# IS LANGUAGE THE OBJECT OF LITERACY AMONG
# UNITED STATES FEMALE ADULT LEARNERS? *

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## ABSTRACT

We present a case-study of adult females becoming "literate." Low income female learners in

Adult Basic Education (ABE) and recent immigrant learners in English as a Second Language (ESL),

and their teachers in Central New York State were involved in a Participatory Action Research

(PAR).

The goal is to present conceptual and attitudinal issues of adult literacy in the United States (US),

including ESL and feminist pedagogy. The results suggest that language literacy by itself may not

lead to a sustainable autonomous individual and group development. We discuss literacy within

attitudinal change about female learner's self-realization vis-à-vis her productivity and social

mobility.


## INTRODUCTION

By analyzing the research approach and process we also introduce a new paradigm in literacy

research and practice (Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993). We present literacy in gender

context using a Participatory Action Research approach to make the results more accessible to both

ABE and ESL learners, to teachers, to administrators and to policy makers.

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The dichotomy between the ideals and practice in female education seems to persist even in the most recent agenda developed by formal and informal, national or international organizations in the East and the West (Barazangi, in preparation). We explain this dichotomy and the agenda (developed by learners) by defining education and literacy, and by relating them to feminist studies and feminist views of education.

Feminism and education share one history. We define education here as the process of conceptual change that transforms individuals and societies from one state of affairs into another. Hence, we are not propagating that education is a woman's "territory," nor that females are only suitable for a career in education. Rather, we emphasize the organic connection between feminists' struggle to change conceptions and education as a conceptual change process to enable females to realize themselves as autonomous individuals who can effect a change in a society (Barazangi, in press).

Feminist studies and Literacy are both oriented toward improving the individual's role in society. From the perspective of the middle-class literacy female volunteers, however, the socially inclusive caring usually associated with women seems to contradict with their role as "status maintainers" (Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari, & Guskin, 1996, p. 589). Feminism rejects the idea of static, one-way literacy as counter to the feminine view of multiplicity in perspectives (Bhola, 1994; Middleton, 1993). Feminism here is a creative theory of human relations aimed at transforming social structures that dismiss individual contributions, particularly those of females, because these contributions are perceived not to fit the "cultural standards." Thus, conventional literacy and feminist studies appear to negate each other due to the professionalization of literacy volunteers as part of the male-dominant field of adult education. This professionalization gave some economic power to the female

volunteers who largely became adult education practitioners, but remain as the maintainers of the status quo in the conception and practice of literacy and of adult female education.

In the remainder of the paper we describe the project, its objectives and population. Then, we will present problem definition, analysis and solutions as perceived by the female adult learners, focusing the analysis on some factors and explaining individual and group differences in self-realization. We summarize the solutions as generated by learners and teachers, concluding with strategic recommendations for practical insights. The synthesis identifies changes among the two sets of learners; changes in awareness and individual capacity to relate to life situations in the home, in the learning environment and in the larger social context.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Peggy McIntosh (1994) wrote: "As a girl or woman learns to read, she learns to imagine alternatives to her situation. But if what she reads leaves her out, she may see these alternatives as unreal--making her more, not less, disempowered, the more she 'learns'" (p. 28).

If schooling is equally provided to Americans and if literacy benefits are interpreted only by their economic and productive value or as Nehru & Dhareshwar (1994, p. 2) call it, "the human capital stock," then why is it that recent immigrants to the US, particularly females, seem to resist literacy in English? and why is it that 49-51% (90 million) of the 191 million American adults, as Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad (1993) report, are functionally illiterate ? Kirsch et al. report that "[t]wenty-one to 23 percent--or 40-44 million of the 191 million adults in this country--demonstrated skills in the lowest level of prose, document and quantitative proficiencies (Level 1)." Twenty-five percent of the respondents who performed in this lowest level of literacy were immigrants. Also "[n]early two-thirds of those in Level 1 (62 percent) had terminated their education before completing high school." Furthermore, "[t]he approximately 90 million adults who performed in Levels 1 and 2 [below average skills] did not necessarily perceive themselves as being 'at risk'" (p. xiv-xv). Finally, "men's average document and quantitative proficiencies are significantly higher than those of

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women" (p. 46). Can this resistance be considered a resistance to "development" and growth? Can we conclude that resistance to female development takes different forms and implications among recent immigrants vis-à-vis low income population? Even when literacy among both sets of population relies on the concepts of human capital accumulation and total productivity growth factor, as suggested by Nehru & Dhareshwar (1994), it became clear that such concepts are very simplistic and do not suffice for the case on hand.

Horton and Freire (1990) wrote that learners see the problem in the system and not in the people, nor in her/him personally (p. 15-18). Once this becomes clear, the learner is free from feeling inferior to others. The result is active interest in one's learning and positive response to the challenge of the situation. Horton and Freire's explanation may lead us to a better understanding of the complex interaction between literacy and development in the gender discourse. This explanation, however, falls short of dealing with the cognitive dissonance that individuals experience before and after they are able to see the problem in the system. This cognitive tension between the individual and the system also coincides with a tension between the individual and her own paradigmatic structure. That is, the individual, in a way, is forced to go outside her existing intellectual structure to be able to inflect some change to the existing system. Meanwhile, the existing paradigm remains almost intact and, consequently, we have a status quo of the intellectual and attitudinal structures. In addition, the system may not only become "frustrate[d]" as Gaunty-Porter (1995) suggests, but often helpless in responding to the diverse needs and interests of the individuals.

For example, we know that low income families in the US are willing to send their children to schools, but there is no explanation as to why females tend not to complete their education. Perhaps parents send their children to schools for a different reason from what is perceived by school authority and educators! Gaunty-Porter (1995) states: "Some students enter schools equipped with literacy experiences that work in concert with the school's instructional practices, whereas other students have cultural attitudes, beliefs and practices which frustrate the system" (p. 75). Perhaps women's identities in the US are closely tied to the achievements of their offspring. This close tie

could be due to the influence of middle-class mothers on school culture, as Brantlinger et al. (1996, p. 576) suggest, and on women's literacy in the lower class and among the recent immigrants, as our study suggests.

The issue of both low income and recent immigrant parents' resistance is deeper than a mere economic need for offspring labor or inferiority complex.  We argue that the number of functionally illiterate adults in the US will increase if we ignore the relation between literacy economics and other public policies. Yet, without discussing the resistance to cultural and class dominance that a recent immigrant or low income parents may experience or perceive, we may not be able to determine the kind of literacy in which these people are interested:  "Because it is impossible to say precisely what literacy skills are essential for individuals to succeed in this or any other society, the results of the National Adult Literacy Survey provide no firm answers to such questions: Are the literacy skills of America's adults adequate?" (Kirsch et al, 1993, p. xviii).

The problem reflects a complex relationship between individual and cultural attitudes toward the present ideals and practices of education.  The present system of education in the US still has the same philosophical premise, that of the utility of education for upper mobility and economic gain.  This practice for upper-mobility is almost divorced from the individual belief system and world view that impacts one's self-realization as free from inferiority or superiority to others.  Regardless of the level of education, gender, class, ethnic or cultural background, Barazangi (1997) suggests, intellectual and moral autonomy is essential.

A more challenging dimension of the issue is that the groups of women that are the focus of this Participatory Action Research are also torn between cultures. The recent immigrant women--whether or not they are enrolled in the ESL program--are also torn between the heritage and the sentiment of their prior culture(s) and the new culture to which they have immigrated, the "American" culture. These women and the low income women in the ABE program are also torn between the discrepant philosophies of emancipated, independent females and the existing educational system that does not allow adult learners to have a voice in their own learning (Knowels, 1978) nor females to fully realize

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themselves as autonomous individuals. American female is not fully recognized as a primary productive member in the family, as recent welfare laws suggest. Nor is she recognized as an autonomous moral person in the society, as the new "back to religion" movements indicate. She is still perceived in relation to the male-structured household (Barazangi, in press) and workplace (Moser, 1993).

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

We examined changes--in learners' awareness and individual capacity to relate to life situations in the home, in the learning environment and in the larger social context--that are assumed to have taken place as a consequence of two literacy programs, the ABE and the ESL. Work with the two sets of populations began as a collaborative Participatory Action Research agreement between the researcher and one of the Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) in Central New York State. Classes offered by BOCES enrolled more than 600 adult learners at the time when contacts were initiated in 1992.

Teachers and administrators designed and implemented the two types of programs, ABE and ESL. The researcher designed and collaborated on a Participatory Action Research project with the teachers, administrators, and 75 male and female learners (the females represent 66% of the total number) at different locations around the BOCES district.

The objective was to understand the value and consequences of imparting basic skills of reading, writing and communication on female mobility. We define mobility as political, intellectual and moral autonomy, rather than as economic- and class-upper movement. We report only part of the results here, focusing on how adult females learn to be literate, and how their views of learning, language and other skills, and of the world influence their own learning. These factors also influence the ability of teachers and others connected to literacy programs to provide sustainable learning situations (Crookes, 1993).

This Participatory Action Research project is an analytic and reflective process focusing on how real life experience interacts with, and exposes tensions in professional ideals and practices. The researcher developed a frame of reference for the individuals to enter into, and depart from a dialogue on the relationship between literacy, feminist theory, pedagogy and people (mainly the female learners and teachers in this context). This frame is based on the premise that the process of literary construction is useful when the individual learner realizes herself as an autonomous individual and can participate in her own voice. Since language is a conceptual-behavioral system as Goodenough (1971, p. 2) suggests, we need to understand the interaction of the individual conceptual and attitudinal change, on one hand, and the behavioral change, on the other. Behavioral change, being an externally observed process could be partially measured by surveying literacy skills. Meanwhile, conceptual and attitudinal change, being an internal process could not be directly measured by a mere survey of skills. Thus, learner's and teachers' participation in the knowledge-generation, or in what is known conventionally as data collection, becomes essential for understanding the interaction of conception and practice (behavior) with regard to language skills.

The Participatory Action Research method differs from conventional survey and qualitative studies by the process and the meaning of data collection (Brod, 1992; Selener, 1992; Hall, 1981, 1975). In conventional survey and qualitative studies, researchers usually begin with a set of premises and research questions. In Participatory Action Research, the participants (learners, teachers and administrators in this case) are the determining factor in generating knowledge for themselves and for the research. That is, they, in effect, research their own learning and teaching processes in a collaborative explorative manner with the researcher to generate the research inquires. For example, Teachers and administrators in the present study were involved in discussing the content of the preliminary questionnaire, and in the formulation and interpretation of the responses to generate further questions. Such involvement helped them reflect on their own perception while informing the research; defining the problem, gathering and analyzing the data, and interpreting the results to reach

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consensus for a collective strategy. Learners were as involved, (see "Problem Definition and Data Gathering" section).

The researcher guided the process (as explained below in the three phases of the study) to facilitate a reflective and analytic discussion regarding the relations between aspects of gender and literacy.  These aspects include adult learning process (Lindeman, 1926) and the perceptions that have surrounded female learning (Stalker, 1996; Laubach Literacy International, 1990). These aspects also include instructional methodology (Middleton, 1993; De Castell & Luke, 1989) and structure (Parpart, 1993), organizational structure (The UN, 1995; UNESCO, 1992), and the role of teacher and administrator (Barazangi, in preparation).  The implication of such analysis is in the lessons that we may learn for understanding contemporary global meanings of literacy and of learning aiming at change in gender relations (Whitmore, 1988). In our analysis, we define literacy operationally as the ability to communicate both in written and oral forms within one's respective setting.

## PROBLEM DEFINITION AND DATA GATHERING THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

We conducted the study in three phases to move with learners, teachers  and administrators toward conceptual and attitudinal change.

### First Phase

The first phase involved constructing and administering a questionnaire to learners in both ABE and ESL programs. The researcher, after several sessions of participant-observation in some classrooms, designed a preliminary questionnaire. Copies of this questionnaire were distributed to the teachers through the head-teacher in each program. The head-teachers also served as program coordinators, a fourth level administrative position in the BOCES structure. The  purpose of sharing the questionnaire was to get feedback on the appropriateness of the  literacy level for the learners and to introduce the Participatory Action Research approach to literacy through action. The questionnaire

was, later, revised and administered mainly orally by the teachers and the researcher as part of the classroom instructional material--replacing the standard hand-outs. That is, instead of teachers' prepared hand-outs of daily syllabic material, copies of the revised questionnaire were distributed to the learners (see sample of content below). The teacher, in the presence of the researcher, read each question and explained the different options from which learners may choose their answers. Each learner, depending on his or her literacy level, attempted to read the different options with the help of the teacher, the researcher, and the social worker in the ABE classes. Volunteer interpreters helped in explaining the questionnaire and the process of responding, and in recording responses in the ESL classes.

Thirty-two American-born adult learners in ABE co-education program participated in the first phase (12 participants were females). The 32 learners attended all three levels (ABE, Pre-GED, and GED) in five classes at two locations. These and the ESL learners lived mainly in a combined suburban and rural setting. The city's population is 30,000 and its economic ventures rely mainly on a research university and a liberal arts college.

Forty-five recent immigrants learning ESL also participated in the first phase (thirty-two participants were females). They attended all four levels (1-4) of ESL classes at different locations. These immigrants were largely from China, Ukraine, Korea, Latin America, Russia, and Vietnam. The researcher's letter introducing the questionnaire to participants and confirming their consent was translated into five languages: Chinese, Korean, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

The questionnaire that teachers and administrators helped design introduced literacy through action--the central concept of the project--to both learners and teachers. The questionnaire consisted of six sections titled as follows: "your views," "learning and our life," "practice of learning," "personality," "short answers (about the program)," and demographic information (age, sex, family status, level of education, profession, country of origin, parents education and profession). Under the section "your views," the first question, for example, was: "Of the things listed below, what made you wanting to go to school now? (please circle two):

A. I want to make more money

B. I want to meet other people

C. I want to take care of myself,...

G. I have to study, Social Service requires that

H. Other (please specify)."

Another question was "some people have different ideas about their role in this country. How do you feel about others' help to you?" (circle one number). The scale of responses was from 1 (some people do not care about my problem) to 7 (most people want to help me). A third question was "Who of the people listed below have been most important to you?," with the options being; parents, boss, children, spouse, religious leader, teacher, friend, etc.

The reflective process of this first phase was facilitated, knowingly and unknowingly, by the teachers and administrators. Most of the teachers and some administrators read the questionnaire prior to implementation. Teachers also had the opportunity to explicitly express their own views on the diversity of their students' needs as well as their views of literacy. The researcher facilitated the process of examining their own teaching and the material they use by soliciting their comments and suggestions. These suggestions were, as indicated earlier, incorporated in the questionnaire prior to being administered. Furthermore, teachers' observations and comments were recorded daily in the research journal, and were taken into consideration as the project progressed.

Teachers explained, step-by-step to the learners, in the presence of the researcher, how to mark their responses. By realizing the effect of their role as facilitators, teachers' active participation created a positive tension between the perceived meaning of literacy and the meaning created by the process of reviewing and administering the questionnaire. That is, by moving from the conventional mode of presenting an interpretation of a written text (pre-prepared syllabus), teachers helped learners in making their own meaning of the text (the questions being asked) . De Castell and Luke (1989) discuss the usually preferred strategy of the mass production and mass implementation of 'teacher-proof' curricular programs to teach the basic skills of reading and writing (p. 77). Barazangi (1995)

discusses meaning making through direct access to the text.  As teachers and learners read, listen, and discuss the questionnaire, they, in a sense, became the makers of the meanings to be derived from the text of each question. They reflected on their own meanings of literacy, teaching, and learning, and shared these meanings.

Teachers and tutors were not only aiding learners--particularly beginners in the ESL program and those with learning difficulties in the ABE program--but were also going through a tense process of modifying their own views about literacy and about their learners. Unknowingly, teachers were also modifying the views of the learners about becoming literate, and hence, causing tension among and between learners and teachers.  This tension is assumed necessary for conscious raising and for moving toward conceptual and attitudinal change.

Through participatory reflection on their own learning--while listening to the questions being introduced orally with the help of interpreters (social worker and teacher among the ABE groups, and native speakers among the ESL groups)--learners became aware of the relationship between their learning and the literacy program.   We assume this awareness to result from self-realization as an active agent in the learning process.  For example, learners, while responding to the questionnaire and discussing their diverse answers, benefited from this study as follows:

**a.** They learned how students may express their feelings and concerns before their own teachers in a systematic, open way.  They were assured that it is a responsible thing to state one's needs, interests and opinions openly (Mace, 1994).

**b.** They were exposed to literacy in action while responding to the questionnaire. That is, they were, in effect doing an exercise in reading and writing, seeing different question and answer forms, learning new words and expressions (e.g. for the ESL learners, it became clear that "working with others" meant to learn in a group setting, and not only to work on the job), and have tried their comprehension skills  (Hall, 1993), while being conscious of the learning process.

Meanwhile, learners were re-searching their own meanings of literacy, becoming aware of the relationship between daily life circumstances and learning, and explicitly articulating their goals of

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becoming literate. In conventional literacy classes, learners are usually asked to go through routine exercises, while the content is often irrelevant to their interests.

Second Phase

The second phase aimed at moving with the participants into the analytic reflective process. Learners and teachers were asked to follow-up on the responses to the questionnaire during the focus-group interviews. Volunteer interpreters also helped in the focus-group interview. During this phase, focus-group interviews were conducted with all ABE classes, and only in two out of the five ESL classes. Females were pulled out from the remaining three classes and were interviewed in all-female focus-groups in another room. After tabulating the responses to the questionnaire (recording the frequencies of each answer to each question), the researcher developed another set of questions. The purpose was to further probe learners and teachers regarding what appeared to be a pattern in their perception of literacy and learning. Almost fifty percent of all the participants also took part in the focus-group interview as a classroom discussion. The group interview was facilitated by the researcher, but guided by the teachers. All interviews were audio-recorded, with the exception of one group that did not feel comfortable with recording their voices. The researcher posed oral queries to learners about their seemingly discrepant responses to the questionnaire (e.g., "how is it that you state that literacy will help you improve your personal life, but then you say that there is small opportunity for change?"). Teachers, meanwhile were simplifying, in language and meaning, the researcher's queries and at times participating in creating answers.

Two things were intended, and to a large extent achieved, through this process; raising tension between meanings of literacy and learning, and realizing the role of one's own worldview and goals for learning and self-realization. Through examining their responses and the discrepancies that have existed between them, ABE learners became aware of the social meaning of literacy (being able to communicate one's needs, interest and opinion) vis-à-vis their own and some teachers' limited conception of literacy (being able to read and write).

Meanwhile, ESL Learners started to question explicitly others' assumptions about their incapacity to conduct a stable life as recent immigrants without being able to read and write in English. Most of these ESL learners questioned their unemployment status since they had a high level of formal education from their native countries. Despite their relatively productive family and social life, they were still being viewed as dependents. Some ESL learners even questioned the usefulness of reading and writing in English when they could not converse or communicate with the social worker, nor with their "American" neighbors. Some questioned the semi-isolating low-income housing policies that kept them--immigrants--and low income natives away from the rest of the population and from each other. The two types of learners (ABE and ESL) are not helped, and apparently are made suspicious of each other to the point that they did not want to communicate with each other either, even on the level of individual one-on-one social or tutoring interaction. When asked if they would tutor recent immigrants in English conversation, some ABE learners shied away by saying that they were not sure how to 'handle-themselves' with non-English speakers. Similarly, when some ESL learners were asked if they communicate with their "American" neighbors to practice spoken English, the answer was that they were afraid to cause misunderstandings.

By participating in the group and/or individual interviews in the second and third phases, learners have practiced their listening and speaking skills, have learned how to argue their views in a group without "being yelled at" (ABE learner) or "shame for not speaking English clearly" (ESL learner). Also, ABE learners have realized that their ability to express themselves are much better than was assumed and that they could analyze their own feelings and concerns even with their "foreign neighbors." The ESL learners have also realized that their speaking ability is much better than it was assumed, and that they could express complex ideas in "English." Furthermore, during group interviews, teachers became aware of their students' perception of literacy and learning. This awareness, as explained earlier, also created a positive tension among meanings of literacy and among learners and teachers.

Third Phase

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The third phase involved administrators, teachers, and learners in discussing the results to reach consensus on solutions and strategies of implementation. The researcher transcribed the audio-recorded interviews and identified repeated concerns. She also developed another set of questions to ask of each individual who agreed to be interviewed individually for a case-by-case follow-up. Fourteen females of all the participants were interviewed individually as part of the third phase of the study. Four of them participated in a tutoring-like interaction for a varied period of several months. Given that there was a shortage in one-on-one volunteer tutors, the researcher volunteered to tutor while following the research procedure with some of the learners  (see section "Learners generate their own solutions").

Discussion of the tension, diagnosing the problem by learners and teachers with the support of some administrators, and generating solutions, was achieved. The researcher was able to reach consensus with the one ABE teachers group.  The session helped in building strategies to follow-up with learners.  For administrative and logistic constraints neither an ESL group fellow-up nor a long-range assessment of the results was possible. The researcher, instead, reached-out to the 10 ESL learners and 4 ABE learners who had agreed to be interviewed individually.   She was also able to interview and maintain regular visitation and tutoring sessions for several months with four of these learners (detailed below), aided by some university student volunteer interpreters and one ABE teacher.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION THROUGH ACTION PLANNING**

As explained earlier in the three phases of the research, data gathering and analysis was achieved through learners and teachers participation in the questionnaire, the focus-group and individual interviews.  Throughout the three phases of this Participatory Action Research, learners and teachers, knowingly and unknowingly were gathering and analyzing the data that informed this research. As the researcher gradually tabulated the results after each phase--generating new questions from the responses to the questionnaire and from the focus-group interview--she was in effect reporting back

on the results to both teachers and learners in order to further encourage their discussion of the findings. These findings can be identified in conventional research terms as quantitative and qualitative results. Given the space limitation in this paper, we will only present in this section examples of quantitative results, and how they were analyzed and synthesized. Examples of the qualitative results will be discussed under the next section.

The quantitative data resulted from tabulating the frequencies of the responses to the questionnaire. Since there were no statistically significant differences between males' and females' responses, we aggregated their responses, looking for patterns of similarities and differences among learners. We also compared the responses to the different questions within each individual case in order to check for discrepancies. Such discrepancies informed the next set of questions that were generated and asked during the focus-group discussions and individual interviews. The following are some examples of quantitative patterns in the responses to the questionnaire:

Under "your views" in the questionnaire, responding to the question "What made you wanting to go to school now?" eighteen of the thirty-two (18/32) ABE respondents chose the answer "I want to change my personal life." Fourteen of them chose a middle rating about "other people wanting to help," and only seven of these 14 said that most helpful people have been teachers.

Responding to the question "who of the people listed below have been the most important for you?" nineteen of the thirty-two (19/32) stated that the most important people for them have been parents, and 17/32 stated teacher as important.

It seems that 50% of the ABE learners are not making a connection between the teacher's role in their learning (becoming literate) and their own goal of wanting to change their personal life. The discrepancy in their responses suggests that these learners either do not see teachers as playing the supportive role that parents usually do, not learning from teachers the needed literacy skills to change their personal life, or not interested in such skills given a difference in their views of what constitutes a change in personal life from what teachers and administrators may have assumed. The qualitative results (reported below) support the latter interpretation.

Thirty-nine of the forty-five (39/45) ESL respondents stated that they want to learn English to take care of themselves or to change personal life, "English can help me to take care of my self, for my family, for my friend." Eighteen of these 39 stated that most people want to help, and 20/39 said that most helpful people have been parents. When asked "who of the people have been most important?," thirty-two of the forty-five (32/45) stated that the most important people for them have been parents. The same matching respondents (32/45) also stated children as important. Yet, only 6/45 stated teacher as important.

These results suggest that ESL learners find it difficult to replace parents' care and help with that of teachers even when parents are not usually in the same country, and even when they know that learning English language skills will help them take care of themselves. This might be the result of feeling home-sick or because of the extended family relationships in their native society. Listing children as the most important could also be because children of immigrants often aid their parents because they learn the language faster. A third interpretation is that teachers were not helping these learners achieve specific interests, as the qualitative results suggest.

Under "Learning and our life," learners were asked to respond to the following: "Learning is very much related to how one thinks about education" by circling one number per statement. The numbers represent a five-point scale from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree."

A. Learning English should enable me to change.

B. The teacher and the learner are partners,...

Nineteen of the thirty-two (19/32) ABE learners agreed (choosing number 4) that learning should enable them to change. Also, 21/32 agreed that teachers and learners are partners. When asked "when something goes wrong, how do you usually think about (solving) it?," however, only 11/32 stated that they need to work harder when things go wrong, and 14/32 said that they will try again. Furthermore, under the section "personality," when asked to rank self on the same five-point scale,

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13/32 agreed that they will do anything for a teacher they like, and eleven of these thirteen (11/13) were happy with simple instructions.

These inconsistent responses suggest that some learners find it difficult to think about the present task more than the past, though many are happy to have the chance to study with "good" teachers. The following comments given by some of these learners, under the section "comments," suggest that it takes a special rapport between these adult learners and the teacher to motivate them to work hard or to maintain the discipline of attending classes on a regular basis:

- "I have a chance" "[I meet ] interesting people," "I'll find a better job,"

- "Teacher show us what's really wrong and correct our mistakes."

Yet, still, some learners feel that they have special needs that warrant special instructional practices:

-" [I am] having a hard time learning that I don't know [what to do],"

-" I like more to learn how to take one day at a time, to get my life together and to

have money, and to enjoy life,"

-" I would like to do something that will always be in my memory."

This latter comment was uttered by one learner who was adamant at finishing the questionnaire by herself because she wanted to "do things differently."


Thirty-nine of the forty-five (39/45) ESL learners agreed that learning English should enable them to change. Also, 35/45 agreed that teachers and learners are partners. Another 22/45 agreed that they will do anything for a teacher they like. Only nine of these twenty-two (9/22), however, were happy with simple instructions, despite the fact that 19/45 stated that they need to work harder when things go wrong, and 15/45 said that they will try again.

These findings also suggest that some ESL learners find it difficult to think about the present task more than the past, though many are happy to have the chance to study with "American" teachers.

Their comments reflect their interest in having sensitive teachers and safe environment for making mistakes, in addition to having free services:

-"[I like] teacher and book," "I like my teacher," "sensitive teacher,"

-"Free talk," "free classes," "interesting people," "we'll find a job,"

-"Feel comfortable speaking, even if I make mistakes," "repetition [helps]."


The overall results suggest that the problem lies not in the persisting high numbers of the functionally illiterates, particularly females, but in the perception (conception and practice) of literacy by teachers, administrators and adult educators vis-à-vis learners. It became clear from the learners comments (not all reported here) that their definition of the problem is not their "inability" to read and write, but that their life circumstances were not being considered when literacy programs were designed. Most of the responses in the section "short answers" about the programs indicate that these learners are aware that the programs are designed according to administrators' and teachers' perception of literacy needs as mere reading and writing.

Furthermore, the female immobility problem lies not in the obvious cases of gender discrimination. Rather, the problem lies in the perception of gender and of gender justice in educational research and praxis (informed practice). This is particularly true when we examine the lack of major changes in female adult education (Stalker, 1996), and especially literacy curricula (Bhola, 1994). That is, Miller, Nelson, and Moore (1998) suggest, as educator we "have a social responsibility to empower those we teach by facilitating dialogue that encourages them to construct themselves and their (research) worlds as knowing subjects rather than passive recipients (Freire, 1970)" (p. 412). The most salient factors of the present study that might explain the evolution--and the modification of phase three among the ESL learners--are the approach of the study, particularly the researcher's active participation in the classroom in which she was encouraging learners to express their views. Active participation of the researcher was viewed as "unscientific" by some of the conventionally trained practitioners (teachers and administrators). Such perception was clearly

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pronounced when the ESL head-teacher requested that the researcher halt further group interview, with the excuse that teachers were not comfortable with the tension among the learners and with the way the research was conducted.

Learners' ownership of information-generation might also have been perceived by these practitioners as a weakness in the validity of the data. Participatory Action Research approach is often perceived as threatening to the authority (of teachers and administrators in this case), and, to a certain extent, to the structure of a hierarchical organization like BOCES. The predominantly female operated structure--the adult education program at BOCES--in a field that is traditionally run by females on a voluntary basis--literacy--seems to produce an unprecedented combination of power as well as competition for control. There were only two males among the 11 female teachers who participated in the study, and only one top level male administrator among three-level female middle administrators in the adult education program at BOCES. Teachers had more leverage in designing and imparting the syllabus according to what they perceived the learners' needs to be. The researcher was introducing strategies for the learners to gain their self-realized interests (see Mace's, 1994, differentiation between literacy needs and literacy interests), but was not given the opportunity to discuss such strategies with individual teachers beforehand.

Language as a conceptual-behavioral system became more subtle when literal and cultural translation was needed. ESL students were harder to approach. Language may have also caused the build-up of resistance by some of the learners, particularly the males when they were not invited to some of the all-female focus-group interviews. This resistance was particularly obvious when the females were either the spouses or daughters of those males who expressed uneasiness with the presence of the researcher. By contrast, this resistance did not exist among ABE learners. To the contrary, some ABE male learners volunteered to aid the researcher when she was explaining some questions to females with learning difficulties.

## LEARNERS GENERATE THEIR OWN SOLUTIONS

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Solutions were found by focusing on conceptual change prior to behavioral change concerning literacy, gender, and education. When thinking about literacy practice, social justice becomes a prerequisite to social change (Barazangi, 1996), and the focus is shifted to attitudinal change prior to structural change. Several other factors contributed to the dynamics of the problem definition that participants also used to find solutions from within their own resources. These factors include structural power (Young, 1990; Memmi, 1965) and control (Papart, 1993), time and timing (Giroux, 1994), research approach (Maguire, 1987) and professional perspectives (Knowels, 1978). Also included are languages and translation, immigration and education (Stewart, 1993), politics of knowledge-generating (Whitmore, 1988), and politics of gender equality (Barazangi, in press).

The most obvious of these factors is the power of the hierarchical structure. We can attribute the movement of the intended Participatory Action Research group process to the individual level to the fact that the contacts between the researcher and the teachers were mainly through the head-teacher. It became apparent later that not all communications by the researcher were made known to all teachers. Also, the fact that teachers were being paid by the hour imposed time limitations and lack of flexibility for direct contacts with the researcher (researcher was able to speak with teachers only during coffee brakes). This lack of communication resulted in misunderstanding the purpose of group interview.

Despite the above obstacles, the research premise that learners will generate an agenda by being involved in the research process was confirmed by group and some individuals' response. The qualitative data analysis and discussion here will focus on some female responses during individual interviews. The responses of Lamis and Zeba (pseudonyms) in the ABE program and Hana and Mays in the ESL program are examples of such responses. Individual interviews were conducted outside the regular instructional session, and outside the class time and space.

**Lamis,** a 27-year single girl affirmed that: "[class discussion in the high school] made me more shy especially when there is smart aleck who make comments." She added: "The main reason [why

such comments bothered me] is that we did not belong to the church, and they picked on us: if you don't belong to the church, you don't belong to the school."

Lamis' parents, I she stated, belonged to different churches, but her mother insisted that Lamis and her brothers attend the school that belonged to her (the mother's) church. Since the children did not attend services in that church either, they were singled out by other children as "not belonging" to the school. For Lamis to tell the researcher about this past history, when the latter was only asking why Lamis did not actively involve in the focus-group interview, is indicative of Lamis' long struggle with her past. More importantly, although Lamis has moved through different locations in the literacy program, it seems that no one has attempted to do something about Lamis' persistent conception--that she did not belong--that prevented her from participating in the classroom.

**Zeba,** a 21-year single mother of an 8-year old boy stated in a joint interview with her closest girl friend, Lamis: "The hardest [hurdle to get started again in training for GED] was getting here [to the classroom] and being able to do it while many things are going on at home." She continued: "There is days when I could not separate life at home and here, it makes it harder for me to learn."

**Lamis and Zeba** were preparing to take the GED for the third time. They stated that passing the GED test has been the stumbling block in their way to advance their training in a field in which each dearly wanted to make a difference, child care. The researcher, acting as a tutor, probed further during her conversation with them. As a result, it became clear what the common grounds that they and other females in the same situation were working against. These females have not realized their identity yet. Despite their complaints that the GED tests do not match what they were learning in the ABE Classes, Zeba and Lamis were actually perpetuating their own problems by blaming themselves for not "making it," contrary to what Horton and Freire (1990) suggest. Even when the researcher/tutor, offered to help in writing a letter to the testing board about the problem, the two learners did not come to the assigned meeting place as scheduled. When asked later, Lamis and Zeba lamented that it would not have made a difference because they would not be able to pass the test anyway. By maintaining such attitudes, Zeba and Lamis, perhaps unknowingly, reinforced the

perception of being "failures. " They also reinforced the hierarchical limitation on direct access to knowledge. Instead of searching for the address of the testing board themselves, they relied on the teacher to find it for them. Obviously, even when the teacher was supportive of their learning and passing the GED test, she would not want to be involved in a strategy that might affect her own job security.

The researcher was able to facilitate for the learners the identification of alternative processes by starting at the level at which they perceive themselves. The consequences that rose out of changes (or the lack of) at the individual level can be observed in the above incident with Lamis and Zeba and in the remarks of two ESL female learners; **Hana and Mays**:

-**Hana:** "My supervisor told me to do something, I didn't understand. I asked him

to write it down and he said, I don't have time to do so, go learn English.

- **Mays:** "I want talk to boss, learn me what to say, people laugh when I talk."

These two learners are already in the work place. They read some English, but cannot communicate with the supervisor and co-workers comfortably despite their eagerness to learn and improve their skills. Their work situation does not allow it either. Listening to the sequences of my (I, the action participant researcher) audio-taped conversations with each of them, I could see changes in Hana's approach to the problem once she had changed her perception of herself. Meanwhile, Mays' approach remained almost the same:

**Hana**, a forty-year old married woman with two young sons in kindergarten and pre-kindergarten grades. At the beginning of the first interview with her, she did not want to speak English to me, insisting on communicating through the interpreter, even though she was able to understand what I was saying. She had stated at the beginning that she would like to find a job and go to work, asserting that learning English is going to help her to better understand other people. Consequently, when she can understand people better, she added, she can have better English skills and she can have a better job. As the interview progressed, she was emphasizing that she needed a tutor to help her

with conversation.  When I offered to play the role of a tutor while talking with her about her learning

English in the ESL program, she liked the idea and started addressing me directly in English.

By the time we had our fourth meeting, Hana had found an evening job, so she could continue her

ESL classes.  Her husband was working during the day, and he did not mind missing ESL classes

because, as she said, "He wants I learn better English to talk more children teacher."  She always

redirected our conversation to find-out how I raised my daughter to be bilingual and to maintain some

native cultural values, while being able to "succeed in America."

Such a transformation in Hana's behavior (accepting me as a tutor and speaking in English

directly with me after an earlier reluctance, and her outlook on learning English) raises the question:

"How do we expect transformation among learners when the same perception of women, particularly

females in literacy programs, has persisted even after the original cause (marginalizing women's role)

is assumed to have changed?"

The answer lies in the relationship of 'change' and 'resilience' in an organization or a field of

work.   It seems that what was an inner personally satisfying or liberating to the middle-class white

females in "Literacy Volunteers of America" is being given an economic value now. This economic

value turned into a powerful patriarchal tool when the volunteer female tutors assumed the role of

teachers or paid tutors in "Adult Education Programs."   This added value, perhaps unknowingly,

transformed the self-liberating act of these female volunteers into an oppressive act to others who are

not of the same class, race or national origin.   Despite their intent to help others, these female

teachers may resist any change in their perception and practice of literacy because they fear the loss

of their gains. They, in turn, can become patriarchal and oppressive, while learners also become

resistant to change.   This resistance means that attitudinal transformation among female teachers did

not take place and, therefore, they could not fully help these immigrant individual learners to

transform.  Teachers' persistence in following a particular perception of literacy was not viewed by

Hana as satisfying to her interests. Thus she wanted a mediator, the interpreter. Yet, when the tutor's

strategy (and, perhaps, worldview) seemed to help her interests, Hana was ready to communicate directly with the tutor.

The above results also lend themselves to the development of another overall strategy. By viewing female teachers' resistance within the existing hierarchical organizational structure in itself and realizing these females as stockholders, we may be able to view their resistance as a positive indicator of their rigor, both individual and cultural. That is, by understanding teachers' resistance at the depth of the organizational worldview rather than at the surface of the structure, in which literacy function is seen only in relevance to perceived learners' needs and not in relevance to learners' interests, we may be able to generate attitudinal change.

**Mays**, a nineteen-year old single girl, was living at the time of the interview with her brother, sponsored by an older sister who had emigrated ten years ago and owns a restaurant. I, as a researcher, asked Mays, through the interpreter: "You were asked [on the questionnaire] why you are going to school. You answered 'to change my personal life.' Yet, you also stated that the opportunities to do so are small. How do you, then, expect to change? Why do you think that opportunities are small?" She answered, "Now I have a regular job, and it's hard to go to work and at the same time go to classes, no time."

Though I offered to play the role of a tutor to her, as I did with Hana, she agreed to talk with me but insisted on having the interpreter join in the conversation. The interpreter, Pam, became the tutor and was visiting Mays alone. Pam, after few sessions with Mays, briefed me that all Mays wanted to learn was some phrases so she could communicate with her supervisor at work. When I discussed the matter with Mays--encouraging her to learn the foundations of the language to improve her job skills as well--she confided that she has been in and out of ESL classes several times already. She indicated that she was moving from one part of the country to another, depending on where her family "found her a job." She added that every time she was laid-off she went back to ESL classes, and after she found the present job, she was told by the head-teacher that the ESL program could not find her a tutor for after work hours.

When I related such interests (other ESL learners told me that they could not have tutors either) to a program director and to a concerned international volunteer group at the university, I did not receive a satisfactory answer. Such responses raise the question: Why should we, the researchers even if we were females, expect these females teachers and program directors to let us bring-out repressed thoughts or feelings into the explicit consciousness? As stated earlier, the patriarchal structure of a paid job that replaced the volunteer altruistic structure is not only professionalizing the literacy field but also creating a shortage of volunteer tutors. We are told that although some of the teachers would like to tutor, they do not have the flexibility that they once had as volunteers.

The answers to these questions seem to lie in the conception of 'change' and the 'status quo'. What was a common-sense, altruistic voluntary field of work 'literacy,' it seems, has also been given an academic value, 'adult education,' now. This added value has institutionalized female marginality. Female adult education practitioners have been mainly maintaining the role of applying recommendations made by predominantly male adult education researchers or managers. It seems as if the opposition to bringing females' repressed thoughts and feelings into the conscious level have transformed, unknowingly, the strive for respect into a strive to maintain the status quo. In addition, when social services agencies attached social welfare funds to attending adult education classes, the pressure to maintain the existing organizational structure became stronger. We are told that social workers become involved in determining the level of English/literacy classes for individual learners as well!

The issue, therefore, is: "How to preserve the rigor of the female teachers and administrators and, at the same time, keep the dialogue between them and female learners open in order for them to hear the learners' voices?"

The answer might be in finding means to help secure the female teachers' understanding of the following:

**a.** That their drive can be inclusive.  That is, when they realize "others" as individuals, not only as people with social needs, these teachers' drive becomes stronger and more effective (Parpart, 1993).

**b.** That their resilience can be maintained with change. That is, their persistence with the same course of action, despite the seeming change in learners' need, may have a positive indicator if they recognize learners' interests.   Yet, this resilience may become obsolete if it distances itself from the individual and social dynamics of self-realization.

**c.** That their expostulation with some patriarchal professors or researchers in adult education needs not filter down to learners.  That is, their personal drive can be transformed into a political one if they join hands with learners and some researcher to change the meaning of learning.

## CONCLUSIONS

A built-in feature of this project is the promotion of dialogue among researchers and between them and learners, teachers and administrators in adult learning, particularly literacy. The purpose is to exchange information, including perceptions of the phenomenon at hand, namely the centrality of literacy to women's education and development.   Resulting from the initial steps of this dialogue, the researcher and the teachers, and some administrators, despite their divergent assumptions have realized the intrinsic commonality of basic human needs for literacy and language skills.  Yet,  as the research process evolved and the results of this study indicate, teachers' and learners' conception of literacy did not always converge, particularly when learners' interest in self-realization and in actually changing their status quo was at stake.

Specific situation and contextual factors, such as social and economic needs for literacy among the two sets of learner population, do not seem to deter from generating common observations concerning female literacy interests. To the contrary, during the researcher's participation in the ESL classes, the dialogue brought to the surface the similarities in meanings of gender and literacy to those generated by ABE learners.  The dialogue also brought up the importance of a deeper understanding

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of the different factors, including adult education and learner's role in re-thinking literacy in the context of gender.

Such an understanding would not have been achieved only through conventional statistical survey of literacy skills, nor through workshops for teachers alone, neither by mere comparison to other research. The dialogue concerning the two separate sets of learner population has led to two specific perceptual observations: The persistence of (a) the conventional conception of literacy, and (b) the hierarchical structure in adult education, particularly in female education. The narratives of individual cases are good evidence that recurring attempts to change perceptions about the effectiveness of literacy programs are still not fully successful. This is supported by the UN reports that not much has changed over the years in the attitudes about women's literacy, education and development. According to the UNESCO report (1992), 800 million world adults were illiterate in 1970 with increase of 25-30 million each year, predominantly among females. The UNESCO report and Kirsch et al. (1993) findings affirm the persistence of the illiteracy problem; the results of this study affirm the need for an alternative approach to understanding the problem. Learners' and teachers' knowledge-generation not only did it inform this Participatory Action Research but mainly brought to the explicit their own views of literacy and of learning. This explicit dialogue resulted in generating from within their own perspective strategic solutions that were implemented directly by the learners and by some teachers.

Furthermore, as Kirsch et al. (1993) found that women among the adults surveyed have significantly lower average document and qualitative proficiencies than their male counterparts; the females that we interviewed in the present study have lead us to the possible avenue as to how we may be able to eliminate, or at least, modify such a trend. The literacy-in-action approach did not only benefit some learners as they reached the self-realization stage, but it has resulted, we were informed, in some structural changes in the BOCES adult education classes.

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