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Vera Masagao Ribeiro

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Literacy and Attitudes: Research among Adults in the City of São Paulo, Brazil

Vera Masagão Ribeiro

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Abstract: *The research includes a quantitative and a qualitative stage. Profiles of groups with higher and lower literacy levels are described and explanatory factors of this condition are suggested. Derived from the results, some adult education guidelines are given.*

Purpose and Context of Study

The research objective was to measure and analyze the phenomenon of adult literacy in an urban center in Latin America. It focused on the relations associated with the ability of adults to understand written information, their literacy practices and their judgements about these. As literacy is a relative concept, which calls for a cultural framework, it is relevant to know what this means in a city like São Paulo, where dynamic sectors of a modern economy coexist with poverty, underemployment and huge educational deficits. Several specialists in the area point out the absence of empirical studies of literacy in the Third World (Wagner, 1993). Studying adult literacy in a context where schooling and other cultural resources are so badly distributed is relevant both as a guide to adult education policies in the region as well as to develop literacy theory in an international perspective.

This study derived from a research project about functional illiteracy promoted by UNESCO's Regional Office for Latin America and Caribbean – OREALC (Infante, 1999). In São Paulo it was sponsored by national research supporting agencies CNPq, FINEP and CAPES.

Theoretical Framework

Literacy has been treated in this study as a complex phenomenon, encompassing diverse practices in which different cognitive abilities are implied to the same degree as are different attitudes and values (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Heath, 1983). Several authors share that general perspective. Nevertheless, while some of them consider literacy as a major factor of psychological and social modernization (Inkeles & Smith, 1974; Ong, 1982; Goody, 1987) others assert that relations between literacy and modernization are not linear and depend on the social contexts where literacy is established (Street,

1984).

According to the theoretical perspective adopted in this study, literacy by itself cannot promote modern attitudes. The relation between literacy and attitudes is reciprocal; while reading abilities make some activities feasible and are able to predispose some attitudes, those same activities and attitudes create the occasions for improving literacy abilities.

Research Design

The research covered both a quantitative and a qualitative design. In its first stage a representative sample of one thousand people aged 15 to 54 was drawn from the population of São Paulo, not including the 5% with higher income and educational background. This sample group took a reading test and answered a questionnaire to determine the demographic profile, educational background, and literacy practices at work and in daily life. The test included tasks requiring comprehension of prose and documents, besides processing quantitative information. The sample was also submitted to a scale of self-perceptions about capacities and dispositions considered advantageous to social insertion. A factorial analysis distinguished 10 attitudinal dimensions: efficiency and flexibility at work, autonomy to find and adapt to different jobs, capacity to persuade, capacity to follow instructions, to express one's opinions, disposition to work in groups, disposition to teach, to carry out manual work, to solve problems alone and finally, to debate public issues.

Based on OREALC consultants' proposals, these instruments used in the quantitative stage were defined by common consent among researchers from seven countries involved in the project. The qualitative stage, however, was designed and carried out autonomously by the Brazilian research team in São Paulo. For this stage, a sample of 26 subjects was intentionally drawn so as to include

people of different age brackets and school levels, with lower and higher reading test scores. They were subjected to both a detailed interview and to reading and writing tasks they had to resolve while interacting with the researcher. The subjects spoke about their strategies to solve problems, focusing on activities upon which the level of literacy has a supposed critical influence: actions to learn and follow directions; to teach and to instruct; to register, document, organize and plan; to become informed and form an opinion; to inform, express an opinion and convince. During the reading and writing tasks solved in a interactive situation, it was also possible to observe the subjects' attitudes in relation to the written text itself. The reading task consisted of reading, commenting and answering oral questions about a newspaper article that told how authorities intended to protect street children from drug dealers. The writing task consisted of filling in a job application form where the subject has to describe the main activities of his or her former job and to enumerate personal features and abilities that qualified him or her for the intended one.

While the quantitative stage made possible an assessment of literacy conditions and educational needs of different social groups, in addition to various statistical analyses, the qualitative stage contributed to a better understanding of the reciprocal influences between literacy abilities and attitudinal orientations.

Findings and Conclusions from the Quantitative Stage

It was established that 7.4% of the studied population was absolutely illiterate, while 25.5% could be identified as functionally illiterate: they had difficulty in accomplishing tasks which required the location of a single item of information in short texts with familiar syntax and vocabulary. It was found that the majority of the people who had not reached at least that basic level of ability were those who had not completed the eighth level of basic obligatory education and were employed in menial jobs. At work or in day-to-day life they seldom used writing.

Another 67.1% demonstrated at least a basic level of literacy and were classified in four comprehension ability levels. It was demonstrated that the people who use reading and writing most intensively, both in the work context and in day-to-day

life, were those who reach the two highest levels of ability (33.0% of the sample). This corresponds to the capacity to correlate information, make inferences and solve calculation sequences, dealing with more complex texts – including tables and graphics – with specific vocabulary (on genetics or ecology, for example) and percentage and arithmetical average concepts. The majority of these were people who had at least completed secondary education such as office and bank workers, technicians, and professionals.

Multiple correlation was used to analyze aspects related to test performance. The tested model contained eleven explanatory variables, which related to demographic features, familiar and educational background, socioeconomic condition, reading and writing uses at work and in daily life. This set of variables explains 52% of the variation on subject's scores. Educational level was the best predictor of reading ability with a relative weight of .47 for prose, .45 for documents and .50 for quantitative tasks. The frequency of reading and writing verbal information at work (letters, reports, manuals, guidelines, etc.) had a significant influence on the three kinds of tasks, as well as how many newspaper sections people read.

A similar model was used to analyze the relation between attitude indexes and the test scores along with other explanatory variables such as sex, age, educational and family background, socioeconomic and professional status. Significant correlation was not found between this set of variables and self-perceptions about expression and persuasion capacities or disposition to work in groups. As for the other attitude dimensions the correlations ascertained were quite moderate (R^2 under 15%) and in only two cases reading ability score or educational level had a meaningful influence in the correlation: disposition for manual work and interest in public issues.

These data confirm the impropriety of looking for direct causality between literacy and attitudes generically in order to identify persons as modern or socially adjusted. That is why the domains of attitude that are more closely related to literacy were sought in the qualitative stage of the study.

Domains of Attitude Related to Literacy

Analyzing information extracted from interviews in the qualitative stage, it was possible to distinguish four domains where subjects' behaviors varied con-

siderably according to their literacy level:

- *attitudes towards subjective expression* – this includes practices directed to non-pragmatic aims, interests in reading and writing as entertainment, personal or spiritual development, a need for assertion and identity affirmation, especially regarding the perfection of ability in communication;
- *attitudes towards planning and control of procedures* – these are related to those literacy practices that are more frequent in the work environment, such as writing reports, budgets and all sorts of financial controls, besides other personal uses of writing such as using an engagement book or checklists ;
- *attitudes towards information* – these are those related to the solution of practical problems of every day life (finding a job, consulting a city guide or instructions for using a medication) as well as to the interest for being updated about news made public by the media.
- *attitudes towards learning* – related to the acquisition of new bodies of knowledge.

For this analysis, categories were established at four levels – low, medium-low, medium-high and high literacy level – considering not only reading ability but also frequency and quality of literacy practices.

Eight of the 26 subjects who participated in the qualitative stage were classified in the low level of literacy; they were people who in all these attitudinal domains depended exclusively on orality. Restricted to a repetitive routine, their work demanded little planning or learning. They had no bank account, they did not buy on credit and, for these reasons, considered their memory and their oral expression capacity sufficient to face their daily needs. They regretted that they did not have a higher educational level mainly because of issues related to self-esteem and social status. Only one of them identified himself as being illiterate, but all of them were below the basic level in the reading test. The tasks proposed in the qualitative phase confirmed that, in fact, they had great difficulty in decoding letters and in getting the meaning of the text; as a matter of fact, all of them gave up trying to read before they finished the text. On filling out the form to ask for the job they wrote only two or three juxtaposed words.

Those classified as medium-low literates also had a restricted use of written language at work. But, different from the first group, all of them affirmed that they dedicated themselves to non utilitarian reading and writing practices geared to expressing their subjective feelings, confirming their faith or strengthening family and friendship ties. Five of the eight in this group had the habit of writing letters to family members and two of the women kept diaries. But, as in the other group, reading with the purpose of learning or getting information was not common. They did not give value to consulting printed media as a strategy for keeping up to date with public interest themes and considered radio and television more efficient. Faced with questions about the necessity to consult manuals or books in different situations, many mentioned confidence in their own capacity to learn by observing and practicing. Although all said they were satisfied with their literacy abilities, almost all of them admitted that their schooling greatly limited their employment possibilities.

The greater number of the subjects of this group was not even able to achieve the basic reading ability level and the others did not go beyond this. When they were invited to read from a newspaper and comment on the news orally, the majority of this group insisted on reading out loud, demonstrating a reasonable fluency. They also showed that they had understood the theme of the text, but they had difficulty in finding specific information when later solicited by the interviewer. When they were asked, for example, the complete name of one of the sources, or what someone had declared in the report, they did not consult the written text but rather, called on their memory and usually gave distorted answers. If the interviewer insisted and, in some cases, gave a little help, almost all of them managed to find the information that was asked for. Spontaneously, however, they seemed less interested in making a literal interpretation of the text than in evoking their own feelings, experiences and opinions. As a matter of fact, in the predominant reading practice of this group – mainly religious and self-help books – the reader can give greater importance to a subjective invocation than to the literal content of the texts. Probably this kind of practice is responsible for shaping the subjects' reading style or their disposition towards interpretation.

The performance of this group in the interactive tasks of reading and writing helped comprehend the remarkable fact that so many people that have had 4 to 7 years of schooling were not able to respond regularly to the simplest items on the reading test. Actually, even the simplest items demanded that the reader limit himself to the literal content of texts and instructions. In the writing task, the predominant literacy practices of this group were also evident. On answering the job application form questions, the majority of those with medium-low level of literacy wrote relatively long texts but, besides making spelling and grammatical mistakes, they used a narrative and confessional style improper to the context of the task.

The seven subjects classified as on medium-high literacy level were involved in more specialized professions that demanded greater communication ability. Their activities demanded planning and control of more complex procedures: defining budgets or accounting control systems, activity reports, interpretation of technical drawings, elaborating or consulting manuals with rules and procedures. Within the family ambience these people affirmed that they also turned to reading as leisure, as a boost to their children's education and in order to update their own knowledge. The majority declared they had magazines, novels, schoolbooks, some children's books and encyclopedias. All of them affirmed that they read newspapers occasionally and that they recognized the worth of this as a complete and reliable source to update their knowledge on themes of public interest. All of them mentioned having taken some course or program for professional development where written material was used.

The attitude in regard to learning, however, was what distinguished this group of three subjects classified as having a high level of literacy. For these, updating was considered a permanent necessity. Two of them subscribed to specialized magazines in their work field (a physical education teacher and a photographer) and the third was taking a university course. They read books with some frequency, not only novels, but also technical books and essays.

These two latter groups managed to reach the best scores in the reading test and their performance in the simulated reading and writing tasks applied in the qualitative stage also corresponded to their more diversified uses of written language. Commenting on the newspaper articles, these interviewees

clearly distinguished textual information from their own opinions and were able to easily consult the text again when necessary. In the written task, they were able to use linguistic resources characteristic of writing such as itemization and nominalization (Halliday, 1986), being able to produce a rhetorical effect that was quite adequate to the situation proposed in the task.

Implications for Adult Education

This data shows that the literacy problem in Brazil is very complex and demands diversification in approaching it. In an urban center such as São Paulo, where a dynamic economic system coexists with a high level of inequality old and new problems have to be faced: besides absolute illiteracy identified in 7% of the population studied, there is the greater problem of functional illiteracy, a situation which characterizes the greater part of youth and adults who have not had access to a complete 8-year basic schooling (49%, according to official statistics). There is also the need to improve abilities of a considerable portion of literate adults, making them adequate to attend the new demands of the economy and of social participation.

In order to guarantee the development of attitudes and abilities in reading and writing which would permit their use autonomously in different situations, transitory and unsystematic solutions such as traditional literacy campaigns are insufficient. This kind of initiative has to be linked with programs that can guarantee the continuity of study for adults. Initial learning of writing language can take two or three years, and for this it is necessary to have continual help of a proficient reader with participation in a community of readers in which the meanings of the written word can be negotiated. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to offer differentiated alternatives for adult basic education, resorting to teaching-modules or with the support of distance learning. However, the presence of an instructor seems to be incontrovertible and decisive; the results of the tests and of the tasks that were given in the qualitative phase of the research indicate that the capacity to follow instructions and learn based on the written text autonomously only occur with those people with a higher mastery of literacy skills.

Adult literacy programs should be conceived as full educational initiatives: receptive to new forms of understanding, expression and action, promoting in adults the interest in subjective expression, the

search for information, the planning and control of processes and in continued learning. There is no doubt that the development of attitudes of this type require longer periods of schooling since the subjects who make the most varied and constant use of reading and writing have at least a complete basic education or even a secondary education. It was observed that the disposition of the subjects to use written language in diverse situations does not only depend on their level of proficiency: it also depends on their familiarity with diversified written materials, their judgement about the convenience of using this material for various purposes, and about the quality of information that they carry. After schooling, the initiative to continue looking for information and opportunities for learning via written language can also be encouraged if the school would become more open to other literacy agencies such as libraries, cultural centers, distribution points for publications, in addition to electronic communication networks. These experiences could strengthen attitudes that correspond to taking better advantage of their life-long literacy abilities.

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