

Reading and Writing: A Gateway to Social Promotion

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Reading and writing are the core literacy skills, but literacy involves more than the simple cognitive skills of reading and writing. It is increasingly understood as competence, or an ability to perform certain tasks in a given field. In the recently conducted International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS),¹ for instance, literacy skills are defined as knowledge and the ability to understand and use information in work-related contexts.

1.2. Another perspective focuses on literacy as a tool. Critical literacy is the forerunner in this perspective.² It concerns what literacy can do, rather than what it is. Closely associated with this perspective is the concept of empowerment. While those interested in the definition of literacy are likely to be concerned with the measurement of literacy skills, the empowerment camp promotes the social and personal changes that literacy skills can bring about.

1.3. This paper will not espouse one perspective of literacy over another or analyse the different perspectives.³ Instead, it will explore literacy as an ensemble consisting of more than reading and writing, embracing cognitive, operational and ideological aspects as integral to the overall concept.

1.4. The purpose of this paper is three-fold. First, it examines the meaning of social promotion to be achieved through literacy skills. Particular attention is paid to the interrelations of the economic, personal and cultural benefits of literacy. Secondly, the paper discusses the assumptions underlying family literacy approach, a popular pedagogical framework for early literacy education. Finally, it looks at some policy implications of the current discourse on early literacy education.

2. LITERACY AND SOCIAL ADVANCEMENT

2.1. A positive correlation exists between literacy skills and an individual's social, economic and cultural advancement. Numerous studies have demonstrated the indispensable value of literacy skills, particularly in societies where knowledge generated and transmitted through written language is the vehicle to power.

2.2. Literacy generates benefits through three processes. The most obvious is that literacy allows people to acquire marketable skills. The final report of the International Adult Literacy Survey, *Literacy in the Information Age*, published by the OECD and Statistics Canada (2000), provides a wealth of evidence attesting to this correlation.

¹ A large scale survey conducted collaboratively by governments, national statistical agencies, research institutions, OECD and Statistics Canada in some of the OECD member states. Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States participated in the first cycle of survey in 1994; Australia, the Flemish Community in Belgium, Great Britain, New Zealand, and Northern Ireland joined in 1996; Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Slovenia and the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland participated in a third data collection in 1998. Data reported in the report were drawn from 20 of these countries. Source: Literacy in the information age: Final report of the international adult literacy survey (2000).

² Spencer, D. (1990). *The Freirean approach to adult literacy education*. National Clearing House for ESL Literacy Education.

³ Cf. Perez, B. (Ed.). (1998). *Socio-cultural contexts of language and literacy*. Mahwah, NJ : Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

2.3. According to the survey, adults with low literacy skills⁴ are more likely to be unemployed, less likely to find work and less likely to work regularly. This association persists even after controlling for factors such as work experience, educational attainment and personal characteristics. Given that adults can acquire and increase their literacy skills in the workplace, the disadvantage of those without employment does not end with the difficulty in getting hired. They are also deprived of the opportunity to improve their literacy skills through informal learning on the job.

2.4. The survey shows that educational attainment is the principal determinant of earnings, but in some countries, literacy proficiency plays a greater role, and in most countries, independent of educational attainment, literacy proficiency has a substantial effect on earnings. In general, at the country level, a positive correlation exists between literacy and per capita income. The higher the proportion of adults with low writing skills, the lower the country's per capita gross national product.⁵

2.5. The positive correlation between literacy skills and employment and earnings should not necessarily be interpreted as causal. Nor is the process through which effects are generated linear. The same effects can result from further formal education or exposure to more information and choices, which improve a person's judgement. It could also be, as shown by the survey, by increasing people's health and their social participation, which will help them better prepared for desirable employment. Irrespective of the process from which the linkage is derived, there is clearly a strong association between literacy skills and a person's economic and social advancement.

2.6. The economic benefits of literacy are recognised by international development agencies, which have advocated basic education, with literacy as the core component, as the major means of poverty eradication. Their focus has been on personal enlightenment process as well on the utilitarian value of literacy. The poverty eradication discourse would also cover the interrelationship between the economic and personal benefits of literacy.

2.7. Ignorance has long been identified as one of the major causes of poverty, and the assumption has been that illiteracy is the main cause. Illiterate people have difficulty transcending their immediate physical environment and objectifying the reality of their lives. Without literacy, the tool with which this reality is mapped at a distance from one's selfhood, the poor do not comprehend the adverse nature of their reality or the conditions that create and influence it. They thus do not know how to overcome it. Also, without literacy, the basic tool for gathering information and building knowledge, poor people are often unaware of options that may be available to improve their lives. As a result, they resign themselves to the status quo rather than embark on action. This inertia causes the adverse reality to perpetuate itself.

2.8. The international development community has recognised that literacy is essential to process of raising the consciousness of the poor, and prompting them to embark on actions to improve their lot. But it has also stressed that understanding the "what" and the "why" of the conditions affecting poor people's lives is not enough to empower them. The poor must also be equipped with skills and resources that will enable them to attain their goals directly, and literacy is indispensable in this process.

2.9. The relationship between the job market and personal enlightenment is compounded by the fact that language, the instrument of literacy, is not and cannot be value-free, and that the enlightening process must have a direction. This point leads to the third dimension of literacy, the cultural dimension.

2.10. Language reflects and embodies values. Some linguistic anthropologists argue that language is culture. Seen from the child development perspective, acquiring language acquisition socialises an individual into a particular system of values. This linkage has profound implications.

2.11. First of all, given the small child's osmotic state of mind, early childhood is perhaps the only period in one's life during which different value systems can be acquired and internalised. Secondly, literacy in

⁴ Measured in three domains – the knowledge and skills to understand and use information from texts, to locate and use information contained in various formats and to apply arithmetic operation.

⁵ The economic returns of literacy skills are greater in countries where the job market is concentrated in knowledge-intensive industry.

more than one language brings with it knowledge of more than one value system, and this diversity embodied in the person constitutes a base for cultural understanding. Implicit is that multilingual education in early childhood period is an effective way of promoting and instilling cultural understanding.

2.12. Yet, multilingualism in early childhood remains a controversial issue. In many societies, children are required to acquire literacy in a language other than that spoken at homes or in their communities. Education and economic transactions in the society are carried out in the dominant language, and to ensure social and economic advancement, they must become literate in that language. Often, unfortunately, this is achieved at the expense of literacy in the home language and diminishes the child's potential for personal and cultural empowerment from his or her home environment.

2.13. This deficit is not limited to individuals. It can also be observed in entire groups or even nations. As globalisation accelerates and its impacts spread, countries have begun to valorise, either willingly or unwillingly, one particular language -- namely, English -- which is dominating the world of economic transactions. They face the same challenge as individuals do of how to protect their national and identity, while remaining competitive in the market. Fierce competition in the present world market, which seems to denigrate values that do not directly contribute to building economic wealth, sets up a conflict between economic advancement and personal and cultural enlightenment.

2.14. To conclude, the three dimensions of the benefits of literacy -- economic, cultural and personal -- are inextricably intertwined, yet their interface is not necessarily compatible or complementary. What is at stake is the harmony between economic advancement and personal and cultural empowerment. This challenge looms particularly large in a society with different "literacies" and cultural and ethnic divisions. Genuine social promotion cannot occur without any of these dimensions, yet it is a daunting task to ensure them concurrently.

3. THE FAMILY LITERACY APPROACH

3.1. Turning now from literacy's benefits for individuals and society, this section is concerned with how literacy can be promoted in the child's early years. The family literacy approach has become a central pedagogical plank for young children, especially those in disadvantaged situations.⁶

3.2. The family literacy approach attempts to improve the child's early literacy experience by improving his or her home environment. More specifically, it aims to improve the parents' child-rearing practices and their literacy skills in order to facilitate the child's literacy development. This approach is based on the scientific finding that early literacy can be facilitated by an improved literacy environment at home. Another basis is the emergent literacy theory that children lay the foundation of literacy skills through various non-literate symbolic interactions at home, long before their mastery of literacy skills in school.⁷

3.3. The family literacy approach also seeks to break the cycle of intergenerational literacy deficiency. When parents are illiterate, they have difficulty creating a home environment conducive to promoting literacy. Deprived of the early opportunity to acquire the needed literacy skills and have an equal start, children of these disadvantaged groups are systematically disadvantaged in later education and economic competition. Without intervention, they are bound to perpetuate the cycle of social, economic and cultural deficits experienced by their parents. Family literacy programmes aim to break this cycle by "correcting" the literacy deficiency of the adult generation.

3.4. UNESCO⁸ has advocated family literacy to achieve three programme objectives. First, it has been found to be a useful source of motivation for adults, especially female learners, to participate in literacy classes. Secondly, it contributes to the achievement of universal primary education by preparing children for school learning. Thirdly, the approach has proven effective in promoting the education of girls, who lag

⁶ Schwartz, W. (1999). Family literacy strategies to support children's learning. ERIC Digest, NO. 144 (EDO-UD-99-4).

Neuman, S.B., & Roskos, K.A. (Eds.). (1988). Children achieving : Best practices in early literacy. Newark, Delaware : International Reading Association.

⁷ Bobys, A.R. (2000). What does emerging literacy look like ? Young Children, 55(4), 16-22.

⁸ World Symposium on Family literacy: Final Report (1994). Paris: UNESCO.

far behind boys in obtaining and benefiting from education. Thus family literacy is not only an approach to promote intergenerational literacy learning but also a heuristic means to further the achievement of other educational and social objectives.

3.5. With regard to pedagogical strategy for family literacy programmes, there have been two observations. First, it has been learned that a programme's potential for success increases when the participation of the parents are maximised and respected.⁹ What is particularly important is respect of the parents' natural, innate and experience-based knowledge as well as their social and cultural backgrounds. When parents are instructed in skills that are alien to them, the effects are found to be limited. When instructors fail to recognise diversity in child-rearing and parenting styles, the parent learners' feeling of powerlessness tends to grow rather than abate.

3.6. Secondly, it has been observed that family literacy programmes should aim to teach more than parenting skills. They should also make more serious efforts to empower parents in their understanding and control of the environment in which they raise their children. Hubik (1994)¹⁰ noted that family literacy programmes increased their chances of success to the extent that they put faith in the family's capacity to meet the challenge by itself and encourage the learners to become "self-sufficient actors and effective promoters of their own interests". In other words, when the parents become active builders of their own lives as well as of the lives and futures of their children, a family literacy programme can expect to have sustainable effects.

3.7. Accordingly, a pedagogically correct family literacy class is characterised by the learners' active participation and the educators' open attitude and willingness to integrate inputs from the learners and maintain a dialectical relationship and interaction with them. Realising these pedagogical imperatives in the classroom, at the technical level, is not difficult if the educator has been properly trained. However the implementation of a family literacy programme may be undermined when the meaning of success is challenged.

3.8. The question is whether the pedagogical imperatives are simply a strategy to facilitate the socialisation of the parents and the children into the mainstream, or whether they are genuinely intended as a means of empowering the learners. Empowerment can be achieved when people are allowed to identify the conditions affecting their lives. If so, the immigrant or ethnic minority parent learners in a family literacy class must be given a fair chance to challenge the powerlessness of their backgrounds, which placed them in a disadvantaged position and brought them to the family literacy class in the first place. If they attain enlightenment on this point, to what extent and in which direction can they be allowed to transform this understanding into action?

3.9. One of the admired effects of family literacy programmes in the United States is that they increase immigrant parents' access to mainstream American culture. In one way or another most family literacy programmes aim to achieve a similar goal. No matter how pedagogically correctly they are designed and conducted, the basic aim of family literacy programmes is to help parents and children with literacy deficiency to adapt to the dominant culture through acquiring literacy in the language of that culture. A programme's success is judged by the extent to which this enculturation is accomplished without apparent conflicts experienced by the learners.

3.10. Importantly, successful enculturation cannot be achieved without some sort of ideological compromise made on the part of the learners, between the requirements of the host society and the social and cultural baggage they have carried from their own background, which can be potentially incompatible with the former. Neither the enculturation nor the compromise agendas can be made explicit or promoted overtly in a family literacy class. These political and ideological agendas became latent, often underlying the pedagogical philosophy.

⁹ Schwartz, W. (1999). Building on existing strength to increase family literacy. *ERIC Digest*, No. 145 (EDO-UD-99-5).

¹⁰ World Symposium on Family literacy: Final Report (1994). Paris: UNESCO.

3.11. Unlike other approaches to early literacy development, family literacy programmes tap into the power of the child's early socialisation process. Thus they have long-term effects on the child. This is good news to the designers and practitioners of family literacy programmes, as it translates into sustainability. But the question remains whether this is desirable for parents and children in particular from the standpoint of their empowerment. Once lost in the early period, the child's chance to be socialised in the home language and its accompanying values system is irreplaceable.

3.12. Suppose an immigrant mother has successfully completed a cycle of a family literacy programme. She is now capable of interacting with her child in the "mainstream" way. This mainstreamed socialisation process will help her child become integrated with his or her peers, and the cultural deficiency will no longer pose a barrier to her child. If the pedagogy of her family literacy class has been correct, she would also know how to maintain the balance between the culture and literacy of the host society and that of her own homeland. The intergenerational cycle is broken successfully, with no apparent conflicts. But if the child's home literacy has not been empowered at this point of the child's life, it never will. In this regard, the impact of both empowered and not-empowered literacy is irreversible.

3.13. As individuals, educators of family literacy programmes are not to be held accountable for the "suppressed" empowerment. It is essentially impossible to maintain two literacies if one of them is associated with social, political, cultural and economic dominance. But educators have the moral duty to be aware of the hidden agendas and ideological pitfalls of family literacy programmes. They must understand that a genuine sense of pedagogical correctness in family literacy programmes lie not only in learner-centred or learner-friendly techniques as such, but in the educators' courage not to parry criticism of their own practice.¹¹ Enlightened educators with critical thinking are more likely to help learners to sharpen their awareness of the meaning of learning. With heightened consciousness in both educator and learner, genuine empowerment can occur.

4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

4.1. The previous sections have discussed literacy as an indispensable tool for ensuring the child's social promotion and shown that family literacy programmes are an effective approach to facilitating child's early literacy development. In this section, attention is paid to the implications of these discussions for policy on early childhood.

Parents as Early Childhood Educators

4.2. The underlying assumption of family literacy programmes is that parents can and should play an important role in the child's literacy development. A plethora of scientific evidence supports this view, and the validity of the position that parents are the most influential figures in child development is beyond dispute. Unfortunately, however, this parental responsibility for child-rearing is becoming increasingly difficult to fulfil.

4.3. Fathers, mothers and key child caretakers alike, everywhere in the world, work longer hours outside the home. In industrialised countries, the surge in working mothers has governments to look at child-rearing from a social and economic perspective. Governments have begun to realise that child-rearing is no longer a personal or family matter, but a domain for which responsibility should be shared by the public sector. Mothers in developing countries are in a similar situation. As mothers carry out a heavy load of household chores and perform labour such as farm work, they may delegate child-rearing responsibilities to the child's female elder siblings or grandparents. But in urban areas, where the extended family system is becoming a thing of the past, and more girls are going to school, neither of these substitutes is easily available anymore, forcing the parents to resort to professional services.

4.4. Importantly, even when parents are given support to stay home and take care of children, they do not necessarily welcome the option. In developed countries, when the government channels its support for early childhood through family allowances, it is low-income parents who generally prefer to take the option. But they are attracted by the cash advance more than by the prospect of fulfilling their parental

¹¹ Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers : Letters to those who dare teach*. Boulder : Westview Press.

responsibility. What is worrisome in this phenomenon is that there is no guarantee that these parents who have decided to stay home with cash benefits can provide their children with urgently needed quality services. In fact, it has turned out that such cash allowances tend to deprive children from disadvantaged home environments of an opportunity to benefit from quality early childhood services.

4.5. In the developing world, where modern family support systems have not yet developed, parents' aspirations for better education for their children motivate them to prefer more structured services outside the home. They perceive that a centre-based early childhood service provided by a trained professional is better than their care at home and will choose that option if they can afford it. Especially with the influence of mass media, parents come to believe that early childhood care and education is a "modern thing" that an enlightened parent must pursue to ensure a better future for their children, and this is often associated with professional services provided outside the home.

4.6. To some extent, their perception is true. Though some specific roles are to be played only by parents in child development, there is no guarantee that parents, especially when they are illiterate and are not properly trained in child-rearing techniques, can be more effective early childhood educators than professionals.

4.7. When parents are not available to serve as early childhood educators and have doubts over what they can do for their children, it is questionable to what extent one can continue to support an early childhood pedagogy or a policy requiring the mobilisation of parents. Moreover, considering that parents' participation and involvement is emphasised when they cannot afford a quality service by professionals, would helping the parents to become efficient early childhood educators be the best way to compensate for the development deficiency of the disadvantaged children? What if they want a more professional service? Would they be given a choice? Unless these questions and points are taken into serious consideration, the advocacy of parental involvement in child's early development is likely to end up as idealistic but empty rhetoric, or a policy that by-passes rather than resolves the plight of disadvantaged children.¹²

Promotion of Children's Own Values?

4.8. An immediate objective of early literacy development is to prepare the child for school learning. But when the literacy required by school education is in a language other than that of the child's home environment, both child and the society face a dilemma. It is not only ideal but also politically correct to promote multi-culturalism and to encourage children to acquire literacy in different languages. But in reality, a child's social and especially economic promotion will rest on one dominant literacy, and most developing countries do not have the resources to offer more than one form of literacy in school education.

4.9. Is school education therefore inherently oppressive by failing to allow the child to build literacy skills in his or her home language or in more than one language? Is economic advancement such an overarching goal that it can justify the suppression of other forms of social promotion? Is supporting the child's home literacy, when different from the dominant literacy of the society, realistically the best way of ensuring his or her social promotion?¹³ Underlying these questions is the issue of the ultimate purpose of an early childhood service. Is it or should it be an effort to better prepare the future citizens of the society or an effort to secure a sanctuary for the child's own personal and individual development, where external influences should be filtered out as much as possible?

4.10. In most developing countries, unless early childhood programmes are perceived as educational activities, they stand relatively little chance of receiving public investment. It is because education is more likely to be associated with production than with consumption than other domains of public sector, such as social welfare, is. Partly for this reason, in most developing countries public investment in early childhood is limited to pre-school education for children over three, which is easily perceived as an educational

¹² Cannella, G.S. (1997). Deconstructing early childhood education : Social justice and revolution. New York : Peter Lang.

¹³ Ward, A. (1999). Literacy in multicultural settings : Whose culture are we discussing ? Reading Online -- Articles : Literacy in multicultural settings (www.readingonline.org/articles/).

process. Conversely, early care for young children below three is often not integrated into the nation's education system along with pre-school education largely because of the conceptual difficulty of viewing the care activity as educational. Thus, at least from a strategic point of view, the area of early childhood must embrace the educational framework and serve to prepare the children for the future, and the policy on early literacy development must be directed accordingly.

4.11 Yet, too much "educationalisation" may harm the early childhood experience, and literacy learning often lies at the heart of the problem. Some countries officially ban literacy teaching in kindergartens out of fear that it will impede the child's liberal development. When literacy dominates kindergarten activities, it is often for lack of more creative pedagogy focused on child development. In countries where early childhood education has been seen strictly from the perspective of preparing children for the future, kindergarten activities tend to be dominated by literacy learning and teaching. Often the result is that children simply begin school education earlier and the early childhood period evaporates.

4.12 The pitfalls of educationalisation of early childhood can be corrected and prevented, to some extent, by training educators in more child-centred pedagogy. But it must be recognised that educationalisation of early childhood education is often supported by parents, whose main concern is to help their children to get a head start for school learning. When they are the payers of early childhood services, the providers of these services cannot easily dispute the parents' educational demand. And even for this simply practical reason, early childhood educators often have to abort a pedagogically correct approach, which can potentially, in the long run, oversee both the national needs and the child's individual needs harmoniously, and respond to the parental short-term demand for preparing the child for school learning.

4.13. If early childhood is to serve the country, the country must first serve it in the way that it can best serve the country. Research has long shown that children need time to develop as sound individuals as well as time to learn to become competent members of society. A well-trained and educated early childhood educator must be familiar with the pedagogical strategies that meet these development and learning needs of future citizens. What is needed is an infrastructure of support for these educators, which must be expressed in two ways. First, given the ideological complexity of the field, early childhood educators must receive quality training and education and be ready to face the ideological challenges of their practice. Secondly, the early childhood field should be supported by the public sector to the extent that enlightened early childhood educators can pursue their vision without being impeded by profit-making concerns. Only when the practitioners involved in the daily interaction with children in the field are enlightened and equipped with means to pursue their vision can the above dilemma be negotiated, if not resolved. And at least for the time being, a pedagogically adept negotiation might be the best solution available.

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