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Recommended Citation

Lee, Jihye (2011). "The Meaning of 'Being Literate' In the Case of Adult Literacy Learners in Korea," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2011/papers/59>

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The Meaning of ‘Being Literate’ In the Case of Adult Literacy Learners in Korea

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Keywords: adult literacy, adult literacy learner, Korea, formal education

Abstract: This study examines the meaning of ‘being literate’ along with focusing on the relationship with formal education in Korea. For the purpose of this study, adult literacy learners wrote 1,673 articles and they were also analyzed. As a result, the demand for having formal education experience limits and influences the motivation, educational process, and meaning of being literate for adult literacy learners in Korea.

Purpose of the Study

The meaning of ‘being literate’ is differentiated by the sociological context. Korea is well known for its high literacy level, which is mainly due to its increase in entrance rate. It is stated that the entrance rate for higher education in Korea is the highest level in the world with an average of 83.8% (KOSTAT, 2008). However, while at the same time there are steady improvements academically, there are also groups who are isolated and deprived from being educated. In the midst of this rapid modernization, relatively unfavorable opportunities in education have been given to senior citizens, low class families, and to females. A nationwide survey on the general status of literacy learners in Korea has not been conducted, however, an estimation was made according to the ‘academic level’ based on the population from a census survey. People who have not graduated from junior high school (less than 9 years of education), which is currently the compulsory education course in Korea, are set as a potential group in need of literacy education. The number of adults who need junior high-level education out of the entire adult population (over 15 years old) in Korea is 5,991,230, which is 26.03%, with this criterion. As a result, the number of people who need elementary level education is 2,075,900 (15.74%), and the number of people who need junior high-level education totals to 3,915,330 (10.29%).

In this overwhelming society where people value higher education, ‘being literate’ has a unique meaning for adult literacy learners. To analyze the meaning of ‘being literate’ in the case of adult literacy learners in South Korea, we must study further through qualitative research. In this study, the participants in adult literacy courses are the adult literacy learners. Most of the adult literacy courses mainly focus on the improvements in cognitive skills in reading and writing. However, the learners experience changes not only in cognitive skills, but also with their own personal identities and social relationships. It is quite essential to realize the empowerment from adult literacy education. The whole purpose of this research is to clarify the outcomes in adult literacy education for the case in South Korea.

The main research questions include:

1. What is the meaning of ‘being literate’ for the adult literacy learners in South Korea?

2. What are some influences with the emphasis on ‘formal schooling’ in South Korea’s society and its relationship to the meaning of ‘being literate’?
3. What are the practical implications with the meaning of ‘being literate’ to adult literacy pedagogy and policy?

Methodology

Adult literacy learners first began learning by reading and writing their names, address and simple words. They were then facilitated to express themselves in writing, which is a teaching method often used in adult literacy education. There are several nationwide or regional competitions runned by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the government. Adult literacy educators strongly believe that writing is a significant component for education. It reflects the learners on a emotional level and receiving awards from competitions allows them to be grateful for their hard work. Therefore, in the last few years, adult literacy learners’ writings have been produced in large forms.

In order to understand and solve the purpose of this research, 1,673 articles were written by adult literacy learners and they were collected as data. It consisted of letters, essays, diaries, and poems. They covered areas from brief articles with just less than 50 words to extensive autobiographies. All of the articles were published between 2003-2008 by NGOs, local governments, and individual institutions. The articles revealed individuals memories of their own lives and their perspectives on education and learning. The collected articles were also analyzed by using constant comparative methods of data analysis, which was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as the means of grounded theory.

Findings

A flower that couldn’t bloom: Exclusion from Schooling

The lack of schooling experience equals to the loss of childhood experience for the adult literacy learners. The reminiscences from their childhood are filled with deep resentment due to their exclusion from schooling. One participant stated:

“When I was a little girl, whenever I saw my friends go to school, I always cried. But my mother had just told me to look after my younger brothers and that girls didn’t need to go to school. She also told me that all girls needed to be good at was housekeeping. I have been doing housekeeping since I was seven years old.” – Kim, 63 years old

During the process of rapid modernization, relatively few opportunities of education have been given to the elderly, the poor, and to females. Similar to other societies and generations after generations, poverty has always been the major obstacle for blocking people from receiving a proper education. In one survey, 66.5% of participants stated that their financial problems deterred them from fulfilling their basic academic needs. However, in the case of illiterate females, discrimination against women was also a significant factor since 39.6% of females said that they didn't have enough opportunities to be educated due to their parents’ traditional way of thinking (KOSTAT, 2008). The most distressed memories were created from their lack of opportunities to receive education. It drew an unbreakable and dividing line from others who were able to attend school. Another participant stated:

“While my friends went to school, I had to work at the store in front of the elementary school. Every morning, all the students signed in after they entered the classroom. With my heart pounding, I peeped into the classroom through the windows but wasn’t able to enter inside. It made me want to blame my mother for my lack of youth.” – Choi, 58 years old

The deficit of schooling experiences not only meant missing their learning opportunities, but also losing their childhood. From the beginning of their life, they immediately had to play a role as an adult without a choice.

Attending school has always been a high demand, but it was also inaccessible. As a result, it created feelings of isolation from others and insecurities about their identities. Adult literacy learners often find themselves feeling as though they are ‘nothing’ and tend to belittle themselves. One of the participants felt lack of self-respect, so far as to comparing herself to an animal and stating that she is ‘a dog who only eats and sleeps’. This strongly shows the need for their recovery.

A process of healing: Experiencing pseudo-schooling

Through literacy education, adult literacy learners are able to recover and gain self-respect by experiencing what its like to be a student, which is the most important factor. Due to their lack of opportunities with school, before starting their courses, most of them suffered from extreme feelings of depression. The absence of schooling experience deteriorated their feelings of incompetence. In the beginning stage of their participation, they were involved in simulated courses for their school-like experience. Positive responses were extensively expressed through their writings about what they felt and discovered. Most of the literacy education is taught informally. The participants not only identify with formal education more, but they also prefer techniques and situations that are similar to a 'school' environment. They put high values on various elements that feature traditional school life. They enjoyed being referred to as ‘students’ and joined in various activities, which are similar to a regular school set up, such as taking ‘school trips’, having ‘school meals’, and attending a ‘graduation ceremony’. Taking a dictation test was also sometimes included.

“As you know, I was very shamed about not having a chance to go to school. But recently, I’m attending a school with courage. I’m excited to take a dictation test. Sometimes I succeed, and other times I have failed. But I want to get your compliments. Please give me your praise.” – Lee, age is unknown

This letter revealed that adult literacy learners are still able to think at a young level. Experiencing ‘school life’ has made them reflect and rebound to their childhood life.

“Now I can read the letters written on the buses. It seems to open a whole new shining world and I can have everything in the world. When I go to class with my backpack, I feel like I transform to a 12 year old girl and not a 70 yeas old lady anymore.” – Lee, 70 years old

The relationship between the learners and their educators were also recognized. Although most of the adult literacy educators make efforts to balance relationships with the learners, the

participants rather preferred a hierarchical system relationship. They always referred to their educators as ‘Sir’ and showed a high level of respect for them in spite of their age differences. This is rare in South Korea considering the fact that a person’s age is the most priority when Koreans build a relationship with one another. In this case, they seem to understand their role as a student by the way they respect their educators.

“I always envied my friends going to school with their blue backpacks. Now I enjoy all of the activities in school. It is the happiest time for me to have lunch with my teachers and classmates. It makes me feel as though I am a real student. I’d like to live my life as a student until my death. Thank you so much for teaching. Thank you, Sir.” — a letter wrote by Hwang, 78 years old

The participants defined themselves as ‘very immature’ students while at the same time sharply contrasting their teachers as ‘mature and well educated’. The educators have made attempts to build a collaborative learning environment through partnership, but the participants instead expressed that they want a leader, not a partner. What was important for these adult literacy learners was not to just gain knowledge through literacy education, but to also participate and experience as a student. Through their desired method, it seems as though their childhood that was once lost was now slowly being restored and even healing their once wounded self-esteem issues. However, at this phase, the meaning of ‘being literate’ was realized through their desires in the past for schooling and confined to the form of schooling.

Recovery of his or her own identity: From the objective of education to the subject of learning

The adult literacy learners progressively experienced changes in their self-identities, social relationships, and motivation to learn through their courses. It helped them break away from their negative self-identity.

“I had lost myself. I was blind. Whenever I went to the bank, I always asked somebody to write my information down and I pretended that my hands were injured. But the world has changed into a brighter and more beautiful one after I attended school. The class gave me not only the joy for learning, but also to live an active life with confidence.” – Jung, 54 years old

Adult literacy learners have begun to understand themselves through their connection with others and not an isolated being that they once felt they were. They have gained a positive viewpoint for themselves as ‘equals’ with others due to their experience with attending classes and learning how to read. It influenced their way of setting up a relationship with their educators as well, which has changed from a hierarchical relationship they began with to a partnership type of relationship. Some participants even took a role of being a teacher’s assistant in class, and became aware of the balanced partnership between teachers and students.

“I feel as though my classmates are like my sisters. They healed my wounded heart and we can open our minds to each other. I love this relationship of teaching and learning together.” – Moon, age is unknown

Their goals have changed because of their experience in a confident and active social environment. Their strong orientation for school experience and educational background became more self-oriented. Progressively, their values have changed from being a student to now the enjoyment of learning.

“I feel so happy when I add a notebook in my shelf. It makes me feel like my life is rich. These days, I’m helping the beginner students in class and learning how to use the computer keyboard. I hope to continue to learn. To learn is a kind of strength, joy, and solace for my loneliness. Bravo, to my life!” – Park, 79 years old

As they recovered from their own self-esteem and began to broaden their social relationships, they overcame their obstacles of ‘deficiency’ and realized the two-folds in their characteristics. A poem about ‘the self’ says, *“I am weaker than a lamb, but I am stronger than a super-hero”* (Yang, age is unknown). They were able to learn and recognize their strengths and weaknesses, allowing them to accept themselves, which became a critical turning point in their lives. Their focus has moved from only viewing at others to now their own selves. Rather than feeling overwhelmed about school experiences, they learned for themselves. A new perspective on education was also discovered by learning not from the outside, but from within themselves. They have put the highest value on learning itself, but not on joining in pseudo-schooling. They have learned the joy of learning and changed into an agent of their own learning.

Discussion

The meaning of being literate for adult literacy learners has changed over time. In the initial phase, what mattered most for these learners was being able to participate in a typical formal education atmosphere. To obtain this ‘form’ of schooling was the strongest motivation for them in adult literacy education. To experience pseudo-schooling was an essential healing process for overcoming their past negative experiences. In the process, they recalled and at the same time cured their negative emotions from their childhood. They experienced not only the recovery of self-awareness, but it also changed their meaning of education. Their framework of viewing education when they first began the class reflected on traditional perspectives of education, which were limited in a formal school environment. As they have become aware of the other aspect of ‘being literate’, their perception of education also has expanded progressively. It has changed into including not only a form of schooling, but also non-formal and informal learning by themselves.

Aspiration for school education has been rooted deeply in Korean culture under the background that education was identified to be equal with power. Not having the chance to get educated at a school meant more than just missing the chance of ‘knowing’, it meant almost having nothing. Therefore, it is highly valued for literacy learners in South Korea that their accomplishments in literacy education are acknowledged as a formal one.

The strong aspirations involved in formal education for Koreans need to be understood as the social and personal context. At first, it is related with historical background. It comes from cultural elements that regard ‘learning’ as ‘attending a school’, which resulted in putting high value on school education. South Korea is known to adopt part of the Confucian culture, which traditionally gives high respect to those who are intelligent. The value of education also was strengthened during the Japanese ruling era from 1910 to 1945 that began at the dawning of modernization. After South Korea’s independence from Japan in 1945, South Korea went through rapid industrialization and urbanization. Traditional social order had completely

collapsed from the Korean War and industrialization. School education began to popularize after the liberation, opportunities that used to be monopolized by dominant groups were opened to the commoners, and it became the main mechanism. This eventually accelerated social movement. It was also the tool that made it possible to enter the modern industry (Kim, 1993). School education was the only ticket to ensure new positions and all the selected mechanisms stopped working due to all the war and partition.

The limited educational experiences of adult literacy learners influenced them to have an imperfect view about learning. In fact, most of the adult literacy learners were very competent with informal learning. They developed their own ways of learning without any literal knowledge. However, they weren't able to recognize themselves as skillful learners because they were too intense focusing on the typical educational experience that they weren't able to receive. It implied how adult learners learned through educational experiences, not only cognitive acquisition, but also meta-cognition of 'learning' itself. The more they have a wide range of experiences in education, the broader definition of education and learning they will be able to interpret.

For the adult literacy learners, formal education was a kind of interface to access into the public sphere. They had been forced to only live in the private sphere since their childhood. During their childhood, they were excluded from schooling because they were women. Once they became adults, they were also discriminated from work and unable to be part of their children's school life because they were illiterate women. With this lack of experience, the women craved for a social and public life through adult literacy education. Therefore, they attached a great importance to the 'form' in education.

Conclusion

This study opened doors for people to understand the importance of 'formal schooling' in an environment where 'being literate' was highly influenced. The results were reflected from their goals and their realization of the true meaning behind adult literacy education. The characteristics involved have been considered to reinforce the impacts of adult literacy pedagogy and policies.

This research has also proven the significance in practicing adult literacy education. It implies multifaceted characteristics for adult literacy learners. In the case of South Korea, the meaning of being literate has been influenced and gained a unique cultural background. They used to have a concept of limiting their education at a formal school-like setting.

Adult literacy learners were known to be in a complicated state of needing to be respected as adults with rich life experiences and to be taught as sensitive children. Adult educators have to try and seek deeply in the mind of the learners needs. They are purely adults, but psychologically similar to children. They were desperately searching to be treated as an equal like young students. This has led us to consider the mismatched problem with the expectations between the educators and the learners. Adult educators tried to realize the concepts of andragogy in the practice of adult literacy education, but adult literacy learners tried to place themselves as the passive ones in the class. The educators wanted to take a role as the facilitator, but the learners expected to have a teacher with a hierarchical mind and to be respected as adults at the same time. These two-folded characteristics of adult literacy learners need to be considered in developing as learning materials, instructional methods, and provide a degree in the educational system.

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