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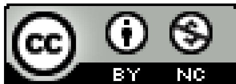

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Rethinking Violence and Learning: Moving Research into Practice

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Abstract: *Drawing on focus groups, interviews and participant observation, we explore the ways discourses of violence and of schooling impede efforts to develop literacy programs which respond to the violence and trauma women learners have experienced.*

This paper draws from an action research study which explores the process of change in literacy programs and their workers when attempts are made to better take account of the relationship between literacy and the reality that many women are, or have been, traumatized by experiences of violence. Many literacy organizations in Canada and the U.S, familiar with a recent study (Horsman, 1999) which examined impacts of violence on adult literacy learning and recommended a radical reconception of adult literacy education to better support all women's learning, are exploring how to create significant change in their programs. This current action research study is providing the opportunity for a detailed examination of the myriad factors that facilitate and hinder introducing change in literacy programs.

Beginning from a commitment to social change, our current research is influenced by particular forms of poststructuralist theory that offer "...a way of conceptualising the relationship between language, social institutions and individual consciousness which focuses on how power is exercised and on the possibilities of change" (Weedon, 1987, p. 21). Through this frame, we are exploring how certain ways of conceptualising literacy, violence, and pedagogy guide particular actions and forms of organization within literacy programs, and thus contribute to or resist dominant power relations. The theory tells us that language, power and subjectivity are important. In this paper we are offering an initial exploration of some discursive practices that appear to impede efforts to address the impacts of violence on learning in literacy programs.

We are drawing from focus groups and interviews with literacy practitioners in Duncan and Vancouver, British Columbia and Edmonton, Alberta. In addition, Jenny Horsman is conducting participant observation research while facilitating a women's literacy group in Toronto, Ontario. This group is involved in an intensive course that allows them time to look at the violence they have experienced and its aftermath in their lives and focus on how to build their strengths as learners. Some participants in each of these sites are also co-researchers with us, engaged in collectively developing in-depth analyses of the dynamics of change when literacy workers and organizations in different settings attempt to alter their practice to develop new trauma-sensitive approaches.

Discourses of Violence and Its Effects

In speaking of violence against women and girls, we are referring to a pervasive set of social practices, often sexualized, frequently taking place in the supposed "safe haven" of the home, usually perpetrated by men on women and girls they profess (explicitly or implicitly) to love. These violent social practices have physical, psychological and emotional effects which may be permanent, but are at least ongoing, affecting all aspects of a woman's life.

In examining the discourses of violence and how they may hinder the possibilities of addressing violence, we became aware of the pervasiveness of silence and the difficulty that literacy workers have in opening up talk about violence. In one focus group session one practitioner spoke about a conversation with a woman about the violence from which the other had escaped. Even though she suggested that she had raised the issue because of a new commitment to speak about the issue of violence directly, she was surprised to realize later that she had not actually spoken of violence but instead had talked

about "the situation." This indirectness struck a chord with many of us; a variety of pressures frequently seem to lead us to be less than direct.

Another example comes from Horsman's experience of trying to draw women who have experienced trauma into the aforementioned women's group. It was hard to speak directly of the focus on experiences of violence in case women felt uncomfortable with attending a course described in this way. During Horsman's earlier research she heard from students attending an interview session that they were terrified they might be observed by others. Some said that they wouldn't attend a support group identified as being for trauma survivors, even though they thought they would find such a group useful. Language such as, "if you have gone through tough times, want to move on, but are not sure where to begin" was the only way found to name the experiences of violence without seeming to stigmatize the women who might attend the course.

In spite of the complexity about naming violence in advance as something women in the group would have in common, once the group came together Horsman led a variety of exercises which created opportunities for women to name the role of violence in their lives. Increasingly it became evident that violence is something with which everyone in the group is familiar. Silence appears to be replaced by talk. Yet a new kind of silence appears when the talk also includes tears. Over and over again women in the Toronto program say to each other: "Don't cry." Often too they respond immediately with a story of their own and, implicitly or explicitly, suggest that in comparison with their own much worse experience the other woman's story is not bad enough to justify tears. We wonder about the prevalence and all-pervasiveness of this powerful discourse about not crying, which includes phrases like: "move on", "don't dwell on it", "it's all in the past" and "forget about it." These are clearly very strongly ingrained responses: Although Horsman regularly points out that saying "don't cry" implies that it is not OK to have the feelings you are having, it is still always the women's first response to someone crying.

We are concerned about the effect of this discourse on women who were frequently hurt and then not allowed to cry as children. This response confirms what they have been told and have told themselves their whole lives. It seems to be part of an extremely well-used discourse about the need to "heal," or at least to move on and "put the past behind you". This discourse silences talk about the pain of violence. It also connects to individualized medical discourses about the ill-effects of trauma as illness, which in turn suggests that it is only the individual who needs to change, not the violence of society. In contrast Lewis (1999) offers new language as she speaks of "familiarity with" and "living beside" trauma. Although this may sound like a small change, such reconceptualization makes possible new discourses about trauma as an ongoing experience, felt long after the original incident or incidents have passed. Within such a discourse more possibilities for speaking about the ongoing impact of violence on learning could be revealed.

The extent to which the discourse about violence is overwhelmed by the well-learned need for silence on the issues is visible in another way in our work. When taken seriously at all, violence and trauma are often framed as barriers to women's learning. Women can't learn whatever it is the programs are trying to teach them, because the issues of violence are too predominant in their minds. Often women can trace the moment when they stopped "learning" as a child, or the particular things they didn't "learn" at school, to episodes of violence in their childhood. We do not want to deny that this is a problem; indeed, our work is based on this premise. But what is missing in the "violence as a barrier to learning" discourse is any reference to just what women ARE learning, either when being abused or when struggling to overcome the damages. "Learning," we would argue, does not in fact stop in the midst of violence. Instead, what is learned is not speakable, not nameable. Enforced silence around issues of violence and trauma mean that some women and girls appear not to learn while learning an enormous amount. The discourse of barriers to learning also preserves an unproblematic sense of "normal" students, who don't have barriers, and "other" students with barriers. These "others" will, at best, be recognized as having "special needs", and at worst, will be judged as not ready to "learn," needing first to go away and "heal" their "disorders," seen as the job of the medical system rather than of education. In this theoretical framework not only does societal violence not need to change, neither does the education system; only the individual must learn to behave differently and leave the impact of violence behind her. In this

way, discourses of schooling and education interact with those about violence.

Discourses of Schooling and Education

Even for those who have not done well at school, or who have spent little time there, the discourses defining the "correct" ways to be a student or a teacher are well-known. As Heald has written elsewhere, such discourses "do not so much describe as attempt to DEFINE identities, setting the limits of what can be done within the subject position, by whatever incumbent..." (1991:137). In defining "good students," the discourse by default defines "bad students." Because the discourse appears neutral, one's competence as a student appears to be a function of the presence or absence of personal qualities, rather than biases concealed within the discourse.

> Other elements which appear 'neutral' aspects of education include a separation of knowledge and opinion; a belief that the only proper and useful knowledge is rational knowledge; an understanding that schooling requires tactics aimed at credentials rather than the learning which credentials are supposed to represent; a sense of earning one's way through some combination of hard work and talent; a sense that the only question to be asked about educational knowledge and training is whether the students are adequate to the tasks set, not whether there is a problem with the tasks. (Heald, 1991, pp.137-138).

In spite of their lack of success in occupying the category "student," then, literacy learners are positioned within this discourse.

Educational discourses also define what is appropriate to learn, how students should behave, how teachers should behave, and the boundaries marking the kinds of things that are appropriate to talk about at school. For example, academic subjects are considered to be the "real" work of school. This is true, in spite of years of research in the sociology of education (e.g., Bowles and Gintis, 1976) which shows that the social importance of schooling has much more to do with sorting people into categories deemed "appropriate" to their class, race and gender status, as well as teaching some people the importance of assembly-line related skills (showing up on time, following instructions, being deferential to authority, etc.) In our research, we can see how the dominant discourses of education supercede committed workers' and learners' sense of what is important and appropriate for them to pay attention to and spend time on in class. So, for example, one instructor commented that although she thought it important for students to "talk[] about themselves as students", she felt it was not legitimate to insist on discussions and lessons on these topics. This was in contrast to her math teaching where she felt able to be "quite directive about what will help and what needs to be worked on." (E-mail correspondence, Evelyn Battell, 12.17.99). We all thought that this hesitancy was at least in part a result of the ways "learning math" is seen to be a clear and important educational goal, while "learning how to be a student" is hidden beneath the assumption that the category student is both natural and neutral.

Jenny Horsman notices something similar in her group: There are women who go to the math, computer or reading groups instead of always coming to the group. It seems as if they think of the other groups as the "real" learning, and the women's course, focusing on building their strengths as learners, as something other than the "real thing," yet they say that the work they do in the group is important and useful. We are concerned with how this reaffirms the need for silence around violent experiences, with the ways it leaves untouched the notion that "schooling" defines what it is important to know, and with the idea that "real learning" involves a separation of mind from heart and body.

Discourses of education also call for a clear separation between teacher and student which many in literacy programs find problematic at the same time as they reproduce it. Noticeable in one focus group was what we came to call the "dealt with it discourse." Many of the workers stated that they had "dealt with" any traumatic experiences in their own lives. They implied that they thought workers had to have "dealt with" their own experiences and put them behind them to be an effective literacy worker. To a certain extent this may be true, but it also reinforces a we/they dynamic anathema to much literacy practice. We relate this to dynamics of professionalism and social class, both of which work to define acceptable behaviours. Working class people/learners/non-professionals get to present/expose themselves as in need of this kind of help; middle class people/workers/professionals need in all ways to be much more together, composed, keeping issues in private. Indeed, participants in one focus group commented that they were surprised at how much they had talked about them-

selves (something not obvious or problematic to us), and went on to have, for the first time, conversations with co-workers about the violence in their own lives. This "dealt with it" discourse excludes discussion about difficulties instructors may have when, for example, they find stories of violence, tears, or other student behaviour difficult to cope with, and leaves unasked the question whether there is such a state of having "dealt with" trauma. Being a "helper" seems to involve the exclusion of the whole person of the teacher or facilitator. Thus it may be hard for her to notice her own needs, or attempt to find a balance between her own needs and those of her students. The helper's own needs will seem insignificant in the face of the greater needs of her students. Rather than facilitate the work of "familiarity with" and "living beside" trauma (Lewis, 1999), discourses of class, professionalism and helper reinforce silence about the pervasiveness of violence, the commonalities between students and teachers and the dynamics which made learners "non-learners" in the first place.

If there was widespread recognition of the ongoing impact of violence then the need for attempts to create a safer environment for learning could be clearly revealed to be a basic necessity for learning in educational settings. Instructors are frustrated by the lack of an everyday discourse about "safety" which inhibits the possibilities for even imagining change that instructors can carry out. In one group interview in a community college instructors talked about the central importance of creating some sort of safe setting for learning and talked of the impossibility of the individual teacher doing so because there is no administrative or institutional awareness of the need for safety. What would learning institutions look like if a priority was given to creating safe and relaxed settings for learning? And what would it take for such a concern to become a priority for organizations and instructors alike?

In the absence of any institutional discourse about safety the prevalent discourse seems to be one of the responsibility of the teacher to cope with whatever happens in her classroom. Several instructors in college settings were firm that there was no support available from the institution, and there were limits on what they could take on in the classroom to address issues of violence in the absence of support.

One instructor illustrated how the discourse of responsibility of the teacher to teach all students and the lack of a policy about the importance of safety structured how she addressed a situation where one male student was loud and angry. The instructor talked about worrying about the impact of this particular student and putting much energy into trying to "defuse him." She checked with colleagues about this student but was told he had "come a long way." Instructors are left struggling with the question what they can do to prevent such men from impeding the learning of others, particularly those who have experienced trauma and are extremely uncomfortable with such violence in the classroom. Although instructors know that many women have experienced violence, instructors do not often hear the details of how students are silenced and unable to learn. In this instance only after the situation had improved was some indication of the impact on other students' learning revealed to the instructor. This instructor suggested first that she should have checked with other students earlier, then said that she "should have known" that many of the other students have experienced violence and so might be expected to have immense difficulty with this man's behaviour. Then she realized that she "did know" because she frequently hears disclosures from her students. Yet in a discourse where the teacher is responsible to teach everyone and where there is no institutional support or policies that would allow one student to be excluded to enhance the learning of others and create a safer learning situation, such instructors may be almost unable to allow themselves to "know" that students who have experienced violence may be retraumatized in the classroom. In the absence of a discourse that recognizes the complexity and importance of creating a safer learning environment there is little opportunity for an instructor to discuss possible responses to problem situations with colleagues without implying that she is unable to cope. Instead the instructor who seeks to create a situation where all her students can learn what she is seeking to teach is left with few options but to stretch farther trying to manage an often enormously difficult classroom situation, trying to make the classroom work for everyone.

In many conversations with instructors, whenever the possibilities of opening up issues of violence and its impact on learning in the classroom is broached, instructors begin to talk about their concern about not "crossing the line" into therapy. Frequently instructors are firmly instructed in

institutional policy that will not allow them to engage in any counselling. This discourse preserves the assertion that there is an obvious demarcation between the two areas. While educators try to support women's learning they are blocked by an injunction not to be a therapist, in spite of the lack or inadequacy of counselling supports for students or instructors. There is little or no support in the educational system for exploration of what the teacher's role might usefully include in the face of the pervasive experience of trauma for workers and learners alike.

We were left questioning the way institutions benefit from those instructors who take up more of a counselling role, while also framing such work as something they shouldn't really be doing. Instructors are left with no facilities, such as private space to meet with their students, unsupported by the institution, unable to ask to process the issues that are raised on paid time, unable to influence an inadequate counselling department, somehow at fault for their level of exhaustion and burn out. The sensitive, caring instructor then gets framed as the problem while carrying much of the load of seeking to support students who have experienced violence.

A further feature of educational discourse relevant to understanding how literacy programs clash with themselves in trying to work with survivors of trauma is the notion of "learner-centred" literacy work. Within this framework, curriculum, discussion topics, ideas for programs, all must come from the students themselves. One Edmonton instructor spoke about wanting to address issues of violence in her program, but believing that it was inappropriate for her to do so unless learners asked her to make this a focus; otherwise she thought she would be imposing her own agenda. Yet a student spoke eloquently in the same focus group about the importance for her of beginning to believe that she could speak in the literacy program about her abusive marriage and its legacy in her life. The student said that an interview session during Horsman's earlier research, where violence was named as the focus, helped her to believe that violence was something that could be spoken about and that someone was ready to hear what students had to say. This comment reaffirms our belief that discourses cannot be radically changed through this method: Waiting for students to begin talk about violence must surely contribute to maintaining silence about violence. Change requires offering new discourses within which to re-understand experience (Weedon, 1987). People can, of course, choose to accept or reject new discourses, but we believe that this level of "imposition" or intervention is required.

In conclusion, then, we have begun to suggest ways that various aspects of these dominant discourses about violence and its effects, and about schooling and education contribute to ongoing silences and struggles for literacy programs trying to deal adequately with the violence in learners' lives. We are at early stages of this work, and are continuing to explore further how these and other discourses work to obscure the extent and effects of violence in our society, and the relation between violence and learning.

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Note: It seems to us that what is learned through violence is both consistent with and in contradiction to what counts as "learning" in the mainstream. This is a point we are developing further, but which goes beyond the scope of this paper.