

Literacy across the curriculum

Including
Media
FOCUS

Connecting literacy in the schools, community and workplace

INSIDE

Women and literacy

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"Educational attainment in and of itself does not contribute to the gender differences [noted in various North American assessments] because there are no gender differences in attainment in Canada."

This is the conclusion of the Canada report on the IALS regarding literacy and gender - a surprising one considering the widespread belief that women generally have lower literacy levels than men and face greater barriers in trying to attain education. Are these perceptions founded in fact, or are they merely popular misconceptions?

For people who like neat equations and pat answers, entering the world of literacy is a little like being lost in the funhouse. The way through is never clear, and you always risk walking into a wall or worse. As an example, the question of women and literacy leads one into a labyrinth of confused terms and faulty comparisons.

Confusing the terms

Part of the confusion begins with the continual reference to UNESCO statistics about illiteracy. Recent studies cite figures of one in three women compared to one in five men worldwide. They also note that in 1990, of 130 million schoolaged children not attending school, two thirds were girls.



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Although these figures come mainly from developing countries, Canadian journalists will frequently begin a local interview citing them and asking how they apply to Canadian women. Even local literacy practitioners will cite UN figures without providing a context.

The use of the words literacy and illiteracy are also problematic. In developing countries, there are millions of people who are illiterate- who have had no access to schooling and no exposure to written language. For social, cultural, economic and political reasons, a majority of these are women.

In the industrialized world, less than 2% of the population is illiterate. The IALS does not even discuss illiteracy. It discusses levels of literacy beginning from very low and moving along a continuum to very high. It tries to measure the ability of people in technological societies to perform a range of specific tasks requiring skills of reading, writing and mathematics.

The problem is that the media, the general population and a substantial number of literacy practitioners are using a framework from the developing world to explain an entirely different situation in the West. This results in unsubstantiated claims about astronomical levels of "Illiteracy" in Canada. The most common route to this conclusion is by adding together the percentages of IALS respondents who performed at the three lowest of the five levels even though these are not measures of illiteracy.

In this context, do Canadian women then have particular problems and needs in relation to literacy'?

The answer is yes, but not because there are significantly more women in need. It is partly because their needs are often different from those of men and partly because they do face greater barriers in attaining education, especially as adults with limited prior education. There is also a North American social pattern of placing a disproportionate responsibility for family literacy on the mother and of blaming women if their children do not learn well in school.

This issue of LAC looks at some of the issues of women as learners by examining the reasons for paying attention to their needs (Davis, p. 10) and by reviewing the recent Canadian publication of a women's curriculum (Nonesuch, p. 8 and In the Classroom, p. 6). They suggest that educational practice which is sensitive and responsive to women benefits both women and men as learners. The list of resources (p. 12) offers a selection of materials on the topic that can be borrowed from The Centre for Literacy.

This issue also offers a critical comment on the IALS by historian Harvey J. Graff (p.4-5) who argues that the survey has ignored the best of literacy research in the past two decades, including a large body of ethnographic research that has examined literacy as it affects actual lives. [LS]

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