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Paradigms of Learning : The Total Literacy Campaign in India

Adults Learning is a magazine of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE in England and Wales) which publishes solid articles on adult education regarding policy, research, and practice.

Following is a book review that appears in Adults Learning for June 2004, Volume 15, Number 10, pp. 28-29. It illustrates the continuing struggle that adult literacy educators and learners are engaged in all around the world.

Paradigms of Learning : The Total Literacy Campaign in India Edited by Malavika Karleka, New Delhi, Sage, 2004, ISBN 81-7829-283-1, 356pp, US\$32, hardback

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From 1979 to 2003 I served as a member of UNESCO's International Jury for Literacy Prizes. During this time I followed adult literacy work in India by reading the candidatures for literacy prizes the government submitted to UNESCO. The first prize for India that I participated in awarding was in 1981 when the jury awarded a prize to the Department of Adult Education of the state of Bihar for its massive state-wide literacy campaign. From 1981 to 1998, thirteen various organizations, individuals, and state governments in India received one or another form of UNESCO recognition for work on adult literacy education.

The last prize that I participated in awarding to India was presented in 1999 for the National Literacy Mission with its Total Literacy Campaign, which is the subject of the book reviewed here. In nine chapters Paradigms of Learning presents a review and critique of the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) based on new research conducted a decade after its initiation. The editor and contributors to the volume are completely frank in their critique and present both the successes and shortcomings of the TLC as they perceived it following their research.

In the first chapter, the editor, Malavika Karlekar, provides a thorough introduction and overview of the TLC and describes its aim as that of "teaching the ability to read without difficulty through descriptions which would fall within the learner's own experience. Additionally, copying at the rate of seven words a minute, counting and writing from 1 to a 100, adding and subtracting three digit numbers as well as being able to multiply and divide two digit numbers were targeted at. Basic general knowledge of the world and society as well as of institutions the learners were likely to encounter was to be imparted, and there was an emphasis on the development of what was called 'social and critical consciousness'. All this was to be taught in 200 learning hours in an environment which suited the learner."(p.20).

In addition to the TLC and its 200 hours of instruction, the National Literacy Mission proposed to follow up the initial acquisition of literacy with a Post Literacy Campaign (PLC) to further develop the learner's literacy and prevent the relapse into illiteracy. Finally, the PLC was to be followed by Continuing Education (CE) to promote continued learning among the populations of the various districts involved in the literacy movement.

Following Karlekar's overview, six chapters summarize studies in six districts across India that were involved in the TLC. In each chapter a description is provided of the particular district being studied, the research proceedings, findings, and conclusions. All this is presented in great detail with descriptions of the social and political contexts of each of the six field study sites, descriptions of programmes and learning methods, comments by administrators, volunteers, teachers, learners and others involved in the various communities, and many tables of various kinds of statistics.

In two final chapters, Chapter 8 discusses issues related to the evaluating of literacy campaigns and Chapter 9 is an Afterword by Menaka Roy of the Asian South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE) which organized the research reported in the book.

A great many issues are raised and explored in the contexts of the six field studies, including (though not limited to) issues of local versus centrally managed literacy programs, the value of a limited duration, targeted campaign approach in contrast to a continuing education center approach, problems in promoting and assessing the acquisition of initial literacy and the need for post-literacy and continuing education programmes to sustain literacy and promote continued learning and knowledge development.

As would be expected, there are no firm yes or no resolutions to the issues addressed, but there are useful discussions of the problems encountered in each field site, such as the failure of many adults to acquire initial literacy skills due to lack of perceived need, work schedules, or family needs; problems of the loss of newly acquired, fragile literacy skills due to long delays between the initial literacy programs and the start-up of the post-literacy programs; loss of interest in continued learning because of a paucity of relevant materials in native languages and the lack of a perceived value for further education as a means of social and economic development. In each of the six Chapters dealing with the examination of each of the six field sites the authors do a thorough job of discussing the many complexities implied by these various issues and others.

Given the many problems encountered in mounting and sustaining a national campaign of such a magnitude, it is important that the overall outcomes of the TLC were nonetheless positive. In particular, in many sites, numerous adults acquired initial literacy and a useful percentage did sustain and advance their literacy and education in post-literacy and continuing education. Furthermore, and perhaps of even greater significance, there were "multiplier" effects of the literacy campaign.

Almost universally women participated in large numbers (some 40 million) and there were gains in social and political status. This was exhibited in ways such as successful campaigns by women to shut down sales of alcoholic beverages that were disrupting family and social life in some districts, by increasing illiterate women's mobility by providing them with bicycles to attend meetings and hence empowering them to greater participation in education and other community activities, challenging employers regarding rights and responsibilities of workers, and the establishment of over 7,000 women's credit co-operatives which helped release thousands of women from indebtedness.

A most perplexing outcome of the TLC, one with a double-sided impact, was the fact that because of the mobilization of interest in adult literacy education in the various districts of the field sites " there is now a strong demand from parents for the education of their children. This was one of the many aims of the TLC and is a substantial achievement". (p. 333). However, on the other side of this very positive outcome of the TLC was the trend reported in the Afterword by Menaka Roy that attention to the provision of primary education to children was occurring at the cost of attention to adult literacy education and was a source of disquiet among those involved in the TLC. She calls for a balanced approach to education "between all stages of education, between formal and non-formal, and that education should be context-specific and learner-centered and accessible to people of all ages." (p. 333).

Overall, this book provides an in-depth account of a unique national effort to increase adult literacy within the contexts of the largest democratic nation on earth. It suggests that while the TLC was not without many difficulties, and there were many shortcomings, the effort to bring literacy to tens of millions of adults was worthy of the high recognition by UNESCO that it received in 1999. It was a worthwhile effort not only for the benefits it provided for adults but also for the benefits that it provided for the children of these adults. It clearly confirmed that in all nations, rich or poor, one of the best investments we can make for the education of children is an investment in the education of adults.

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