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Invited Article

Will Anything Be Different in the 21st Century? How 107 Million Adults and the Field of Adult Literacy Became so Marginalized

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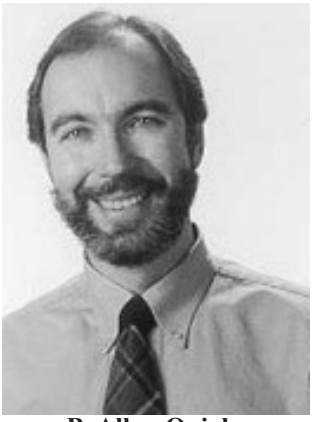
Abstract

The field of adult education has research on the development of adult literacy education as a discipline and research concerning the need for, and impact of, adult literacy education around the world. However, there is a lack of research on why low literacy remains so stigmatized in Western societies. There is also a lack of research on how the historic legacy of literacy classism has helped marginalize the field of adult education. This article explores these issues by discussing how reading and writing became part of a privileged literate class in Roman history and how class prejudices towards low literacy have been perpetuated through campaigns and literacy landmarks through to today. The article concludes with recommendations for the future.



B. Allan Quigley

Introduction

In this same issue, Ron Cervero notes: "Learning needs should not be treated as deficiencies of the individual that can be treated and remedied. Rather, learning needs should be treated as an adult's right to know (2017, p. 16). While

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few would disagree with this statement, one might ask why this statement is necessary. After all, isn't the "right to know" a self-evident first principle in adult education today? Unfortunately, in adult literacy, there has been a longstanding notion that low literacy indicates personal "deficiencies" that must be "treated" and "remedied" for the benefit of the individual and society at large. Unfortunately, this perception has received little attention in the adult education literature (Quigley, 1997). As discussed in this article, the long socio/cultural history of literacy classism needs to be included our discourse and research if there is to be any substantial change into the 21st century.

It is not as if there has been a lack of "declarations." As early as 1946, UNESCO placed literacy among its highest priorities in its internationally acclaimed Declaration of Human Rights (Wagner, 2011) and, in 1974, UNESCO's Persepolis Declaration stated: "Literacy is not an end in itself. It is a fundamental human right" (cited in Wagner, p. 319). Variations of this declaration have been repeated by UNESCO and multiple nations around the world since (Wagner, 2011). Yet, we can again ask: "Why, after half a century, do we still need to advance such a seemingly self-evident principle?"

Sometimes the voices of those whose lives are affected can be more meaningful than l "declarations." To give but two examples, in 1980, a caller phoned into a U.S. radio program to describe what it felt like to live with adult low literacy. As he said: "Illiteracy is 20st century leprosy" (Eberle & Robinson, 1980, p.x,). Another example. I have a copy of a letter forwarded to me by a literacy teacher in Massachusetts. She wrote describing what one of her adult students told her. Her new student was a truck driver. He told her: "I would rather stand naked on the hill overlooking the town and say I am HIV/AIDS positive than ever admit I am a non-reader (Personal correspondence, 1980). Adult literacy students I have taught and worked with on both sides of the Canada-U.S. border for over 40 years have been quite consistent in wanting to stay "invisible." Few will ever admit they have low literacy skills. Why this deep sense of shame? Why is it so unchanging in our culture? Paolo Friere explained it this way:

> Self-deprecation is a characteristic of [those with low literacy]. It derives from an internalization of the opinion [society] holds of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness" (1970, p. 49).

We have had no lack of literacy campaigns through time--or, as labelled in the early 20th century, "literacy crusades" (Quigley, 1997). However, when such campaigns were reviewed to try to understand why they typically failed to meet their overly ambitious goals, factors such as limited resources, myopic policies and lack of learner motivation were usually named (Quigley, 1997). The legacy of class prejudice that western cultures have inherited and perpetuate was rarely part of the analyses.

Elsewhere, I have written on what I have termed the "political" and "popular" hegemonies of adult literacy (2006, p. 24). From literacy "crusades" in the 19th century through the four two historical landmarks to be discussed, the legacy of literacy classism has been perpetuated to the present day. Until we have a better, more critical understanding of our postcolonial history; until we take some steps to challenge what we have inherited, we are at risk of seeing no substantive change in adult literacy into the 21st century.

The Size and Scope of the Issue

Surveys since the early 1970's in Canada and the U.S. have consistently reported that literacy rates among adults between 16 and 65 years of age are well below acceptable levels (Quigley, 2006). However, the most recent reports in our two countries and the lack of response to them from the media and policy-makers seems to have signaled that "the war on adult literacy is lost." Media interest, along with public and political interest, has fallen since the early days of headline news on low literacy back in the 1970's and '80's. It seems we are at the point in literacy's history where the accepted view on both sides of the U.S.- Canada border is that adult low literacy is but one more unresolvable social problem.

There was passing interest in 2003 in Canada when it was reported that approximately 20% of adults between 16 and 65 were in the lowest skill level (level one); meaning they were living with the severest literacy issues (Statistics Canada, 2003). It was also reported that another approximately 23% were in level 2, meaning they did not have sufficient skills to fully participate in society. But then, when it was further revealed that "literacy scores showed very little variation between the 1994 and 2003" (Statistics Canada, 2003, p. 35)—a decade of "no progress"—the effect was demoralizing at every level. The sense of demoralization continued when the 2003 estimates of 8 million Canadian adults at levels 1 and 2 were shown to have risen to an unprecedented 9, 945,000 (Statistics Canada, 2014). Governmental support for adult literacy simply went into decline. Federal funding for literacy coalitions was discontinued. National research and development organizations funded by the federal government were forced to close. Some provinces were able to backfill at least some of the funding but it is safe to say morale throughout the adult literacy field in Canada is at an all time low.

Things have not been much better in the United States. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) 2014 Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) report: "About one in three (34%) adults score at Level 3 in literacy" (OECD: http://piaacdataexplorer.oecd.org/ide/idepiaac/). This means an estimated 97.5 million American adults are living below the level needed to fully function in today's society. The OECD's discouraging conclusion was:

> Larger proportions of adults in the United States than in other countries have poor literacy and numeracy skills, and the proportion of adults with

> poor skills in problem-solving in technology-rich environments is slightly larger than the average, despite the relatively high educational attainment among adults in the United States. (OECD, https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Country%20note%20-%20United%20States.pdf).

Such reports are now back-page news in the media, if announced at all. Adult literacy was not mentioned by any candidate in Canada's recent federal election and, as I followed it, adult literacy was not raised as a significant issue in the recent presidential election. In short, with statistics rising and public interest at its lowest point in some 40 years, sometime someone needs to ask: "Will anything change for adult literacy in the 21st century?"

Not all nations have had this same experience. Some Scandinavian countries and a few post-revolutionary nations such as Cuba and Vietnam (Arnove & Graff, 1987; OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000) have achieved remarkably high rates of adult literacy, but we in North America have not learned much from their successes (Veeman, Ward & Walker, 2006). Even more challenging, we are attempting to make changes and meet the needs of some 107,000,000 adults while long-standing hegemonic prejudices towards low literacy go largely unquestioned in the public discourse.

In this article, I explore the two questions that I have struggled with throughout my career: "Why is it so difficult to raise the levels of adult literacy in North America?" And, secondly, "Can anything actually change for adult literacy in the 21st century?" It is hoped this discussion will foster more discourse and research and, perhaps, encourage actions such as those suggested in the conclusion of this article.

Positionality and a Conceptual Framework

I have worked in and with colleges, universities, and governments on both sides of the border throughout my career. The position taken in this article is that the estimated 107,000,000 adults living with lower literacy are not all "lazy or crazy." Rather, the starting point for the deeper issue we face in literacy is the age-old notion that lower literacy is somehow "fixable." Lower literacy is somehow seen as a "temporary condition that can be cured." For much of our history, lower literacy has been ascribed to individuals as a "personal deficit." As Beder has observed: "Those of the dominant culture perceive the lower class sub-culture as being lacking and in need of major mending" (1991, pp. 37-38).

Hegemonic prejudices against adult lower literacy and lower levels of education are deeply embedded in Western culture (Beder, 1991). Researchers from Harvey Graff in 1979 to Ralf St. Clair in 2010 have argued that literacy campaigns and their attendant programs have not been about the needs of learners. Rather, as Graff stated over 40 years ago, adult literacy programming has typically been a "central instrument and vehicle" in the effort "to secure social,

cultural, economic and political cohesion in the political economy of the expanding capitalist order" (1979. Only in recent years have adult learners had a voice in the design and delivery of some the adult literacy programs across our two nations (Quigley, 2006).

In this article, I argue that many of the historical and resultant socio-cultural issues we have inherited have not been well identified or discussed. Nor have the sociological issues of discrimination and "veiled racism" (Beder, 1991, p. 140) towards adults living with lower literacy been well researched. We know that fewer than 10% of adults living with lower literacy will not—dare not—come forward and be "exposed," but we need to understand why this phenomenon is so pervasive (Quigley, 1997). If we can begin to deconstruct what I term the "literacy classism" we have inherited, we can then begin to raise better questions and put forward informed challenges and better ways to approach this major issue.

"It Would be so Good if You Would Just Go Away"

Our society embraces education and learning as proud signs of national progress and personal achievement, but not so much where adult literacy is concerned. Long seen as a something of a national embarrassment (Arnove & Graff, 1987), I remember how a literacy advocacy group I was part of was once told by a senior bureaucrat: "It would be so good if you would just go away." And, unsaid but clearly implied: "Take your literacy problems with." This was not an isolated incident. A civil servant I once worked with in government once commented that, "Adult literacy is our government's dirty little secret." This is not the case with those who need to "retool" in the trades, or gain a higher education, learn to drive or become "computer literate."

Most literacy and basic education volunteers, teachers and government workers could match such stories, but here is one more that I experienced. I was on faculty at a university in Nova Scotia and had a chance to help launch a literacy program for our campus support staff, including the cleaning staff, maintenance personnel, kitchen staff, and our security guards. The university administration had decided that new technologies were putting productivity and worker safety at risk. The staff needed higher literacy skills. I was asked if I could help set up a basic literacy program on campus by working in partnership with the local community-based literacy program I was involved with. The course took place on campus through the fall of that year. Soon after the course was over, a maintenance worker whom I had seen around the campus came to my office, knocked on the door, and asked if he could shake my hand? I said, "Sure, but why?" Because, he said, "You changed my life." Sitting down, he thanked me for helping get the class started and told me how, just that afternoon, he had been mopping the floor in the Music Building. I can still picture him working all alone. Students streaming around him. As he continued, "I suddenly looked up at a poster on the wall and realized, 'Hey! I can read that!'" With tears in his eyes, he told me how the class had helped him and his entire family. When I asked why

he signed up, he told me it was because he wanted to write a note in a valentine card for his wife for the first time. No mention of "productivity or safety in the workplace." He then told me how he and the handful of staff who enrolled with him were laughed at and called the "dumb and dumbers" by their co-workers.

Like the Massachusetts truck driver and the radio show caller mentioned earlier, he told me he would never, ever, admit that he had been a non-reader. He came back to my office a few months later and, with a smile on his face, added: "The next course is full." Unlike the thousands of university students who walk across the convocation stage, achieving basic literacy is rarely mentioned beyond the adult learners' families and closest friends.

The Marginalization of the Literacy Field

Literacy practitioners transform lives every day; but, in order to do so, huge personal sacrifices and pedagogical compromises are often required. With severe financial cuts from the last federal government in Canada, some literacy volunteers have to pay for the required textbooks from their own pocket. Community-based literacy programs and many adult basic education programs struggle just to survive year-over-year. How did our field and our learners become so marginalized? Why is it not simply another accepted part of lifelong learning?

The field of adult literacy was founded on the acceptance of personal sacrifice. Further, the public notion of "fixing low literacy" and the assumption that low literacy is a temporary issue has been passed on to us through for generations. As Fingeret once put it: "For most of our society, it is difficult to conceptualize life without reading and writing as anything other than a limited, dull, dependent existence" (1983, p.133) and our programs often echo this view. As O'Brien observed over thirty years ago:

> The acceptance...in A.B.E [sic] of outer imposed normative statements used as program goals, in place of a…needs statement from the target population, is surprising in light of the usual tendency of [adult] educators to bristle at the idea of pre-established course content. (1979, p. 20).

Other critics of the traditional schooling model so often used in adult literacy include Paul Jurmo (1989) who has argued the field needs to embrace a far more participatory model. Why are such exhortations even necessary after so many critics have argued for change (e.g., Quigley, 1987; St. Clair, 2010)? The reasons, as proposed here, lie in the long postcolonial history of social prejudices towards those with lower literacy skills.

Definitions and Literacy Classism

The stigmatization of adults with lower literacy has been pervasive in our culture for generations. One sees this in the very "lexicon of literacy" as seen in

policy terminology through the years. Labels for literacy programs have ranged from more "liberal sounding" names such as: "foundational education," "upgrading," and "developmental education"; to labels with a work oriented connotation, such as: "functional literacy," "essential skills," and "vocational preparation." Why these changing labels? As Fischer explains, our history of adult literacy "demonstrates how literacy in any society is not simply a question of who can read and write, but rather the accommodation of prevailing values" (2003, p. 149). Prevailing values change.

As an ever-changing social construct that derives not from measured skills or expressed learner needs, adult literacy as a social construct reflects the changing social values of sponsors and the society of the times. Today's widely accepted definition of adult literacy, as put forward by the OECD is, "The ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community—to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2000, p. x,). We need only to turn the clock back to 1953 for the Encyclopedia Britannica's definition. That 1950's view of adult literacy was: "Adult Education is a phrase originally meaning the education of adults who have not been properly educated as children."

Reading vs. Literacy: The Development of the Field of Adult Literacy Education

It is possible to see the long legacy we have inherited as evolving out of three historical periods. The first can be understood as the discovery and growth of a decoding skill universally known as "reading." While there is a long history that precedes it, the "second phase," in history involves the Roman empire. Rome has been called the first "of Reading" (Fischer, p. 70). With the third, we see the appearance of a nascent adult education movement in early 19th England. Here is the first documented adult schooling movement in the English-speaking world with identifiable curricula, reading/teaching materials and (volunteer) instructors that made a lasting impact on literacy education as we know it today. Although the founding adult schools discussed here, and the countless programs to follow, reached and helped countless adult learners through time, we also see how, in so doing, they also tended to perpetuate many of the assumptions and stigmas ascribed to those who did not qualify to be among the litteratus through to today.

The Discovery and Rise of Reading

Historians are agreed that reading began in Mesopotamia, roughly in today's nation of Syria. According to historian Roger Fischer (2003), reading began "around 2000 B.C. in Ur, [then] the region's greatest metropolis with a population of around 12,000" (p. 18). Historian Alberto Manguel (1996) has dis-

cussed how he actually saw reproductions of the very first two artifacts of reading in the Archeological Museum in Baghdad. He describes, "two small clay tablets of vaguely rectangular shape" discovered in Tell Brak, Syria (p. 27, 1996). Each stone tablet had small incisions "near the top and some sort of stick drawn animal in the centre" (p 27). The agreement among archaeologists is that these first messages were saying, "Here were ten goats," and, "Here were ten sheep" (Manguel, p.27). This humble beginning, defined by Manguel as the "sequencing of standardized symbols (characters, signs or sign components) in order to graphically reproduce human speech, thought and other things in part or whole," (p. 15) is, as he tells us, where "all of our history begins" (p. 27).

> Adults have been learning and teaching each other to read and write for over 3,000 years. The acquisition of these two cognitive, psychomotor skills has helped build entire civilizations. In early Egypt, the skills of reading and writing were the domain of a privileged group of scribes (Fischer, p. 30, 2003). These skills held an almost mystical power. As an example, Fischer gives an anecdote of, "an Egyptian bureaucrat named Dua-Khety." While sailing south along the Nile to a school for scribes, Dua-Khety tells his son: "Set your thoughts on writings, Behold there is nothing greater than writings. They are like a boat upon water…there is nothing like it on earth" (p. 31-32).

By contrast, in ancient Greece, oratory was valued far more than reading or writing An example of this is seen in Plato's dialogue, the Phaedrus (Original, 360 b.c.). In this dialogue, Socrates is discussing the recent discovery of writing. He is highly skeptical of this new idea. He explains to his friend, Phaedrus, that we should not embrace reading and writing because such will only make mankind "lazy." We should rely instead on lived experience, memory and the power of oratory. As Socrates explains: "This discovery [of writing] will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories." Moreover, "[Man] will…generally know nothing…having the show of wisdom without the reality (Phaedrus, 360 b.c.e., http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedrus.html).

Turning to the Romans, they took a far more pragmatic view of reading and writing. As Fischer tells us: "Roman society remained fundamentally oral, still perceiving reading to be an adjunct skill, not a primary faculty" (p. 67). In early Rome, "human speech reigned supreme" (p. 69). However, a rising "privileged minority that took part in civic life" took on the facility of reading and writing as the empire continued to grow. Ultimately, the ability to read and write grew beyond "trained slaves and professional scribes and secretaries" (p. 71) and it is here that we see the indelible footprint for what we today understand as "literacy."

As noted earlier, a privileged class slowly arose called the litteratus (Fischer, p. 149). From this word comes the etymology of terms such as "literate,"

"illiterate," "literacy," and "literature." As Fischer explains, there was but one route into the elite litteratus. The ability to read and write in Latin was key. As he explains: "An illiterate was not a person who could not read, but someone who could not read Latin, the vehicle of Christendom and all learning" (p. 149). Reading and writing in Latin was the key to "all learning." We see here how coding and decoding script became imbued with class values. Induction into the litteratus and "all learning," was defined, controlled and promoted by the dominant Roman culture. Significantly, other adults across the vast Roman empire could read and write, in hieroglyphics or cuneiform for example, but Latin alone was the vehicle of the colonizers. Even today, if one is able to read and write in Celtic, Spanish, or any of the indigenous languages across North America, one is not officially "literate." In Canada, the official languages are French or English. In the U.S., literacy is officially understood as English. The concept of who is "literate" has evidently changed little in some 2000 years.

How Our Field Grew and Expanded

Moving to the third phase of our literacy history, following are two landmarks discussed elsewhere (Quigley, 2007; 2013): The Bristol Adult School, the Port Royal Experiment, and the Moonlight Schools of Kentucky.

Looking first at the first documented school to teach adults to read was the "Bristol Adult School," or, to use its original name, the Bristol Institution for Instructing Adult Persons to Read the Holy Scriptures (Verner, 1967). The story of how and why it was established is seen in Pole's History (Verner, 1967). This book, published in 1816, is considered the first published history on adult education in the English language. Its author, Dr. Thomas Pole, makes clear that the singular purpose for the Bristol School was to teach adults to read the Bible (Martin, 1924) and, as a result, become more moral Christians. Morality, therefore, was the first documented purpose of adult education. However, as Pole explained it, this new adult school idea would also provide social and economic benefits for all England:

> When the good seed hath been sown, …how changed will be the state of our favoured isle! The lower classes will not then be dependent on the more provident members of society…either for their comforts or necessities of life. Industry, frugality, and economy will be their possession. They will also have learned better to practice meekness, Christian fortitude, and resignation. Cited in Verner, 1967, p. 19.

As Pole continued to make his case: "the perusal of the sacred Scriptures and other religious books, have a tendency to moralize and Christianize the minds of men—Instead of idleness, profaneness, and vice—they inculcate diligence, sobriety, frugality, piety, and heavenly-mindedness" (cited in Verner, p. 19). As Pole saw it, the entire "favoured isle" of England would benefit.

Perhaps in another 200 years the language used to around the benefits of adult literacy will sound less bombastic, but the promises made then are strikingly similar to those that have been made through the latter half of the 20th century (Quigley, 1997). North American literacy crusades, campaigns and programs have promised everything from improved citizenship, to increased voter participation, to reduced welfare, to a reduction in crime rates. The major change for sponsoring agencies since World War II has been a shift to an emphasis on employment (Beder, 1991; Quigley, 1997), but the importance of "prevailing values" has not changed.

We see also see a fascinating pedagogical pattern emerging out of the Bristol School era. In February 1812, the Bristol Auxiliary Bible Society was holding their second annual meeting. The congregation was discussing their progress in distributing Bibles to the poor when a letter was read aloud. As was explained: "We have been necessarily obliged to omit a great number of poor inhabitants as they could not read and are therefore not likely to be benefited by the possession of the Bible" (cited in Verner, p. 8). Seeing the injustice of this, "A certain William Smith, door-keeper of a Wesleyan chapel in the city" (Martin cited in Pole, p.6), stepped forward. Described as, "A poor, humble, and almost unlettered individual … without the slightest knowledge of what had been done in another province" (Hudson, 1969, p. 2), William Smith "relinquished three shillings weekly from his small wages of eighteen shillings per week" (p. 4) to cover expenses for two rented rooms. Smith started our first documented "school for persons advanced in years" (p. 3).

With the support of local tobacco merchant, Stephen Prust, this humble two-room beginning developed into an international movement. The Society's annual records showed a growth of "24 schools for men and 31 for women … [with adult schools] in Ireland, New York, Philadelphia, and Sierra Leone" (Kelly, 1962, p. 150).

With echoes of the litteratus, learning goals were decided by sponsors and reflected the prevailing values of the dominant culture. We can also see for how adult literacy was delivered in this first adult school. Volunteer and part-time teachers sacrificed their time and energy. They taught with little or no training. Temporary facilities were used along with prescribed learning materials—the Bible in this case and in many examples to follow in our early history (Quigley, 2006). Then, as now, low literacy was an assumed "deficiency." The deficit approach used for addressing this "under class" carried the prejudices and assumptions of the Roman empire through to seeing today's field of adult literacy education at the very margins of traditional public school, vocational school and higher education (Quigley, 1997; 2016).

Turning to our second landmark, we see the fascinating story the Moonlight Schools of Kentucky. The story begins when Cora Wilson Stewart opened the doors of the Little Brushy schoolhouse in Rowan County—the poorest county in Kentucky in 1911. She waited wondering if any adults would show up to learn to read and write (Baldwin, 2005b); however, within weeks, some 1,200 adults

came to the school houses across the county. They came when the moon was shining; a signal and invitation to make their way along the country roads and down the mountain pathways to learn to read and write in the county schoolhouses.

Within two years, a total of 25 counties had established Moonlight Schools (Baldwin, 2006) and, within the next five years, the Moonlight Schools model had swept the United States (Dauksza Cook, 1977). Wilson became an international figure and was ultimately appointed by President Calvin Coolidge as Director of the first National Illiteracy Crusade in 1926.

Following the pattern of what adult literacy education should look like, at the turn of the 20th century, adult literacy programs again had a clear purpose. Literacy should seek to improve morality and good citizenship of adults of the lower classes through prescribed teaching content, including the Bible. As Baldwin (2006) put it: "[Stewart] accepted many of the class-based assumptions of her time and place" (p. 132). For example, in the Country Life Readers that Stewart wrote and had published, learners saw a picture of a well-maintained farmhouse with a white picket fence. They learned that, "People who go down this road say"/ 'A nice, neat family lives in this house'" (pp. 95–99). On the next page, students see a contrasting picture of a run-down house with a crumbling chimney and broken fence. They are advised:

> This place is dirty and ugly.
> The house needs paint.
> The yard is full of weeds.
> A lazy shiftless family lives here. …
> Lazy, shiftless people live in dirty ugly houses. (Baldwin, pp. 95–99)

Consistent with the Bristol example, teaching occurred in the free classrooms available at night in the nations' school houses. Volunteers did most of the work, resources and adult teacher training were limited, the assumptions around "low literacy as a state of deficit" continued and across America, and on to Canada.

Space does not allow for other examples such as the Port Royal Experiment in South Carolina, Jane Addams' Hull House settlement movement for immigrants in Chicago (Dauksza Cook, 1977; Quigley, 2006, 2013), or Canada's Frontier College; however, while these and so many other early adult literacy schools and programs grew out of caring and sacrifice, they also helped reify a system of temporariness and a universal belief that the adult low literacy was a "problem" that should be "fixed." As Beder has observed: "Those of the dominant culture perceive the lower class subculture as being lacking and in need of major mending (1991, pp. 37-38).

Can anything change for the estimated 107,000,000 adults in North America living with low literacy, and for the millions who will surely follow?

Living in a Time of Hope

Having followed the pattern of how our field has evolved in the context of the class prejudices, we need to remind ourselves of the positive, courageous—even noble—side of our story. We have seen but a few of the heroes and heroines who gave everything for adult literacy. We have seen a legacy built on compassion and giving. Can anything change? I believe it can.

We live in a hopeful time. Consider how it was not so long ago that we had a hidden population living with HIV and AIDS. Those with disabilities in our society were on the margins of society. The acronym, "LGBT," would have been unknown by most in North America less than three decades ago. Today, those living with HIV and AIDS have at least some health supports and, equally important, have gained a voice. Those with disabilities have made progress with physical accommodations and have a voice they did not have even two decades ago. In 2016, the Prime Minister of Canada joined in both Toronto's and Vancouver's Gay Pride Parades. First Nations and Métis in Canada have made strides in gaining equity and land rights, as have American Indians in the U.S. Most of us can remember how the suggestion that a Black man would be President, or that a woman would be running as the chosen candidate to replace him, would have been inconceivable not more than a couple of decades ago.

Taken in historical context, North American society has experienced a sea change in attitudes towards those once considered "outcasts" on the very margins of society. Surely there is hope for what is one of the last major subpopulations still living with what Beder termed, "veiled racism" (1991, p. 140). For change to come for the estimated 100,7000 adults living with low literacy, we first need a clearer, far more critical, understanding of where our ingrained social prejudices have come from. We need to be proud of our past, but we also need to advocate for a better future. It is hoped the recommendations to follow might prove helpful.

Imagining a Better Future

For change to occur, it has to involve and be based on the adults most affected—our adult learners and those who work with them. Therefore:

- Imagine if the vast community of literacy students and graduates, together with the thousands of literacy volunteers, teachers, counselors, administrators, researchers and policy-makers across North America, were to challenge the public prejudices we have inherited towards low literacy. Imagine if even 10% of this huge audience were to write a letter, send an e-mail, speak to the media, or talk with political or governmental policy-makers about the marginalization of the field, it would comprise a flood of awareness raising.

- Imagine if International Literacy Day, which occurs every September 8, was to become a day of "Awareness Walks for Adult Literacy." Imagine wide media coverage on the needs and issues of adult low literacy as voiced by those involved. As discussed earlier, other marginalized groups have gained a voice by raising their voice in just this way.

- On a structural level, it needs to be recognized that adult literacy does not "belong" to any single governmental department, ministry, organization or agency. Literacy is a society-wide issue. We have seen the growth of a subfield of health literacy research (e.g., Ronson & Rootman, 2012). Health agencies and hospitals need to be encouraged to continue such efforts to advance literacy capacities and, at least in Canada, the largest proportion of health expenses are annually spent on those with the lowest education levels (Quigley, Coady, Grégoire, et al., 2009). Health and wellness can improve if literacy rates improve. Meanwhile, the rates lower literacy among the incarcerated are far higher than the national average, both in both Canada and the USA. While corrections literacy is a well established subfield of adult literacy (Quigley, 1997) and groups such the John Howard Society have recently taken a keen interest in adult literacy, law courts and the field of justice need to increase their involvement in adult literacy. Social services and welfare agencies also need to shoulder a greater responsibility for literacy if low literacy and the issues of poverty are to be better addressed. In short, from governmental departments to helping agencies, ownership for adult literacy education needs to expanded.

  One approach would be for provincial, state, and federal governments to coordinate literacy services through, for instance, their annual economic plans and budgets. A planned approach with shared expertise and among multiple agencies could make a major difference. Linking the educational expertise of the literacy field with more systems that work with low literacy can have a huge impact on literacy rates.

- However, technology is the next frontier to be explored for literacy. The OECD found that, in the U.S.: "only 9.3% of the adult population (16-65 year-olds) report no prior experience with computers or lack very basic computer skills" (OECD, (http://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=CAN&treshold=10&topic=AS). In Canada, according to the same Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies report, only "10.4% of this age group reported no prior experience with computers or lack very basic computer skills." This is an extremely important finding for a field with participation rates below 10% (Quigley, 1997) and a classic delivery system

that is largely reliant on adults returning to what they often perceive to be "school all over again" (Quigley, 1997, 2006). There are well documented pedagogical reasons to go in the direction of self-directed learning. As Candy (1991) and others have discussed and researched, adults mainly learn on their own, not in classrooms. Technology offers an unprecedented opportunity to reach and retain far more learners into the 21st century. However, for reasons that would seem to arise from our inherited assumptions about literacy learners, far fewer technology-based learning options are available to literacy learners than to mainstream adult learners.

Sadly, one of the longstanding stereo types in adult literacy has been that literacy learners must have "warm body" instruction to succeed. This may be true for some, but not all. Technology, I believe, is the avenue we need to explore into the 21st century if the vast numbers of those with low literacy are to be better engaged and served.

- Finally, while many practitioners are highly effective in teaching adults in the literacy field, research makes it clear that working to "deschool" literacy and ABE classrooms can be essential for success (Quigley, 2006). Creating classroom learning communities with relevant learning content can be critical (Quigley, 2016). For evidence-based practices that help with such challenges, the Saskatchewan Action Research Network's website, WWW.SARN.CA has on-going postings of literacy/ basic education classroom "best practice" projects that have succeeded. I am currently entering my 13th year with SARN and can recommend the many reports found there for addressing issues of retention, recruitment, transitioning graduates to the workforce and engaging leaners in the community. However, the theme that runs through all of this effective practice is a theme of "deschooling."

A Concluding Note

While centuries of literacy classism will not be changed in the near future, it needs to be recognized that the wider needs of this large adult population will not be met by "more programs and more rhetoric." As the 21st century builds inclusivity and the struggle for equity continues, the voices of those whose lives are affected by low literacy need to be heard. The inherited social prejudices towards literacy need to be identified and challenged. When adults with low literacy gain a real role in shaping their educational future, when society accepts that, as Cervero stated earlier: "learning needs should be treated as an adult's right to know" (2017, p. 16¬), the world of some 107,000,000 adults will at last have a real chance for real change.

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