic and Canadian groups? Why do immigrants take certain types of jobs? Why do Canadians generally not take these? How are immigrant participants in Canada, intentionally and unintentionally (without necessarily deciding, for example, through tax payments) support systems they don't even know about.

This work became the basis for a Working Group on Literacy (Joao Medeiros, Sidney Pratt, Brenda Duncombe, Nestor Castro, Mary Ellen Nettle) which met during 1975 and 1976 to try to understand how to make a literacy curriculum and to share their current experiences. A L.I.P. project was created in 1977 to work full time on the problems of setting up a curriculum and analyzing what was currently in use on the Canadian scene. From the L.I.P. group, Naldi Nomez and Patricio Urzua were hired directly by The St. Christopher House to work on literacy issues, thus indicating the movement of a neighbourhood settlement house into a concrete concern for social communications.

At St. Stephen's Community House, also in the West End of Toronto, Brenda Duncombe has been giving literacy classes for Portuguese cleaning women since 1976. The women were attending E.S.L. classes in the home of one of them. When the time came for them to read or write anything, they always had some excuse such as: "I forgot my glasses," or "I'm too tired to continue the lesson," or "Your kind of writing is different from mine and I can't read it. When the women discovered that in fact none of them could read nor write in her own language, they agreed to work together to learn how to perceive words and to write. In the first part of a lesson, the women would talk about what concerned them, in their own lives, in their neighbourhoods, or in the world. They learned to recognize words that most closely pertained to them: their names, addresses, names of streets nearby.

From their conversations in Portuguese, they gradually came to recognize other words from which they could derive still others, sometimes in Portuguese, other times in English: garage, age, bag from "garbage." The facilitator was not so much concerned with the efficiency of the progress in literacy as with the fact that older women, night cleaners, were overcoming their embarrassment to learn something together.

The West End Y.M.C.A. has continued its work with literacy and English as a Second Language. A 1976 L.I.P. grant enabled them to offer literacy classes in Portuguese, with simple texts and pictures. At present they are working out more complete unit plans.

A more general attempt to develop indigenous material that may be used for literacy is the textbook soon to be released, *Children Speak for Themselves*, collected and edited by Nomi Wall and Judy McClard through the Women's Educational Press.

Designated as a textbook for grades 4-7, the book presents original materials from children in inner-city Toronto schools, their feelings and perceptions about their every-day lives. They show a very keen perception of the problems in their parents' lives: "My mother works at a factory where they make plastic toys. She'd rather own her own business because at the factory she sometimes gets burned with hot plastic..." Because of the relevant content of this book,

various literacy and E.S.L. groups will be using it as classroom material.

Canada: A Developed Country?

It is clear from the proceeding that, except for some isolated instances, Canadians are not doing a very good job in developing adequate indigenous material that addresses itself to the problem of literacy in this country. In contrast, countries with far fewer resources have tackled - and almost eliminated - the problem. That is not to say that countries with fewer resources are the only ones that have a problem of illiteracy - the millions of pounds spent in Britain on the "On the Move" literacy programme belie this. But exactly because millions are not being spent nor even is any real attempt being made to recognize illiteracy as a Canadian issue and to form a national policy about it, we have chosen to look at the attempts of several smaller countries, i.e., Jamaica and Swaziland to use materials relevant to the participants lives.

Our Lands

Our Lands, Reader One, published by the Social Action Centre in Kingston, Jamaica, very simply recounts the struggle of the farmers for freedom to get the land, form a coop, and run the farm: "now we work as one for coop." A lesson plan on the theme "who runs the coop: the General Meeting" makes the point that members of the coop in a general meeting run the coop. Pictures (codes) are used to compare the old way of the "busha" (boss) with the new way of the cooperative.

In discussion of the pictures, the participants tell what they see: in one, the busha is pointing his finger to show the workers what to do; in the other, there is no busha, no one is pointing a finger at anyone else.

Discussion about what the pictures mean bring out the old ways and the new: in the old way, the busha had to tell people what to do because the people were not working for themselves, thus they did not want to work hard; in the new way, the workers are running the farm, they are making their own decisions. " We as one do it. Black man do it. We as a COOP do it," runs the text.

The Swaziland material, KUFUNDZA, is more closely patterned after the Freire approach, where words are phonetically divided and new words can be devised from various combinations of sounds - an impracticality in English. Code pictures generate discussion around the words. Participants discuss various activities in their lives, from having to go to a scribe to get their letters written for them, to having to take the train to Johannesburg because there is no work near where they live. It is important to notice what are the common elements of these approaches to literacy training:

1. The materials used are inexpensive and flexible. There is little investment in the physical properties of the materials, so there is little temptation to continue

to use them when they cease to be pertinent to the lives of the participants.

2. The words and pictures (codes) are derived from the actual experience of the participants. They move the participant from looking at his/her own situation as a personal experience, to the group realizing that it has a common history.

3. The participants always meet as a group, for a social problem demands a social solution which can lead to social action.

4. The payoff for participation is often socialization before literacy, information and conscientization before complete mastery of writing and reading. The dynamic exists in which each part co-creates the material to be used-there is no longer one person giving information and the others receiving.