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The Uses and Consequences of Literacy Among Salvadoran Campesinos/as: A Longitudinal Study

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Keywords: adult literacy; El Salvador; international adult education; literacy practices

Abstract: This paper uses data from a longitudinal study with former adult literacy participants in El Salvador to examine how campesinos/as currently use literacy and what they perceive as the temporary and long-term socio-economic benefits of literacy education. The findings underscore the social dimensions and multi-faceted nature and consequences of literacy.

Studies examining the social and economic consequences of participation in adult literacy education (ALE) have illuminated how people in distinct sociocultural settings use literacy skills and programs for varied purposes, in some cases enabling them to improve their lives (e.g., Kalman, 2005). Most claims regarding the purported benefits of ALE participation are based on studies conducted upon program exit. Only a few longitudinal studies, however, have explored how participants continue to use literacy in their daily lives and which, if any, benefits persist over the years. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to examine how former literacy participants in a rural Salvadoran village currently engage in literacy practices and how they perceive the long-term social and economic benefits of ALE participation, if any. This study provides insights into the temporary or long-term nature of literacy acquisition and changes in learners' lives and which aspects of ALE participation learners considered most meaningful.

Theoretical Framework

Previous large-scale, longitudinal studies have typically employed surveys and/or interviews to explore long-term outcomes of ALE participation, including academic skills and development, health, psychosocial and economic well-being, and civic participation (e.g., Bingman, Ebert, & Bell, 2000; Griffin et al., 1997; Hua & Burchfield, 2003; Smith, 1999). By contrast, this study affords insights rarely obtained in large-scale studies, as it used ethnographic research to explore Salvadoran adults' accounts of their current literacy practices and reflections on the literacy classes, 5½ years after classes ended in December 2001.

To analyze the data I draw on the New Literacy Studies, a body of scholarship that has challenged the prevailing assumption that participation in ALE leads, in a linear, causal fashion, to increased economic productivity, self-esteem, cognitive development, or similar outcomes (e.g., Betts, 2003; Robinson-Pant, 2004; Street, 2001). Viewing literacy as a social practice rather than a discrete set of technical skills (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 1999), this theoretical perspective explores how adults use literacy for their own purposes, the meanings they attribute to it, and how literacy practices shape (and are shaped by) specific sociocultural settings. Some NLS scholars, however, have been reluctant to "examine the role of literacy capabilities and practices in progressive forms of social change, and the production of agency" (Maddox, 2007, p. 257). As such, I explore in this paper how people draw on literacy skills and participation to exercise new forms of agency, actions that are always constrained by social structures.

Setting and Methods

The original study (2001-02) used ethnographic and participatory methods to examine how participation in a literacy program in two rural Salvadoran villages fostered or limited women's and men's personal, interpersonal, and collective empowerment. Fifty-six campesinos/as attended Freirean-inspired literacy classes from August to December 2001. Many learners identified psychosocial benefits of participation such as new friendships and improved self-expression, yet there were few changes in collective agency or gender equity (Prins, in press). Based on a 2007 follow-up study in Colima, the focal village in the 2001 study, this paper investigates two questions: How do former literacy participants currently use literacy? What do they perceive as the temporary and long-term socio-economic benefits of literacy education?

Since 2001 I have maintained contact with my Colima host family (including a literacy facilitator), a relationship that enabled the follow-up study. Over two weeks I interviewed 12 adults who participated in the initial study. Aged 19 to late 60s, all were campesinos/as with limited schooling (0 to 8th grade). I interviewed individually or in pairs eight of the 11 learners who had attended Class A (all women)—the focal class in the 2001 study—and four of the six learners from Class B (all men). Two former learners were unavailable, two had migrated to the U.S., and one had passed away. I also conducted a focus group with three women from Class A. Interviews explored learners' current uses of literacy, which benefits of literacy education (mentioned in 2001) had or had not persisted, and their memories of literacy classes, among other topics. Participants received a popular education-style book. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, recorded, and transcribed verbatim by a Salvadoran. The paper also draws on field notes regarding local and national socio-economic changes, learners' life circumstances, and literacy practices. All but one of the learners was interviewed in 2001, allowing me to compare their responses across time. Content analysis was used to code the original Spanish transcripts.

Findings

It is important to situate the research findings in the sociocultural setting, one marked by persistent social and economic problems, postwar social violence, and widespread migration. Between 2001 and 2007 learners experienced many life changes, including motherhood, the birth of children, changes in marital status, dropping out of school, and migration of immediate family members and friends to the U.S. Learners and other villagers struggled with the escalating cost of living and scarce, poorly paid work, especially after the closure of Colima's sugar mill. In response to these conditions two former learners (a middle-aged woman and a young man) and two former facilitators (a young man and woman), along with countless other villagers, have left to find work in the U.S. These economic changes, in turn, have shaped local literacy practices.

Literacy Practices

During the previous six years, three former learners had enrolled in another literacy class, but it was discontinued due to low enrollment. No other literacy classes had been offered. Two learners stated they had learned no literacy skills in the 2001 class and one forgot the little she had learned, since her efforts to help her family survive economically left little time to practice reading and writing. Regardless of their literacy abilities, all learners encountered "literacy-demanding" and "literacy-generating" spaces (Kalman, 2005) such as schools, health clinics, banks, churches, and agricultural work. Salvadoran learners' literacy and numeracy practices mirrored many of those identified by Kalman in Mexico, including *everyday literacy activities* (e.g., utility bills, children's health documents, product labels), *following up on official business*

(e.g., remittances, job applications), *personal reading and writing* (e.g., letters, poems), *children's schooling* (e.g., helping with homework), and *public reading and writing* (e.g., signs, buses). The most common reading materials included the newspaper (n=7), the Bible (n=6), and books (e.g., children's school books, storybooks) (n=6), while product labels and instructions (n=4), documents (n=3), signs (n=3), and bills (n=3) were the most common types of document literacy. Learners compensated for the scarcity and expense of reading materials by copying song lyrics (including English songs), poems, Bible texts, and the like. They described copying not as a passive activity but as an active way to learn, remember, and preserve texts they deemed important. Learners also practiced writing (e.g., signature), signed official documents, and engaged in personal writing, everyday writing (e.g., coach wrote softball team lineup) and, in one case, workplace record keeping (list of agricultural workers' names and productivity).

Two literacy practices—completing paperwork to receive remittances and corresponding via letters with North American child sponsors—merit attention because they reflect shifting economic conditions and livelihood strategies, illustrating how economic forces structure what people do with literacy, and why (Brandt, 2001; Guerra, 1998). Esmeralda relied on others to perform the literacy tasks involved in receiving remittances: When her eldest son called from the U.S., she asked another son to write down the remittance code, which she later presented to a bank clerk, using her fingerprint to verify her identity. Esmeralda's completion of remittance paperwork, then, both reflects and reinforces her family's—and Salvadoran society's—reliance on migration as a survival strategy, implicating her in transnational flows of communication and capital. Similarly, many Colima families enroll their children in a NGO child sponsorship program, requiring them to write two letters per year. When Esperanza and Karla María write letters to their children's English-speaking sponsors, their actions are molded by North-South political economy, NGO expectations for sponsor-recipient relations and letters, and Salvadoran letter writing conventions. They had no way of verifying, however, the accuracy of the NGO's translations or whether information was omitted from sponsors' letters or their own.

With the exception of three learners with more advanced literacy, all received some help with literacy tasks, illustrating the collaborative nature of literacy (Fingeret, 1983; Kalman, 2005). Learners typically asked individuals whom they trusted and who they thought could read or write well—usually relatives, their children, or friends. One person (a young woman with a sixth grade education) was content asking for help and two people gave ambiguous responses. However, four out of seven said they would feel “very happy” if they could perform these tasks by themselves. For example, Karla María stated, “I would feel happy because I [would] know that I could accomplish it by myself.” Another person worried about the loss of privacy when dictating letters to her child, explaining that there was some information she would not want her children to know, such as advice to a friend about intimate health problems.

Short- and Long-Term Benefits of Literacy Education

Policy makers and scholars have long attributed increased economic well-being to literacy, as people with advanced literacy skills can presumably acquire better-paying jobs. Most learners in this study viewed literacy as important for their personal development, dignity, and ability to *defenderse* (defend themselves), but only three participants (all men) used literacy in income-generating activities, for example, when reading pesticide instructions or recording farm laborers' names and productivity. Although most of the women engaged in the informal economy (e.g., doing laundry for neighbors), none reported reading or writing in these activities, despite (in two cases) a sixth grade education. Learners did not believe attending literacy classes

had improved their economic well-being, and all but one person described their economic situation as the same or worse than it was before 2001. (Her family was better off because her mother had migrated and started sending remittances.) For these individuals, literacy education alone did not produce economic benefits (see Cameron & Cameron, 2006). As learners explained, there were few jobs and even unskilled (e.g., cleaning) jobs increasingly required a 9th grade or even high school education—something most adult campesinos/as have no chance of attaining after dropping out of school, no matter how well they may later learn to read and write.

In the 2001 study, learners emphasized the psychosocial benefits of attending literacy classes and developing literacy skills, including enhanced self-esteem and self-expression, diminished timidity, and making new friends, among others. Some of the personal and interpersonal changes identified in 2001 appear to be short-lived. For instance, two people who claimed in 2001 that attending literacy classes helped them get along better with their partner have since separated. Three learners—all women—noted they had begun to feel *pena* (shame, timidity, embarrassment) again because they no longer met and talked with peers in class. A 19 year-old mother of two explained: “When you live isolated, no one visits you. You talk most with family members, but there are times when you need trusted people to talk to about some problem or something that’s happening to you.... But if you don’t talk to anyone, you become shy and timid again.” To regain the confidence they had felt in 2001, these women believed they would need to resume attending classes.

Similarly, women in 2001 described the classes as a site for social distraction (Stromquist, 1997), a place where they could forget their worries, have fun, and release pent-up emotions (*desahogarse*), which in turn helped improve their mental health. In this regard, the classes were especially important because women felt isolated, usually had to ask for their partner’s or parents’ permission to go out, and were solely responsible for chores and childrearing. After the program’s conclusion, women’s sole opportunities for social distraction were church, a women’s softball team, watching men’s soccer games, and a communal radio run by youth. Without the literacy classes, women had one less opportunity for play and affiliation, capacities that are vital to human flourishing (Nussbaum, 1999).

According to learners, longer-lasting changes included enhanced ability to communicate and express themselves, feeling closer to God, practicing the culturally valued forms of communication and sociability (*educación*) they had learned in classes, getting along better with friends and family, and feeling more confident and less timid. For instance, Mayra stated, “My fear left me. I was very timid; all of that left me,” while Esmeralda shared that she had learned “to be *educado* [friendly, well-mannered]—you don’t forget that. And to have love for people.” Some learners described how they had developed these capacities and applied them in their lives, for example, by speaking up more in meetings. Karla María described how she had learned to get along (*convivir*) with her friends: “Before I didn’t know how to value people very much and I didn’t know how I might offend them.... At least now I am a little more aware of the great love one has for people.... In the class, I noticed that even in the smallest things we asked each other and helped each other. So that’s how we need to be outside of class.” All four of the men but only two out of five women claimed that they no longer felt *pena*, signaling the gendered dimensions of timidity among campesinos/as. Learners attributed most of these long-term changes to social interaction in their classes, their teacher’s actions (e.g., small group work, having students read aloud), or participatory research activities undertaken for the 2001 study.

Most learners still saw and talked to former classmates who lived nearby and considered them friends, but with a few exceptions they no longer spent time together consistently.

Consequently, several people stated they no longer shared as much trust with former classmates. As Esperanza put it, the trust “dissipates day by day.” To regain the same degree of trust, learners believed they would need to resume attending classes and conversing together.

Finally, it is striking that when asked to describe their memories of the literacy classes, few learners discussed instruction. Rather, they recalled social aspects such as *convivencia* (sharing, coming together), having fun, talking, and making friends, as well as the participatory research activities. Esperanza summarized these memories, saying, “It was really nice because we all talked and expressed what we felt—and with freedom.” In sum, both literacy classes and research activities provided a meaningful social space, one that continues to live in the collective memory through conversations and, in some cases, the photos learners kept.

Discussion and Conclusion

This longitudinal study indicates that, to varying degrees, former literacy participants continue to use reading and writing in their daily lives, either independently or with assistance. However, post-literacy services are also needed to support continued literacy learning. While the ability to read or sign documents such as vaccination records, utility bills, or remittance forms may appear routine or inconsequential to highly educated persons, Brandt (2001) suggests “the dominion of documents [in modern life] in very real ways constructs who we are and to what we are and are not entitled” (p. 49). The ability to navigate these practices, then, is crucial, especially for socially and economically vulnerable campesinos/as.

Secondly, most learners received some help with literacy tasks from relatives and friends, yet we cannot assume that this is how they *want* to engage in literacy, for as Brandt (2001) writes, “the literacy that people practice is not the literacy they necessarily wish to practice” (p. 8). Distributed literacy is often celebrated in NLS as a sign of ingenuity and interdependence, but we need to discern under what conditions it nurtures or hampers people’s capacity to *defenderse* and exercise agency, and when it signals interdependence or exclusion and constraint.

Many psychosocial, economic, and cognitive benefits have been attributed to literacy (Bartlett, in press). The findings support other studies showing that the consequences of ALE participation are not linear or uniform, but rather depend on the ways people in specific sociocultural settings acquire, use, and adapt reading and writing for distinct purposes, and the ways they use the social space literacy classes afford (Bartlett, in press). According to learners, ALE participation did not improve their economic situation, mainly due to the labor market structure and rising educational standards. Further, the variation in what learners deemed short- or long-term changes reveals the difficulty of pinpointing specific consequences of literacy, and the need to investigate what reading, writing, and attending literacy classes mean to people, both symbolically and materially. As this study suggests, literacy participation entails much more than developing technical skills; it also serves social purposes that can enhance psychosocial well-being and relationships (Horsman, 1990). That literacy classes constituted a valued social space also helps explain the fleeting nature of increased assertiveness, self-expression, friendships, and some of the other changes reported in 2001: After the classes ended, learners no longer practiced the communicative and interactional routines that had prompted these changes. Like a muscle, these capacities and relationships may atrophy through disuse. Despite the short-term nature of some literacy benefits, this study suggests learners can and do draw on their prior experiences in literacy classes to enrich their lives, especially to claim the identity of an educated person.

Finally, learners’ memories of the 2001 research activities underscore the value of using popular education and participatory methods (e.g., mapping, skits, *dinámicas* [icebreakers],

participatory photography) in research and literacy instruction. For instance, Karla María remarked, “I think what we felt the most was that we were important to someone.” Her comments suggest that in addition to providing enjoyment and nurturing friendships and communicative competence, such activities can also affirm adult learners’ inherent value.

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