Beyond Participation and Stereotypes: Towards the Study of Engagement in Adult Literacy Education

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Abstract: *Mainstream adult education framed the critical issues of literacy non-participation within its normative participation models creating a serious setback for literacy. Research. Through a review of the literacy literature and an analysis of the IALS and NALL studies, this paper discusses how undereducated adults refuse to participate in formal education, yet how they engage in informal and incidental learning. It concludes with an argument for research into how and why the undereducated* engage *in learning rather than* participate *in education.*

The Stereotyping of the Formally Undereducated and Recent Research Challenges

Despite almost half a century of concentrated literacy programming in Canada, and U.S. literacy campaigns extending back to the 1920's, the rate of participation of eligible adults remains at less than 8%. Why does this number remain so low? There are undoubtedly multiple complex reasons; however, it is also apparent that educational psychology and mainstream adult education have contributed to a research hegemony that has obscured the unique explanations behind this phenomenon.

Prior to 1970, the adult literacy research was highly influenced by psychological paradigms and deficit assumptions. Educational psychology and adult education studies from the 1940's to at least the 1970's essentially reinforced and certainly did not challenge the historic negative stereotypes of the formally undereducated in North America. For example, Anderson and Niemi's (1970) meta-analysis of the pre-1970's research in Canada and the U.S. revealed a bizarre list of characteristics attributed to the undereducated; such as, they "often did not talk with their children at meal time . . . Hence, such children were ill prepared for entry into a middle class school" (p. 27). They are "authoritarian and resort to physical rather than verbal dominance" (p. 21). They are "markedly reactionary in socio-political areas but somewhat favorable to economic liberalism" (p. 21). In 1962, Reissman came to the conclusion that among the least educated adults "there is practically no interest in knowledge for its own sake . . . Nor is education seen as an opportunity for the development of self-expression, self-realization growth or the like" (1962, p. 12). What would certainly have been challenged as racist or slanderous if aimed at other adult groups in North America, became commonplace in the literacy research through the 60's, 70's, and 80's. In 1980, for instance, Irish based her literacy recruitment recommendations around the stereotypes found in Anderson and Niemi's (1970) work, asserting that low-literates all exhibit "insecurity, distrust, fatalism, low aspirations, limited time perspective, dependency, localism, and lack of empathy (p. 41, 1980). Such assertions have been perpetuated in mainstream texts, including Cross's still popular, *Adults as Learners* (1982).

The first major challenge to this line of deficit research began to emerge in the late1980's. It followed the theme that Cervero and Fitzpatrick (1990) established in a major longitudinal study that there are long-standing and enduring formative factors that arise early in the lived experiences of formally undereducated adults. Literacy research began to turn from quasi-psychological explanations of deviance to broader sociological perspectives, including studies of ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic factors (Beder, 1991; Fingeret, 1984; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Horsman, 1991; Quigley, 1997; Ziehgan, 1992). Literacy researchers began to develop a unique corpus of research that assumed that non-participation may in fact be a well considered, ethically responsible, decision given the lived context of many non-participants and the deficit hegemony that pervades many ABLE programs (Quigley, 1997). However, why has this research evolution token so long to develop in the field of literacy?

The High-Jacking of Literacy and its Participation Research Agenda by Adult Education

Mainstream adult education took on participation as one of its "big research questions" as early as 1964, and did so partly out of the politics of forming a discipline of adult education. The 1964 Black Book, which was so seminal in establishing an academic discipline of adult education in North America, made the case for the "general acceptance of adult education" (Hallenbeck, p. 13). Co-editor Hallenbeck enshrined participation as a promising issue for future study with the argument that "the number of facets of society in which adult education has come to have a place, and the vast amount of money being spent for adult education [testifies to] . . . its important role in American life" (p. 13). Adult literacy was soon swept into the mainstream as "sub-field" of adult education. As early as 1958, Floud and Halsey named ABLE as "remedial, assimilative, mobility-promoting, and compensatory," and by 1970, Schroeder's taxonomy of adult education was including literacy. The assumed dominance of our "subaltern" field of literacy has had a number of (unresearched) affects through time, but perhaps the most deleterious has been the assumption that the mainstream theories of participation would naturally fit the issues of literacy. Ironically, despite a legacy of deficit research perpetuated and condoned by the mainstream, the formally undereducated suddenly became homogeneous with the formally educated in the quest to build the "big research question." In 1986, for instance, Darkenwald (1986) stated that adult participation models such as those advocated by Boshier; Rubenson; and Hogheim, all needed to be adopted by ABLE. With no supporting evidence, he asserted that if they were, "the quality of ABE participation/dropout research would be vastly improved" (p. 12). The issues of low participation rates in literacy have come to be framed in terms of mainstream. Beder dedicated a chapter to participation in his 1991 Okes Award-winning book by summarizing mainstream adult motivation and mainstream participation models– from Miller's Force Field Analysis model to Cross's chain of response model. Wide scale testing of these models in literacy has yet to be conducted to see if construct validity actually holds up. Happily, Beder went on to discuss nonparticipation and the complexities inherent in this phenomenon. However, this had to draw from the nascent literacy research because, on the topic of non-participation, mainstream adult education is silent. Why? I have argued elsewhere this is largely, but not only, because formally undereducated adults often come out of a radically different lived experience than educated adults on their shared background of prior schooling and a caste system of norms surrounding formal education (Quigley, 1997).

Establishing a Corpus of Non-Participation Literature: Can it Lead Anywhere?

Research on the formally undereducated and their low participation rates in ABLE has evolved through two major phases in the past two decades. First, literacy research has begun to emphasize socio-economic, ethnic, and gender-related issues – all within the context of the world that is unique to many of the formally undereducated (e.g., Green, 1980; Horsman, 1991;Uhland, 1995). There have been increasing attempts to define and understand the phenomenon of non-participation as voiced by the undereducated (Taylor, in press) and as situated in the lives of non-participating adults themselves. This research has seen a move away from a focus on singular deterrents and stereotypical learner characteristics to a more robust conceptualization of the complexities of the sociological realities and dispositional barriers that are expressed by many formally undereducated adults (Quigley, 1997).

However, I ask if this line of emerging research is perhaps where we should put our energy in literacy? The issue, after all, is acting responsibly to assist adults in their learning where appropriate. I wonder if the next step should be to research the promising area of how the formally undereducated teach themselves – that is, how and why they engage in informal and incidental learning. Rather than ask why so few of the formally undereducated adults choose to avoid formal adult education programs, we might well ask why and how so many continue to learn, even to thrive, in our society without our help or interference (Quigley, 1997). Indeed, we might ask how we could learn from them.

Towards the Study of Engagement in Adult Literacy Education

The fact that the formally undereducated resist the formal programs that are offered them across the Western world is evident in the recent *1995 International Adult Literacy Survey* (OECD & Statis-

tics Canada), summarized in Table 1 (Quigley & Arrowsmith, 1997).

It is remarkably clear from this table that formal education is avoided; however, these same adults across 7 countries also refuse to make use of public libraries either, as seen in Table 2. Yet, this does not mean they avoid reading books, that they are utterly unmotivated, dyslexic, and/or either unwilling or incapable of learning – as the early deficit research insisted.

Table 1: Participation and Non-participation of Adults With Less Than High School in Formal and Non-formal Adult Education/Training in Six Industrialized Countries

	Participated in Adult Education and Training?	
Country	**Yes**	**No**
Sweden	34.70%	65.30%
Netherlands	24.00%	76.00%
Switzerland (Germ.)	***	***
Canada	19.04%	80.96%
Switzerland (French)	***	***
United States	13.19%	86.81%
Poland	6.18%	93.82%
ALL Countries	13.47%	86.53%
TOTAL N = 5146		

NOTES: ● Data based on IALS study and ISCED levels 2 or less. ● Population ages 25-65, except in Switz' French speaking, Switz' German speaking, and Poland (25-64). *** Sample size too small to release estimate.

Table 2 indicates that over 76% of the sample group in 6 countries *never* use libraries; yet, they do read books almost as often as high school completers. Despite the myths, they *do not* avoid printed material, even though they apparently avoid formal programs and public libraries for the most part. This observation is further supported by the recent New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) study conducted in Canada (Livingstone, 1997). In a telephone survey of 1,562 Canadian adults conducted in 1998, it was found that those adults with no high school diploma engaged in informal learning on an average of 16 hours per week. Those with a high school diploma engaged in 15 hours per week, with the Canadian norm at 15 hours per week. For Canada, we see a pattern of essentially avoiding formal programs but embracing informal learning. The NALL Study also found that only 28% of adults without a high school diploma participated in an adult education workshop or course during the previous year. The Canadian norm was 61%. When asked if prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) were to be made available, the anticipated participation rate climbed to 53%, with the norm at 61%.

If researchers were to study the more informal and incidental forms of "engagement" in learning among the formally undereducated, I am arguing that we would discover the world of learning that Fingeret (1983) referred to as rich social networks. This argument is supported by Table 3 from the 1995 IALS study (Quigley & Arrowsmith, 1997). It is obvious here that formally undereducated adults again engage in learning at rates compared to mainstream norms.

Table 2: Engagement in Reading Books & Public Library Usage in 6 Countries

"How often do you..."	**Daily**	**Weekly**	**Monthly**	**Several times/yr**	**Never**
Use a Public Library? N = 14,708					
Less than High School	***	3.64%	7.32%	12.33%	76.48%
Complete High School	0.47%	7.31%	11.69%	31.25%	49.28%
Post-secondary	***	7.50%	19.04%	34.95%	38.00%
University	2.08%	11.84%	22.29%	41.65%	22.14%
All Educ. Level	0.78%	7.51%	14.06%	29.82%	47.83%
Read Books? N = 14,683					
Less than High School	15.75%	14.49%	14.95%	20.11%	34.69%
Complete High School	30.39%	16.78%	15.91%	21.17%	15.75%
Post-secondary	40.51%	19.67%	14.02%	18.93%	6.87%
University	41.54%	21.95%	12.29%	17.36%	6.86%
All Educ. Level	30.95%	17.81%	14.64%	19.78%	16.83%

NOTE: *** Sample size too small to release estimate.

- Population age 25-65 except in Switz' French, Switz' German Speaking, and Poland (25-64).

Learning into the Future

A major proportion of the formally undereducated in the IALS and NALL samples seen here are very much engaged in informal and incidental learning, but there remains a large group that is not. What if we learned how the formally undereducated learned, and sought to find ways to assist these processes as appropriate? Must we forever insist that the reproduction of schooling through formal ABLE programs is the one, best means to "reach" the formally undereducated? As Fingeret stated: "If we do not learn to work with them, many illiterate adults will continue to refuse to work with us" (p. 144, 1983).

Table 3: Engagement in Informal Learning About Current Events in 6 Industrialized Countries

"I would like to know how you usually get information about current events, public affairs, and the government. How much information do you get from..."				
Activity/ Educ. Level	**Frequency**			
	A lot	**Some**	**Very little**	**None**
Newspapers? N = 10,301				
Less than High School	31.06%	32.89%	13.86%	22.19%
Complete High School	44.87%	37.86%	11.50%	5.77%
Post-secondary	48.27%	39.29%	7.85%	4.59%
University	61.34%	30.38%	6.18%	2.10%
All Educ. Level	46.88%	35.40%	10.11%	7.60%
Magazines? N = 10,279				
Less than High School	6.54%	23.88%	24.19%	45.40%
Complete High School	12.63%	38.44%	26.89%	22.05%
Post-secondary	18.24%	46.70%	24.02%	11.05%
University	23.44%	42.75%	26.22%	7.59%
All Educ. Level	14.96%	38.11%	25.84%	21.08%
Radio? N = 10,289				
Less than High School	35.53%	34.01%	12.40%	18.06%
Complete High School	57.16%	43.13%	11.75%	9.63%
Post-secondary	36.08%	18.95%	8.45%	3.75%
University	46.54%	36.22%	10.93%	6.31%
All Educ. Level	46.19%	34.06%	10.95%	9.05%
Television? N = 10,295				
Less than High School	63.47%	21.81%	6.78%	7.94%
Complete High School	70.16%	25.28%	6.74%	2.67%
Post-secondary	35.36%	16.92%	4.78%	2.59%
University	58.08%	29.67%	9.60%	2.65%
All Educ. Level	58.55%	23.81%	6.94%	3.51%

Note: Population ages 25-65, except in Switz' French speaking, Switz' German speaking, and Poland (25-64).

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