

Refereed Article

Listening to the Voices of Haiti: Exploring Perceptions of Education, Quality of Life, and Democracy

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the levels of literacy among Haitian citizens and to understand their perceptions concerning the importance and availability of literacy programs and democratic process training. Since democratic process, education, and access to information are intrinsically linked, the intent of the authors of this paper was to explore the connection of education, health, and quality of life in the democratization process in Haiti. The results of this study found continued low literacy rates, little access to education and political information, and people proclaiming that their quality of life is worse than it has ever been and expressing little to no hope for the future. The implications and recommendations extrapolated from the findings of this study are significant for literacy and health education movements, politicians in power in Haiti, and those federal and private agencies seeking to aid this country. The challenge to helpers is the establishment of a systematic infusion of the democratic process, initiated by the assurance of education, literacy, and truthful information dissemination.

Introduction

Haiti is a country where its governments have been unstable and, for the most part, totalitarian. The United Nations has classified Haiti as a

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“Least Developed Nation,” giving it the Human Development Ranking of the 159th poorest country out of 174 nations (Emling, 1998). Haitians’ quality of life and access to literacy education have been questionable for a number of years, even after the democratizing efforts in the past few years. Access to education for all Haitians is limited, and illiteracy continues to challenge citizens as adult illiteracy rates have risen from 52% in 1985 to 54% in 1995 (Tardif, 1998) to 60% in 1999 (Emling, 1999; Kovaleski, 1999). Up to 82% of Haitian women are illiterate, and 6% of all Haitian families are headed by women (DeJean, 1996). Other conditions have not improved, and still others have grown worse. Life expectancy in 1991 was 55.7 years and has dropped to 54.6 years in 1998. Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita has decreased from \$380 US dollars in 1991 to \$231 US dollars in 1995 and continues to fall (Faul, 1999; Tardif, 1998). In 1994 only 28% of the population reported having access to safe drinking water (Tardif, 1998). Currently, 70% of the population is unemployed or underemployed (Kovaleski, 1999). All of these measurements indicate a dramatic and noticeable decrease in the general quality of life following the adoption of democracy over a decade ago. Voter turnout for elections decreases with every election: 95% of the voters in 1990, 50% in 1995, 30% in 1996, and 5% in 1997 (Faul, 1999).

Why has the democratic process failed to improve the quality of life for Haitians? Why has democracy failed to fulfill its promise? Adult education’s enduring stance concerning social action and promoting social equity and justice (Quigley, 1997) supports the notion that democracy and the democratic process can work only when people are educated and their literacy needs addressed (Collins, 1998; Lindeman, 1989; Okech-Owiti, 1993)—including literacy needs associated with quality of life.

A growing number of studies in industrialized and developing countries point to low levels of literacy as contributors to poor health and quality of life among citizens (Grosse & Auffrey, 1989; Weiss, Hart, McGee, & D’Estelle, 1992). In addition, other researchers have suggested that low literacy, poor health, and early death are undeniably linked (Perrin, 1989; Tresserras, Canela, Alvarez, Sentis, & Salleras, 1992). All of these studies have resulted in renewed interest in the linkages of literacy and health care and have “generated enormous concern across the spectrum of health care about how to work effectively with low literacy populations” (Hohn, 1998, p. 12), such as those in Haiti. Robertson and Minkler (1994) argue for community empowerment as a primary goal for health education and promotion. Empowerment health education puts the learners’ needs, interests, and questions about health central to the educational pro-

cess, facilitating individual and group decision-making processes through non-traditional teaching methods (Airhihenbuma, 1994). Similar ideas about involving literacy students in planning literacy programs are reflected in adult education (Auerbach et al., 1996; Cuban & Hayes, 1996; Imel, 1996; Sissel & Hohn, 1996; Valazquez, 1996). Fingeret (1990, 1992) and Horsman (1990) endorse the idea of inviting learners to be active participants in the learning process by providing opportunities to work on problems and constructing solutions. These authors are saying that this approach enhances the potential for positive change. In addition, involving learners in planning programs can promote social equity (Quigley, 1997).

Adult and health educators recognize that education must lead the efforts to revitalize the democratic, social, and economic processes in Haiti (Desruisseaux, 1994; Tardif, 1998); consequently, addressing illiteracy among Haitians would provide access to political, professional, technical, and scientific education. However, Haitians' quality of life and access to literacy education have been questionable for a number of years, even after the democratizing efforts in the past few years. The purpose of this study was to (a) ascertain the levels of literacy among Haitian citizens, (b) understand their perceptions concerning the importance and availability of literacy programs and democratic process training, and (c) explore the impact of education and literacy levels with participants' perceptions of their quality of life.

Literacy and Haiti

The National Education Goals Panel's (1994) definition of literacy includes the conceptions of adults being capable of using print and written information in order to function in a global economy and of their developing knowledge and individual potential while exercising the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Low income levels, lack of available jobs, poor housing, and limited access to medical care all contribute to links between literacy levels and health status; low literate populations have a documented higher risk of poor health (Hohn, 1998) and, thus, lower quality of life. The link between literacy level and health status is a growing concern among adult and health educators (Sissel & Hohn, 1996). As Hohn (1998) argues, "Literacy level is a reflection of educational attainment and is often a more accurate reflection of actual functional levels" (p. 11). In undeveloped or developing nations, such as Haiti, illiteracy and related socio-economic issues cause a reduced quality of life.

Hohn's ideas reflect Freire's (1970) ideas of education that promote a process that is people-centered and controlled, using a dialogic approach in which everyone participates as equals and co-creators of knowledge. This pedagogy "must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed" (Freire, 1970, p. 33). Freire advocates praxis, the interaction in which theory informs practice and practice informs theory, an interaction that leads to a problem-posing method of popular education and, many times, literacy work and training (Beder, 1996). Popular education, when applied to literacy education, recognizes that the everyday circumstances of the lives of learners—that is, the community's problems, issues, cultures, languages, and hopes—provide the context and tools to engage the learners in literacy education and are an integral part of their lives (Hohn, 1998). Learners, when engaged in this manner, may become empowered. In literacy education such engagement may lead to citizens' participation in the democratic process.

The success of literacy work and training to help advance the cause of democracy in Haiti was demonstrated in the early 1980s. One such literacy movement was *Mission Alpha*, a literacy program sponsored by the Catholic Church that sought to enlighten and educate illiterate peasants and slum-dwellers in the 1970s and early 1980s (Wilentz, 1989). Literacy workers of this program were particularly targeted for murder during the riots before and after the first democratic election attempted in 1985 (Wilentz, 1989). Another powerful literacy movement at this same time, entitled *Chemen Devlopman (The Road to Development)*, was co-sponsored by the Ofis Nasyonal Alfabetizasyon ak Aksyon Kominote (The National Office of Literacy and Community Action) and UNICEF (Gid Monite, 1985). Both of these literacy programs folded shortly after the ousting of then President Jean Claude Duvalier. Subsequent literacy programs initiated in Haiti include government-supported, religious-based literacy programs (Beyond Borders Group, 1999) and non-profit organizations (Fondasyon Aristide pou Demokrasi, 1999). The mission statements for the non-governmental agencies center around establishing democracy, justice, and peace for Haiti. The World Wide Web home page for the *Fondasyon Aristide pou Demokrasi* (1999) states the goal of the organization: "dedicated to deepening the roots of Haiti's democracy through forums for dialogue, radio programs, literacy projects, and the formation of cooperative centers." Literacy centers in Haiti, historically and currently, seek to address educational needs within the political context of the nation. Declining literacy rates (Kovaleski, 1999) coupled with decreasing electoral turnout (Faul, 1999) seem to indicate problems

with the literacy movement and, consequently, democracy in Haiti.

Connecting literacy, health, and overall quality-of-life concerns is becoming more common in both literacy and health education literature (Sissel & Hohn, 1996). How these concerns and connections play out in the real world practices of health education and literacy education, particularly in Haiti, is unknown. In Haiti, where much of the population is illiterate, quality of life, health, and welfare of the people may be tied to literacy programs and methods for delivering these programs. However, how available are these programs to citizens, and do Haitians participate in these programs? How aware of the democratic process are citizens? What are the perceptions of their quality of life now that democratic efforts have been established in their country? The purpose of this study was to address these questions by listening to and understanding the voices of the citizens of Haiti.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the levels of literacy among Haitian citizens, to understand their perceptions concerning the importance and availability of literacy programs and democratic process training, and, finally, to explore the impact of education and literacy levels upon participants' perceptions of their quality of life. This study was funded by the Americas Council of the University System of Georgia and was part of a larger research project that studied the effect of democratization upon the perceived quality of life among rural Haitians. For purposes of this study, only the data concerning literacy and democratic perceptions are reported.

In order to achieve the stated purpose of the study, the researchers utilized a quasi-experimental descriptive approach. Quantitative data were collected using the *Haitian Quality of Life* (HQOL) survey (Welle-Graf, 1997), adapted from the *World Health Organization Quality of Life* (WHOQOL) scale. The WHOQOL was designed to give an overall determinant of life satisfaction/quality by assessing health domains (or subscales) of physical, psychological, independence/autonomy, social relationships, community/environment, and spiritual (Kuyken, 1989; World Health Organization Quality of Life Group, 1995). The philosophical underpinnings of the WHOQOL survey were adapted to create the HQOL (Welle-Graf, 1997). The HQOL, designed to measure four domains of health—physical, social, intellectual, community—and including an overall Quality of Life measure, consists of 31 total questions. Within the HQOL

a Literacy Sub-scale (LS-HQOL) consists of 16 total questions: nine Likert-type questions, two open-ended questions, and five demographic determinants. A five-point response option was provided to the participant (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree).

Four questions on quality of life sought to determine overall life satisfaction and expectations. These questions were designed to be culturally sensitive to current and past historical developments in Haiti and examine overall life satisfaction, recent improvement of quality of life, progress of the country, and predictions of quality of life in the next five years. Two open-ended questions were asked in a focus group setting and elicited input from this population regarding their perceptions of the effect of democratization on quality of life. Quality-of-life assessments conducted in urban areas in developing nations tend to produce lower scores than those in rural areas and often are confounded by other variables, such as overcrowding, inadequate housing, etc. (Carley, 1981). Therefore, it was important to this study to sample both urban residents and rural populace.

The target sample size for this study was 50 to 75 Haitians. Over a four-day period in summer, 1997, the survey was administered orally to geographically diverse Haitian populations. A non-probability quota sampling selection methodology was utilized for this study. Non-probability sampling selection is justified when the researcher seeks to obtain sensitive information (Green & Lewis, 1986). Quota sampling is utilized when the researcher seeks information about the attitudes, beliefs, or practices of a given population (McDermott & Sarvela, 1999). Strategic data collection targeted a mixture of rural and urban populations; Port-au-Prince and Petionville were selected for the urban settings, and Lavallee, Montouis, and LaGonave were selected for the rural.

Statistical analysis of data consisted of descriptive statistics for the Likert-type questions and demographic variables. Results were recorded in frequencies, percentiles, means, and range. Analysis of the responses to open-ended questions was conducted via focus content analysis. Focus content analysis categorizes responses into general themes. This type of content analysis seeks to reveal patterns of meanings that are not evident from raw data. This type of analysis is accomplished by grouping information into comparable descriptor units and subsequent analysis of the groups (Patton, 1990).

Content validity of the HQOL instrument was established. The instrument was pilot tested among three bilingual Haitian citizens completing undergraduate course work in community health at a major university

in the Southeastern United States. Corrections and suggestions were incorporated into the final instrument. The HQOL was translated into Haitian Creole and its cultural sensitivity assessed. The official language of Haiti is French. However, Haitian Creole (a mixture of French and possibly several indigenous West African dialects) is the variety of French spoken by a large proportion of Haitians with no access to formal education. The series of questions were demonstrated to measure accurately quality-of-life and literacy perceptions of this population. Reliability for this study was ascertained by calculating Cronbach Alpha, which determines internal consistency of an instrument and should be minimally 0.60 (McDermott & Sarvela, 1999). The Cronbach Alpha for this instrument was 0.7024.

Results

110 Haitians participated in this study. The greater than anticipated number of respondents might have been due to participants' need to be heard. No incentives were given to entice participation. Data points were set up in heavy traffic areas in urban and rural areas, and people flocked in and waited to be interviewed. Time limitations were the greatest deterrent for the inclusion of more participants. Completion time for each interview was 20 to 30 minutes, depending on the participants' willingness to elaborate on certain key issues. Data revealed that the majority of the participants were male ($n = 69$, 63.3%) and rural inhabitants ($n = 67$, 60.9%). The mean age of participants was 38 years old, with ages ranging from 16 to 78. The mean report of number of years completed in school was 4.14 years. Participants reported having a range of 0 to 17 living children, but the average number of living children in a household was 3.75. Current employment rates among participants was extremely low ($n = 25$, 22.9%), and 85 participants reporting being unemployed.

Table 1 presents the frequencies associated with participants' responses to the Likert scale questions concerning literacy issues and quality of life. The overall reported literacy rate was 40%, which is comparable to the national reported average of 40% to 46%. When asked whether the participant would like to attend a school to learn to read, 90% agreed. These contrasting figures suggest that literacy rates were actually lower among participants. Many participants reported the availability of adult literacy programs (70%), but that barriers inhibited their attendance at these programs. Sixty-one percent reported that their children attended school, although the question did not ask the respondent to articulate how many of his or her children attended school. In response to the

general, overall life satisfaction question, only 29.4% reported that they were content. Even less people reported that their life has gotten better since democracy (24.8%) and expressed satisfaction with the political process of their country (22.9%). Very few of the participants reported hope for the future; only 20.2% stated that they believed things would get better over the next five years.

Haitians in this study also participated in focus groups aimed at trying to understand better participants' perceptions of the Haitian democracy. Haitians were asked two questions: "What changes have occurred since Haiti has become a democracy?" and "Is Haiti better with a democratic government?" A total of 13 major themes emerged from the focus content analysis conducted on participants' responses to the questions. The top four categories of themes from participants' responses to the first question ("What changes have occurred since Haiti has become a democracy?") were: "Is not a democracy" (n = 45, 28.1%); "No changes" (n = 39, 23.4%); "More expensive to live" (n = 19, 11.8%); and "More freedom of speech" (n = 11, 6.9%). The top four themes from the second question ("Is Haiti better with a democratic government?") were: "No better off" (n = 51, 45.1%), "Yes" (n = 21, 18.6%), "Getting worse" (n = 19, 16.8%), and "More violent" (n = 2, 1.8%). The total numbers of responses may exceed the sample size of 110 due to the fact that each participant may have given more than one response to the questions.

The most common theme noted by the researchers was that the Haitians did not feel that a democracy existed currently. Many people stated that there were no changes and that the country is not better off. Clearly, the promise and hope of living in a democratic society has not been realized in the lives of the Haitians who took part in this study. The theme of "no democracy" held subtle differences within the context of the individual participants' responses. While some participants claimed that democracy as a political process did not exist, other participants made short statements describing their perceptions of democracy. These statements are direct quotes, translated from their native language:

- I have no idea about what democracy is.
- I don't understand the word democracy.
- There is no democracy. We don't know what democracy is.
- I don't know about democracy; I would rather have Duvalier back.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of question responses for the Literacy Subscale of the Haitian Quality of Life Scale (LS-HQOLS).

	<i>n</i>	Mean	Strongly Agree % (<i>n</i>)	Agree % (<i>n</i>)	Neutral % (<i>n</i>)	Disagree % (<i>n</i>)	Strongly Disagree % (<i>n</i>)
<u>Intellectual Domain:</u>							
I can read well.	110	2.75	7.3 % (8)	32.7 % (36)	7.3% (8)	32.7% (36)	20.0% (22)
I would like to attend school to learn to read.	110	4.01	20.0% (22)	70.0% (77)	2.7% (3)	5.5% (6)	1.8% (2)
They have adult literacy classes where I live.	110	3.37	4.6% (5)	63.6% (70)	6.4% (7)	15.5% (17)	10.0% (11)
My children attend school.	99	3.26	5.1% (5)	56.6% (56)	6.1% (6)	24.2% (24)	8.1% (8)
I receive information about the political process.	110	2.63	2.7% (3)	28.2% (31)	17.3% (19)	32.7% (36)	19.1% (21)
<u>Over Quality of Life:</u>							
Currently, I am happy with my life.	109	2.41	0% (0)	29.4% (32)	11.0% (12)	41.3% (45)	18.3% (20)
In the past 10 years, my life has gotten better.	109	2.40	0.9% (1)	23.9% (26)	14.7% (16)	35.8% (39)	24.8% (27)
I am happy with the political progress Haiti is making.	109	2.31	0% (0)	22.9% (25)	13.8% (15)	34.9% (38)	28.4% (31)
In five years, things will be better for the people of Haiti.	110	2.66	0% (0)	20.2% (22)	43.1% (47)	20.2% (22)	16.5% (18)
Overall Literacy Subscale Totals		2.87	4.5%	38.6%	13.6%	27.0%	16.3%

Note: Scoring range is 1 to 5; 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=neutral or don't know, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree.

- I don't know anything about it (democracy). I don't see any change in point of view of the quality of the poor people.
- Not everyone knows the meaning of democracy. The people that live in this town are not educated.
- There is no democracy in Haiti because things have not changed at all.
- It could be better, but people don't understand democracy.
- There is no democracy; they are killing people in the street everyday.
- With the current structure in the country, nothing is working the way it is supposed to be.
- I am 49 years old; I don't know think I'll ever see 50 years. I don't eat everyday. If I am hungry, nobody will give me anything.

When the participants chose to expound on their initial responses to the comments, some offered glimpses of positive changes, hope, and suggestions for the betterment of their society:

- We no longer get beat up and tortured by the police without doing anything wrong.
- Now that we have democracy, we have freedom of speech. We can say what we want.
- There isn't much of a change, but at least we can speak our minds.
- People can talk without being arrested and put in jail. They can fight for their rights compared to ten years ago when it was bad.
- We need schools for children and adults. We need work.
- We need a good government, we have no radio, no electricity, no information. Make a specific plan and explain it to the people.

Evident from the recording of the voices of Haitians was desperation intermingled with hope and belief that the democratic process could actualize change for the better. Extreme situations sometimes initiate desperate measures, and it is the belief of the researchers that, without a systematic infusion of the democratic process through education and access to information, the people of Haiti will be forced to consider alternative forms of government.

Discussion

This study documented clearly the importance of education to study participants, the need for adult literacy programs, and the desire of Haitians to attend these programs. Study participants also expressed frustration at the lack of information available concerning democratic process, a lack that resulted in their own perceived lack of comprehension of how to understand and participate in a democratic society. Most of the adult population of Haiti today has no recollection or personal experience with a governmental system that was anything but dictatorial and corrupt. At a pinnacle point in Haitian history, when freedom of speech is tolerated, education for children and adults strongly desired, and democracy trying to maintain its feeble foothold, advancements could be made.

Democracy demands that all voices be heard, yet, as our research has shown, the concerns and beliefs of the general populace of Haiti have not been given the opportunity to be expressed. Indeed, as the participants of this project told us, many of them did not even know the concepts of democracy and, if they did, did not believe that Haiti was a better country because of democratic principles.

Literacy programs historically have been part of the bridge that transports people to a better life. Knox (1987) asserts that the goals of literacy efforts should promote economic productivity, stimulate political change, increase social equity, and enhance quality of life. Similarly, Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) voice the opinion that the goal of literacy is to support democratic political reform. Adult educators can and should play a role in alleviating poverty and powerlessness among people of the world through allowing voices of those marginalized to be heard and providing support in the form of literacy, health, and other educational programs. Realistically assessing the barriers that confound Haiti's people as they try to attend programs and planning programs to surmount these barriers should also become a part of adult education practice in Haiti. Curriculum should also focus on grassroots efforts to promote an understanding of democratic principles, transformation, and learning to take action. Fingeret (1992) and others advocate that literacy educators pay attention to the context in which learners live and work and plan programs that take into account the real lives of literacy learners. Freire's ideas of popular education and praxis have been given lip service in Haiti; real programs by and for the people need to be developed. As Heaney (1996) proposes, learning must be linked to democratic change.

One cannot interact with the people of Haiti without a deep sense of emerging respect. In impossible situations, with little to no resources and no guarantee that tomorrow will bring anything better, the Haitian people endure with grace, hope, and a sense of humor. Although some of the enthusiasm for a better society has waned in the past few years, people concerned with the development of this nation should remember that a window of opportunity still exists. How long the window stays open depends on a number of factors; the most important role for adult educators is the part they can play in supporting and developing education and literacy programs.

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