The Social Dimension of Literacy

> ***"I guess as I taught them I realized the only reason they had me there was so they could bake cookies and have tea and a social group...[We] dropped them off our case load because we came to the conclusion that they were there just basically so that I'd come out and a couple of neighbours would come over and they'd have tea and cookies and they'd learn, but..."***

These words were spoken by a woman who teaches literacy and upgrading to women in rural Nova Scotia. I interviewed her with other tutors and participants from a variety of literacy, upgrading and training programs in 1986.[1] Her comment is similar to those of many of the literacy workers I interviewed, but contrasts strongly with the accounts of the participants.

In this article, through the words of women who participate in literacy and upgrading programs, I want to demonstrate that many women are extremely isolated. This makes the social dimension of literacy programs especially important to them. It is only through the opportunity to talk together about their lives that women can share knowledge about the ways in which isolation is structured into their lives and can begin to find ways to challenge and change this situation.

It is essential to acknowledge the importance of the social aspects of literacy programs, so that those programs which do not currently consider the social dimension an integral part of their programs are encouraged to do so. The social dimension includes events, discussion groups and meetings, as well as informal opportunities for women to get together and share their experiences. Many community-based programs do integrate such social aspects into their programs, but the extent to which they can do this is limited by the scarcity of funds. Funders frequently fund only the serious work of "teaching" and see other aspects as peripheral.

Illiteracy is often considered a primary cause of isolation, especially for rural women. But many of the women I interviewed had been isolated in childhood because they had been unable to make friends in school and now as adults did not trust neighbours. Others had left friends behind when they moved to a new location with their husbands. Women frequently have total responsibility for children which keeps them at home, and housework is hard work which is also carried out in the home. Men often have the power to decide whether a woman will get out of the house. They may forbid women to participate in events, or simply control this through lack of access to the family car. This

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control is usually seen as "natural." The gendered organization of society also makes it appear natural for families to live in a place that is suitable for the man's work and for women to stay at home as "housewives," with little access to transportation. The women I interviewed talked of being shut in the house with little or no social contact outside the extended family and little social life. Illiteracy is not the cause of women's isolation. Women are trapped in their lives so they cannot be freed from this isolation through literacy alone.

When I began to understand the extent of the isolation these women experienced I listened more carefully to what they were asking for that would address this isolation. I first thought that what the women "really" wanted was some sort of social group. I thought that perhaps a "kitchen table" chat, where neighbours gathered together to talk and discuss their lives, might be more useful to many women than participation in a literacy group because they spoke so enthusiastically about the social aspects of the program. But the conclusion that they wanted a social gathering *instead* of education does not challenge the assumption that education is not social but a solitary, individual process.

A social event alone was not what the women wanted. Many women spoke strongly about their fear of being exposed to their neighbours. Some of them also made it clear that even though many men object to their wives or girlfriends participating in educational programs, others "permit" them to participate on the basis that improved literacy skills will enable them to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers better. The women wanted both social contact *and* an educational event. Not only would the social aspect decrease their isolation, but they considered that the confidence gained through the social contact with other women who shared the same problems, would enhance their learning. They would also have the opportunity to consider what might need to change to reduce the structured isolation of their lives.

The lack of social opportunities in their lives and in the lives of women generally discouraged many women. The literacy program cannot meet all the social needs women have, but it should incorporate elements of social interaction: discussion, student meetings and social gatherings where women can get together and speak about their reality. This will enhance the learning that takes place in the programs. In this way programs can provide a forum within which women can question their situation and challenge the social organization] that isolates them in the home.

The social organization of the women's lives as girls, kept at home to help with the work of the household, also contributed to the later isolation of many women. They had experienced abuse in childhood, both in the home and at school. This had silenced them and they had become isolated from other children, giving them little experience of making friends. Maxine spoke of her isolation at home:

> *When I was a kid I had no friends. I stayed home and I helped with housework...I didn't do nothing right. Boy, there was a yardstick right behind me. You do that or wham.*

Mistreatment in school added to the solitariness and silence of some. Frieda described her experience:

> *I couldn't take the criticism of the teacher. He stood me up in class, I just couldn't do math at all. He used to call me retarded in front of the whole class of children and then they used to chase me around the school grounds when I went out for recess: "Hey, look at the dummy. Look at the dummy." And he put a dunce's cap on me every time he got a chance.*

Maxine was also isolated:

> *At school I'd just sit by myself. I never bothered anybody. I always wished I had friends when I was a kid.*

When these women describe themselves as "shy" during adolescence, they are describing a kind of silence. They are silenced at school and at home through threat or physical violence. Their negative interactions with authority figures defined and negated them. But these descriptions of "shy" focuses attention on the girls as lacking assertiveness, rather than on the situations and authority structures which silence them. The social organization of the school and home which some women experienced in childhood, contributed to their later loneliness and isolation.

Some of the women were also distant even from neighbours. Perhaps their lack of experience of friendship and their childhood poverty made them ashamed and afraid of being judged. They did not see neighbours as potential friends, but feared being talked about behind their backs. Maxine and Jean both describe this:

> *When you get to know neighbours you're all right until they more or less stab you in the back.*

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I've seen too many of the people fighting with this or that one. They couldn't even go to the mailbox because they'd be talking about them and they'd be mad at them. They'd say, "Did you hear what she said?" It was awful. At least when I go down to the bottom of the hill people will wave to me. They don't say, "That [Jean] said this." That's the way I like it; stay out of their lives they stay out of mine.

Some women were also suspicious of their families. Women, brought up by mothers who hurt them, found it hard to trust other women. Many felt that their loneliness led them to become depressed, or as the women described it, have trouble with their "nerves."

It is not uncommon for women to be uprooted and relocated to be near their husband's job. Those women who had made friends lost touch with them when they moved into outlying places with their husbands. Some men increase women's isolation by discouraging them from leaving the house or meeting alone.

Further, when women divorced partners and moved again they sometimes lost any friends they had managed to find during that period. They are cut off from their old friends because of the belief that women alone are a threat, likely to steal another woman's husband. As Alice described:

Where I used to live there was about twelve families and all us girls would go back and forth for coffee. We were friends. When you become a divorced person you don't have that anymore, because somehow they seem to think you're not attached to any man anymore, so you might grab theirs.

Other than an occasional bingo game or church group, women lack a social place where they can go without a man. They want somewhere where they can feel comfortable alone, a place to chat with other women. They spoke about being hassled when they went to the tavern even when in a group:

I don't know, I must have a sign on me —I'm not attached, try to pick me up. I don't know, you get hit on so much and propositioned.

Roberts (1976) has identified that when women are not with a partner, are seen as no man's property, therefore as "every man's prey" (p. 16). Neighbours accuse women of not caring for their children adequately when they go to the tavern. So, unlike men, women have nowhere to drop in and meet people:

There isn't a place where it's just a drop in for women like the tavern is for men. They can drop in for a cold beer on the way home from work. Can we do that? Talk about discrimination.

Jane explained:

I don't drink or smoke or anything so there's not many places to go if you don't do those [things].

Many programs, program workers and funders, saw time spent on social aspects as irrelevant, and an inappropriate use of time in a literacy or training program. Workers spoke of the need to curtail the chat and get down to work, and spoke disparagingly of those participants whom they felt were only in the program for a social time. But participants saw this chance to mix with other women as fundamental. It reduced their isolation and also made it easier to relax and seek help without embarrassment and so enhanced their learning. They were glad to get out of the house and to talk to other women or simply to get to know the woman who was their tutor so that she became a friend. Those who were in groups spoke of the group becoming like one big family. They enjoyed working together and helping each other, and they saw the opportunity to discover that their problems were experienced also by other women as particularly important.

Participating in the literacy program was a way of filling the time. Betty described saving her homework for that purpose:

I could have sat right down and did it all and had nothing to do for the rest of the time until next Thursday. Well I leave it, or I'll do it when I get bored, which is very often.

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Mary said she would participate in the literacy program to give her something to do:

Well I said, it might give me something to do to occupy some time, I guess.

However, school work is not just a way of filling time. The social interaction is key for many women. Mary enjoyed the personal exchange with a woman about her own age. She did not think she would have the same experience with a man because the social dimension would have been different:

If it was a man that was talking about it with me, I would be uncomfortable. I don't think I would be able to do it.

When I asked what she got out of the lesson she told me how important it was "to have someone to chat with, to talk to."

Her tutor comes twice a week and they do a lesson from the Laubach text and then they have tea and talk. The tutoring

lesson does not however exhaust her need for social contact. I asked her if she would have preferred to do something that got her out of the house and meeting people and she simply said she would have liked to do something like that too.

Women enjoyed the opportunity a group gave them to make friends and realize that they are not alone with their problems. As Maxine said:

I've made friends here. I'm pleased and I'm happy. I'm happier than I ever was.

They felt more confident working with others who shared the same problems and were in similar circumstances. Two women spoke of why they would like to work in a group:

You'd do it sort of like together. Learning from each other. You're not the only one with this problem. There's other ones with the same problem. When you're in with [the tutor] alone you feel like you're the only one with a problem.

Supportive relationships developed in the groups and these helped the women to learn. Jane had been afraid that in a group she would look stupid. Instead, she said: "we turned out like one big family." Pat also developed friendships and enjoyed the personal way that the teachers related:

One teacher...who was at that school, God love us, she was sweet. She would say [Pat] if you need help give us a call. They met you on a personal level. Even through the study of the English we got talking and she had health problems. She was getting fed up and she was going to Halifax. We were able to share part of that frustration. They weren't just there to teach you your English, they were there to be supportive of what you were going through in society.

This personal relationship gave her confidence and made it easier to ask for help when she needed it, as Pat said: "You felt comfortable... because they were so open."

In contrast, many literacy workers felt the women in groups were not "serious" students. They thought these women were there solely for a social event, to have a good time, and not to learn.

When literacy is offered within a social context it can be a process that challenges the isolation of women's lives. It can provide the space for women to discuss their problems and identify what they have in common. When program workers realize that women's circumstances often make it difficult for them to get out of the house, they often offer women individual tutoring at home. However, women often want to get out of the house and meet other women.

Programs need to find ways to interweave a social dimension into the learning they offer. Perhaps tutoring pairs can meet two or three other pairs once a month. Perhaps a small group can rotate, meeting at a different women's home each week. Perhaps a learners' group can be formed and a variety of support, such as transportation and childcare, offered to enable women to attend. Program workers need to listen to women and find ways to provide programs which respond to their needs. The social dimensions which women say they want may help women to find ways to change their lives. Programming, rather than reinforcing women's circumstances, needs to provide women with the opportunity for social contact and critical discussion which can challenge the social organziation of their lives.

When programs seek to enhance the social aspects of the program, and strengthen and expand the possibilities for meaningful interaction between students, they help to create a space for discourse which include women's shared realities. If programs integrate "work" and "social" time in the program, they help to create a discourse that contests the individuality of learning. This makes it possible to see education itself as social. If programs encourage sharing between women that not only allows them to talk about their problems, but also to look critically at the location of these problems, they will create a space for discourses of resistance with the potential to lead to social change.

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[1]The interviews were carried out as part of doctoral research. I interviewed twenty women in literacy and other training programs and ten workers in those programs. The full study is described in my thesis, (1988).

[2]Laubach is a Canada-wide literacy organization which makes use of volunteers to tutor adult literacy students using a structured set of reading materials.

References

Roberts, J. (1976) "Pictures of Powerlessness: A Personal Synthesis." In J. Roberts (ed.), *Beyond Intellectual Sexism* (New York: David McKay, 1976), pp. 14-60.