# Adult Basic Education

## Participatory Literacy Practices: Exploring Social Identity and Relations

# PARTICIPATORY LITERACY PRACTICES: EXPLORING SOCIAL IDENTITY AND RELATIONS

**Pat Campbell**

## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the outcomes of an 8-month study on participatory literacy practices in five adult literacy programs in Alberta, Canada. The findings indicated that identity politics play a pivotal role in the transformation or reproduction of power relationships between and among literacy workers and students. It is only after we have addressed social identity and power/social relationships articulated through "identities" that we can begin to talk about student participation and the creation of new roles for students and staff.

## Introduction

Participatory literacy programs, according to Fingeret and Jurmo (1989), are those which "share the power equally among learners and staff' (p.1). The notion of changing established power relationships between students and staff is woven throughout the literature on participatory practices. Although recognition exists for the challenges inherent in altering power/social relationships, more information is needed on what actually transpires in programs and among students and literacy workers as they try to challenge and change power relationships. This study examined five adult literacy programs that had staff and students who were engaged in this process.

## The Design

The main purpose of this research was to study participatory literacy practices or the active involvement of students in the operation of one or more components of their adult literacy program. The study was guided by the following two questions:
(a) What are the individual and group experiences of students and literacy workers who are involved in participatory literacy practices?
(b) What changes do students and literacy workers see in themselves and in their programs as they become involved in participatory literacy practices?

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his study examined participatory literacy practices in one urban and four rural literacy programs in Alberta. As a reference point, the growth and development of student groups within these adult literacy programs were followed. These groups were viewed as a venue for students to represent their interests and needs in relation to their literacy programs.

The study was conducted within the naturalistic research paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and the data regarding the two research questions were collected through 28 individual and five group interviews, journals, fieldnotes, photostories, document analysis and a questionnaire. Photostories were used as a means of generating knowledge and recording information about participatory practices. Photostories were used because they involve a group experience that employs visual and verbal modes of communication which are appropriate for adults with low literacy skills. As well, photostories are a fluid process which created a safe place for students to express desire(s) for change.

## The Programs

Five programs were involved in this study: (a) Adult Literacy for Action (ALFA), a rural southern Alberta literacy program whose primary mode of instruction was one-to-one tutoring; (b) Action Read, an urban Alberta literacy program which also followed the one-to-one tutoring model; and (c) The Literacy Network, an educational institution which sponsored three full-time literacy programs in the northern rural communities of Creston, Haines Junction, and Virden. Pseudonyms are used for these literacy programs and their geographical locations as well as for the students and literacy workers who participated in the study.

The ALFA program, which is staffed by one part-time literacy worker, serves approximately 50 students from five rural communities on an annual basis. At any one time, approximately 30 to 40 students are working with volunteer tutors. At the time of this study, 39% of the registered students were male, and 61% were female. English was the mother tongue for 67% of the students, while English was a second language for the remaining students. Action Read, with a staff of 3 full-time literacy workers serves approximately 170 to 200 students every year. At any one time, there are usually 90 to 100 students matched with volunteer tutors. During the time of this study, 47% of the registered students were male, and 53% were female. For 69% of the students, English was their mother tongue, while English was the second language for 31% of the students. Finally, the Literacy Network, which is coordinated by one full-time staff member, sponsors 3 literacy programs, each of which is staffed by one paid tutor for every 4 students. The 13 female and 6 male students enrolled in the Creston program were from the Mennonite culture, with English being their second language. Of the 6 female and 3 male students in the Haines Junction program, 7 spoke English as their second language. The 6 male and 5 female students registered with the Virden program were Native and spoke English as a second language.

The Findings

The findings pertaining to social identity and relationships are presented and discussed under the following three themes: (a) representation; (b) moving from silence into speech and; (c) working across differences. Each of these themes underscores how ethnicity, class and gender and the power, privilege and oppression embedded within these respective subject positions affect the way social relationships were constructed between and among students, staff and board members.

<u>Representation</u>

One of the tenets of participatory practices is that opportunities should be created for students to represent their issues, concerns and needs concerning the operation of the program (Demetrion, 1993; Duff-McCracken & Fretz, 1992; Fingeret & Jurmo; 1989). Throughout the study, two of the Action Read students, Maria and Geoffrey, made it clear to the staff that they were interested in serving on the board. Maria stated that there should be "students on the board... [be]cause the program is based around students like literacy people... the students should have a say on what goes on in the program [and the program] should have [the] insight of the student." The staff was supportive of student representation on the board, and Jody, the coordinator, brought it forward to the board.

Henrietta, the board chair, was vehemently opposed to the idea and several of the board members sided with her. According to Henrietta,

> the governing board has to function equitably and you can't accommodate an individual on it. They have to be there as equals in terms of their responsibility for the decisions... having the dedication to really take your one sixth of the responsibility for the decisions made for the organization.'

The board consisted of white, middle-class educated individuals.

In Henrietta's mind, they were responsible citizens capable of making decisions whereas the students did not have the abilities or the right "attitude" to make responsible decisions for the Action Read program.

Vicky, one board member who saw the value in having that "different perspective" on the board, was frustrated with Henrietta, who positioned the students within a deficit model, doubting their abilities and dedication to serve as board members. Vicky informed me that:

> Henrietta is very nervous about student involvement on the board because of the responsibilities of directors and she feels that student can't, how could students be fully aware... that the responsibility that you're asking them to bear is something that they couldn't even properly envisage.

Young (1993) believes that the "privileged usually are not inclined to protect or advance the interests of the oppressed, partly because their social position prevents them from understanding those interests, and partly because to some degree their privilege depends on the continued oppression of others" (p.310). Henrietta appeared to equate literacy with intelligence, cognition,

and rationality, all of which she deems to be superior traits belonging to the literate population. Using this line of reasoning, Henrietta believed that individuals with low literacy skills, such as the students, did not have the cognition, intelligence or rationality to serve on the board. Throughout her tenure as chair of the board, Henrietta effectively used her privilege as a white, middle-class, well educated woman to exclude the students from participation at the board level. The assumptions behind her words shaped the social relations between board members and students as well as the practices and processes of Action Read's board. Rather than wanting to transform the social relations between board members and students, Henrietta chose to perpetuate the status quo through the preservation of boundaries and hierarchies which excluded students from the decision-making process. Towards the end of the study, Henrietta was challenged by the staff and Vicky and action in the form of a brief was taken to explore the "feasibility" of having students serve on the board. The brief read as follows:

> Action Read's mission is to help adults learn to read so that they can become fully functioning and participating members of society. But we don't have any students on the board. Why not? Are there any good reasons AGAINST doing so? And good reasons FOR doing so? This would require a change in the bylaws, but that's easily done. To discuss this intelligently, we need background information on organizations that have taken this route, why, how it works, liabilities and so on.

After the board meeting, Jody informed me that

> everyone felt uncomfortable with Vicky's brief. Henrietta apparently said that board members need to be able to think and to have a commitment to the goals of the program. It was left that a by-law committee will be struck to look at increasing the size of the board as well as the feasibility of students serving on it. (Fieldnotes, May 25, 1993).

Part of the discomfort, according to Jody, was that board meetings "had been going along really nicely, and no one had raised probing questions." The brief served to shatter this tranquillity, disturbing the status quo.

Moving from Silence into Speech

The literature on participatory practices, which uses the framework of advocacy to stress the students' "right to speak" and represent themselves both inside and outside of their literacy program(s), presumes singular, essential, authentic and stable notions of identity among the students rather than multiple identities and positions which, in turn, inform who speaks and who listens. In other words, problematics such as social positions and power relations which underscore the "right to speak" have not been touched upon within the framework of advocacy.

Shelley, an Action Read staff member told me how she had "hoped [the students] would be stronger voiced." Shelley's frustration about the students' reluctance to speak their mind in the student group is woven throughout the following narrative:

The students won't come out and say, well, 'I don't feel comfortable in this', or they'll agree and come along with an idea up until they have to participate and then they'll leave you high and dry. But, all along they may not have been really committed or interested... I don't want this to sound really negative, but either they lack the social skills, they lack the confidence, they lack the articulation to say that they don't really think that this is a good idea or they don't want to do it, but you kind of get this passive-aggressive cooperation up until the event, when you really need them, and then they're not there because they haven't believed in it all along. And that's very, I find that really hard to deal with because I'm more used to talking with people and either you agree and you do something or you don't and then you do something else.

Shelley is frustrated by the students' reluctance to speak their minds and state their opinions; she attributes their reluctance to speak to a lack of confidence and ability to articulate, lack of interest, lack of commitment and lack of social skills. The meanings which Shelley ascribed to the behavior, actions, and words of students appear to be colored by her social identity as a white, middle-class, educated woman; her subjectivity affected her interpretation of the world. Shelley perceived that the students' behavior was in sharp contrast to the behavior of people (friends, family, colleagues) that she usually associated with in her daily interactions, yet she did not question why the students' behavior was different. Consequently, Shelley was locked into a deficit perspective of the students which painted them as lacking confidence, social skills, commitment, interest, and ability to articulate, rather than looking at how the intersection of class, race and gender played a significant role in their participation and willingness to speak their mind.

Yet, in analyzing the accounts of students, a different perspective emerges, one in which students talk about their fear in speaking up and taking a stand. In the text of the ALFA photostory, the students stated that "some of us used to be so shy we could not even speak to people." As well, the Haines Junction students emphasized a link between shyness and not speaking during the production of their photostory. Geoffrey, an Action Read student, also connected a reluctance to speak in groups with shyness. As Geoffrey was speculating about the benefits of the student group, he informed me that "it would help [students] learn to speak. It helps them to get away from their shyness to talk around others. See, it only starts with a group that they know, but then after a while speaking comes naturally." hooks (1988), however, views shyness as a socially constructed phenomenon, placing silence within the larger sphere of social relations, hooks asks the question: "Can their fear [to speak] be understood solely as shyness or is it an expression of deeply embedded, socially constructed restrictions against speech in a culture of domination, a fear of owning one's words, of taking a stand?" (p.17). In the interviews, several students described their fear of talking. Jean, the President of the Haines Junction student group told me how she "couldn't even talk for [her]self, couldn't even you know stand up for myself, like even if I didn't know, I couldn't say no, I ain't going to do this." The data indicate the validity of hook's view that students' shyness or fear of speech may come from past experiences where, as working class, nonacademic people, they were not heard because they did not speak the dominant language of academics and professionals such as doctors, teachers and social workers.

How does feeling shy and scared relate to the issue of identity politics and the reproduction of power relationships? At the time of the incident, the students were undoubtedly cognizant that they were occupying a socially constructed position of subordination whereas the literacy worker was occupying a socially constructed position of privilege. The students probably did not see any space for 'negotiating' these positions, and consequently chose to remain silent. This silence would support Ellsworth's (1989) claim that we must move beyond the notion that 'oppressed' people are silenced and instead, consider the possibility that they are choosing/declining/refusing to talk.

Ellsworth argues that differences in an individual's privilege and oppression in relation to the other members of a group influence his/her decision to enter into dialogue. According to Ellsworth (1989), "what they/we say, to whom, in what context, depending on the energy they/we have for the struggle on a particular day, is the result of conscious and unconscious assessments of the power relations and safety of the situation" (p.313). Ellsworth argues that before individuals decide to unleash their voice, they might well ask themselves, "Do I feel safe?" or "Do I trust the other members of the group?" or "What are the risks and costs of voicing my thoughts and feelings?"

Ellsworth's (1989) thesis helps to explain why the students at Haines Junction were willing to move from an initial position of silence in the fall in which they did not protest the decision that was imposed upon them to a position of narrating the incident the following spring for the photostory. I think the students perceived a positive shift in the power relationships between them and the literacy worker; the students had moved to a position of feeling safer and at less risk. Interestingly, the comment that preceded the first sentence of the photostory was "we don't have to say it, do we?" Liz and I responded by reassuring the students that it was 'ok' to share their thoughts and emotions, that others would learn from their story and that we might resolve the incident in the telling of the story. This final bit of reassurance seemed to clear the air and the students began to tell their story. Hence, a safe space had been created where students could express themselves. After 2 days of discussion, the students concluded their photostory by stating "We have learned not to do what we don't want. We have learned to speak up for ourselves."

The production of the Haines Junction photostory was a turning point in my awareness of how the students' fear of speech was connected to the social/power relations between the literacy worker and the students. The students at Haines Junction decided that their photostory should be about a critical incident in which they were excluded from the decision-making process in their literacy program. That is, the students were not given a choice or an opportunity to make a decision about something that affected them. Due to the confidential nature of this incident, the particulars and specifics cannot be outlined. The students informed me that they did not protest the decision that was imposed upon them by Liz, the literacy worker, because "we just took it [the decision] because we felt shy and scared. We didn't know if everybody was feeling the same way so we did not say anything."

As Liz listened to their narrative, she became aware that she had unwittingly made a decision that was in opposition to the decision the students would have made, had they been given the opportunity. As the students narrative unfolded, Liz began to see her actions and her words through their eyes. In this study, the students became mirrors that reflected Liz's behavior and actions back to her. Although her intentions surrounding this particular incident had been good, she began to see her behavior from a different angle. During the first photostory session, Liz was quiet and attentive to what the students were saying. During the second session, Liz apologized to the students. She said: "I think I'm saying this for myself, but it's kind of an apology too. I got thinking about everything we talked about or said yesterday about having a choice and it being your decision... What I'm apologizing for is that I didn't give you a choice at that time."

During the first two photostory sessions, Liz understood that her previous words about the need to share power and privilege were incongruent with her actions. Liz reflected upon our initial discussions and became alarmed at the contradiction between her words and actions: "Those were the words, and those were the mulling over the words. That was the intellectual." She described how painful it was to acknowledge the contradictions that existed between her words and her actions:

> It is painful to acknowledge that you are working maybe from an internalized dominant point of privilege and silencing and controlling people through that. I think that likely what I was so upset about on Tuesday. On Monday night, on Tuesday morning. At breakfast it was starting to hit me and I think as the day progressed and then I was sitting in on the workshop for the photostory and I think it hit me at coffee break like profoundly that's what hit me and that that's why I think I felt so angry and teary and hurt and I think I first of all I did take it out on people around me. Not the students but and that was even hard initially not to sort of you know say you know fuck them. That's all part of being dismantled when you offer a position and you deconstruct it and it felt like that.

The photostory served as a trigger event which prompted a sense of discomfort within Liz. This was followed by a period of self-scrutiny. During this period, Liz became acutely aware of the contradiction between her words and actions, and the resulting emotions that flooded through her almost resulted in a resistance where she wanted to say "fuck them."

Liz was struck by the contradiction between her libratory words and her "directive, controlling" actions. As we explored this contradiction, we realized that Liz was caught between discourses which were competing against each other. On the one hand, Liz was a feminist who valued collaboration, democracy, equality, participation; these values surfaced in her words. On the other hand, Liz was a female teacher working within in a hierarchical system that valued control, discipline and authority; these values came through in her actions. During our exploration of the contradiction, I commented that "it's interesting because you're a feminist, and feminists usually work in collaborative, you know participatory [ways], so you've been really influenced by..." Without skipping a beat, Liz finished my sentence with the words "by the dominant discourse at [this institution]." Kosmidou and Usher (1991) agree that the teacher is "positioned within a number of different discursive and material practices... all of which have different meanings involving power relationships for her and all of which shape subjectivity, often in contradictory ways" (p.39).

After exploring Liz's contradiction or incoherence between saying and doing, we began to ask pragmatic questions: What follows an examination and acknowledgment of privilege? How do we silence and control others without even being aware of it? How do our subject positions affect the way we process information? How do we unravel and address the tensions that arise from the students' and educators' different subject positions? We did not have any answers to our questions, but we had begun the process of trying to integrate a new way of thinking and being into the fabric of our pedagogy.

Finally, one of the strands within this section has been Liz's contradiction between her words and actions. Initially, Liz did not recognize this contradiction. It was only after she recognized the contradiction that she engaged in praxis. After the production of the photostory, Liz's understanding of identity politics deepened and she stated that she was clearer about student participation and identity politics. Then, she uttered the following statement: "Your actions, your words, your actions." This statement suggests that rather than living a contradiction, Liz had been engaged in a cyclical process of learning that unified theory and practice. A deeper understanding of social identity and relations requires praxis, a dialectical process between thought and action. It was only through praxis that Liz became aware of how she silenced students through her position of authority and how she needed to create a safe space for students to talk.

Working Across Differences

Participatory literacy practices created possibilities for students to acknowledge their social identity in relation to other students in their group; it was a chance to move beyond descriptors such as "we're all in the same boat" and to look at how gender, class, race, culture and intellectual ability constitute social identity and our relations with others. It should be mentioned that the students did not facilitate the acknowledgment of social identity; rather, it was a role adopted by literacy workers.

In this study, the students who attended the student group and/or student association meetings differed in terms of ethnicity, gender, age, ability, and religion. The findings indicated that the literacy workers and students varied in terms of acknowledgment of these differences and their willingness to work across these differences. Furthermore, the findings suggested that, in one program, the acknowledgment of differences was a contributing factor towards the development of a sense of community within the student group. In this study, Barb, the program director of ALFA, was the only literacy worker who verbally acknowledged differences among students at student meetings. In turn, the students within the ALFA student group appeared to share a strong sense of comradery and fellowship.

At the beginning of the study, Barb informed me that she was afraid of starting a student group because of the diversity among the students. In terms of diversity, Barb was primarily referring to abilities, rather than race, class, or gender. For instance, some of the students who attended the group were mentally handicapped and others were not very fluent in spoken English. As well, Donna, the secretary was hearing impaired. Barb stated that "I decided that this forming a student group was a good idea, but I was afraid of it because there's such a diversity of students within [ALFA] and I couldn't visualize in many ways putting them all together." For Barb, one of the biggest challenges in forming the student group was "learn[ing] to work across the differences." She tried to find "common ground" as well as to "make sure that we try to do things that are of interest to all of the group at least once in a while." Rather than denying diversity among the students and treating everybody as the same, Barb wanted a student group that met and supported the specific interests and stated needs of students with different abilities and backgrounds.

Towards the end of the study, Barb named the differences within the group at a student meeting. Rather than pretending that differences did not exist, she thought that an acknowledgment of differences would ultimately lead to an understanding and acceptance of each other and a realization that students had specific needs, based on their differences. The ALFA students also acknowledged and appreciated the group's diversity and this came through during the production of the photostory. In fact, the photostory's first sentence about the student group highlighted the differences and read "our student group is made of people who have different needs." This naming and acknowledgment of differences seemed to unite the group, and I observed a strong sense of comradery and fellowship among the ALFA student group. Peggy, the President of the student group, described the student group as a place where students could "cooperate, I don't know what you call it, but be able to speak together, working together with other people, helping other people." Peggy was describing a community of fellowship -- a place where people come together to speak, to work, to cooperate and to help others.

The remaining student groups did not openly address student differences, although two staff members mentioned diversity during interviews. Shelley was aware of differences among students within the Action Read student group in terms of their age, gender, ability and interests, yet these differences were not discussed in the student group. In terms of ability, Bill was the only student attending Action Read's student meetings who was mentally and physically challenged. As well, Bill had a speech and hearing impediment. In the student meeting, I noticed that he did not engage in group discussion at any time. As Bill was mentally challenged, his lack of participation in the group discussion may have been due to an inability to follow the discussion at a conceptual level. During the meeting, he continually interrupted the discussion with questions that were off-topic. For instance, he kept grabbing my arm, asking for the date of the next meeting. He persevered on this question, even though it had been answered.

According to Jody and Shelley, Bill had attended Action Read workshops for 2 years, and his disruptive behavior at the student meeting was typical. Although the staff makes a concerted effort to include and integrate students who are mentally challenged into the program, Bill's behavior taxed their (and my) patience. Bill, indeed, was a difficult person to work with in a group setting. Yet, the staff continues to accept him and provide learning opportunities for Bill in the workshops.

Within the literature on critical pedagogy, working across differences usually refers to differences of class, gender or race (Giroux, 1993; Phelan, 1991; Rothenberg, 1990; Young, 1993). Where does Bill fit into all of this? The scenario with Bill illustrates that a politics of inclusion, although desirable, does not easily translate into practice. Yet, if we exclude people who do not exhibit appropriate behaviors, how will they ever learn to participate in society? I have chosen to highlight Bill because, as educators, we have all known a Bill -- a person that taxes and strains the patience of any group. Certainly, there is a tendency to want to exclude Bill from the group, a tendency that speaks to the desire for unity, for harmony. Yet, we know that unity functions to oppress and exclude individuals and to repress differences (Ellsworth, 1989; Nicholson, 1991). So, How does one give voice to differences so that they will not be simply reduced to exclusion or silence? As educators, how do we begin to form a bridge across differences among the students and between educators and students?

In the Haines Junction student association, differences related to ethnicity surfaced among students of the same gender. For instance, the Native and Mennonite women held different positions on motherhood and family and this, in turn, dictated who was able to participate in extracurricular activities. The majority of the Native women wanted to participate in fund-raising activities and were willing to attend conferences and go on field trips. However, the Mennonite women were not as interested in extracurricular activities. During the student interviews, I noted an undercurrent of tension with respect to the issue of participation in extracurricular activities. However, the staff and students, with the exception of Jean, did not articulate the relationship between participation and ethnicity.

Jean, a Native student stated that "they don't want to do anything else... Nothing. Just come here, do their work and go home... Cause to them, they find all these other little extra things here is not important." She later softened her criticism by stating that "it's not that they couldn't [participate], it's just that they couldn't because of situations." On the other hand, Heather, a Mennonite student informed me that "they talked about potlucks or bake sales and I didn't really agree with that." In both cases, these two students referred to they, without specifying who constituted they. However, it was clear to me that the Mennonite women constituted the group who did not want to participate in extracurricular activities and the Native women constituted the group who were willing and able to engage in extracurricular activities. Phelan (1991), an advocate for recognition of differences, would respond to this situation with the following suggestion: "The question we must ask is not simply whether people are 'the same' or 'different' within a particular structure, but how they are similar or different and what the effects of that are" (p.136). I think that sometimes it is also important to examine the historical and systemic structures in order to understand why people are the same or different. How would the social relations between the students have changed if the Mennonite and Native students had examined and discussed how their particular social location or their ethnicity underscored their reasons for nonparticipation?

The propensity not to acknowledge and work across differences among students is certainly understandable, given the discourse within which literacy coordinators in Alberta work. Adult literacy students rarely work in group settings within the volunteer literacy programs, and consequently differences among students are issues that are seldom, if ever, raised. When literacy workers do discuss student differences, it is couched in the terminology of learner-centered. Although this term connotes a willingness to address differences such as ethnicity, class and gender, the term has come to mean designing a curriculum to meet the needs and interests of the generic, nongendered, nonraced, nonclassed student.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to discuss how social identity and relations play a pivotal role in the transformation or reproduction of social/power relationships between and among literacy workers and students. It can be concluded that social identity played a role in the reproduction of power relationships between the Action Read board members and students. The Action Read's mission statement reads: "Action Read is a community based, volunteer organization that provides literacy opportunities for adults in order to enhance community participation and quality of life." In reading the mission statement, the question "Who can be a member of the community?" comes to mind. Considering the board's position on student representation in program governance, it appears that while anyone can be a member of the community, only literate citizens can be members with full rights and privileges. Although the students belong to a community of learners and tutors, they do not belong to the community of decision-makers.

The theory and practice of adult literacy emphasizes the visual aspects of literacy such as reading and writing, while the oral aspects such as speaking and listening are often neglected. Yet, in this study the students seldom, if ever, spoke of the visual aspects of literacy. Instead, they spoke of their shyness and their fear to speak. The study raised more questions than answers around their reluctance to speak, but does point to the need to examine how social identities and relations effects who speaks and who listens. It was only after engagement in praxis, that Liz was able to acknowledge how she silenced students through her position of authority. It can be concluded that through examining social identity and privilege and engaging in a dialectical process between thought and action, a transformation in the inequitable social relations between Liz and the students occurred.

Finally, it can be concluded that when differences between multiple social locations were not examined by students and/or literacy workers involved with the Action Read and Haines Junction student groups, tensions and misunderstandings often arose. On the other hand, the ALFA student group discussed its differences, and this resulted in a sense of community among the students.

## Implications

As literacy workers and students engage in participatory practices they face frustrations, tensions, and roadblocks similar to the ones faced by the participants in this study. Packaged as a whole, these constraints could conceivably overwhelm literacy workers from engaging in participatory practices. Perhaps literacy workers and students may be more accepting of

perceived failures if they view participatory literacy practices as a process that gradually evolves over time rather than as a product such as serving on the board or forming a student group. This means we need to challenge the production-oriented discourse which shapes our practice. We need to set aside time to discuss issues such as (a) "What does participatory practices mean?" (b) "What threatens and excites us?" and (c) "What are the benefits and the barriers of participatory practice?"

The findings indicated that identity politics play a pivotal role in the transformation or reproduction of power relationships between literacy workers and students. The question, 'Who are we in relation to the students and their issues?' needs to be posed by literacy workers so that they can recognize and explore their privileged positions in relation to that of the students. Arnold, Burke, James, Martin and Thomas (1991) state that "an unwillingness to recognize and learn about the role of social identity will ensure the perpetuation of power relations and will hold back the work of education for social change" (p.15). This means moving beyond the notion that 'we're all in this together' toward the recognition that the subject positions of educators and students are lodged in power. Also recognition that differences between these subject positions will affect the ways in which we actively interpret the word and the world and the ways in which we work together. We need to develop the capacity to see how our subjectivity-how we hear, how we speak, how we know-is lodged in social relations and shaped by discursive formations.

Opportunities need to be created so that literacy workers and students can collectively explore the questions of social identity and privilege, as it is difficult for literacy educators working in isolated setting to begin posing and reflecting upon these questions to themselves. We must realize that "deepening our consciousness about our social identity requires taking time, probing our own discomfort, risking frank discussion" (Arnold et al., 1991, p.15). Provincial literacy organizations could provide venues, study groups, and opportunities for workers to engage in a pedagogy that explores these issues.

The findings indicate that as educators, we need to shift our gaze away from the individual to look at how systemic factors such as race, class, and gender may play a significant role in silencing people. As opportunities are created for students to engage in decision-making and to represent their interests, we need to be aware of who is speaking and who is choosing to remain silent. Together, educators and students need to analyze the roots of silence, rather than attributing it to shyness or a lack of confidence. To begin this process, perhaps a literacy worker could speak with individual students after meetings to see if they spoke when they wanted or needed to express themselves. If the student chose not to speak, it would be beneficial to explore the issue of silence with the individual and, at a later date, with the group so that students and staff have a deeper understanding. Gradually, more opportunities could be created within and perhaps outside of programs for students to move from silence into speech. For instance, literacy programs could organize safe spaces for students to come together to talk about their experiences and their issues. Perhaps, in time, students could collectively make presentations at community and public forums on issues which personally affect them as a group.

## ENDNOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted the quotes are taken from the author's Fieldnotes.

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