

CEDI EDUCAÇÃO POPULAR E
 ESC. POPULARES
 documentação
 No 04.03
 Hód/pep
 Data 21.11.96

Post-literacy in Latin American: some reflections

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Post-literacy and functional illiteracy

Post-literacy is a concept coined and known in the field of adult education. Initially, post-literacy programs were designed to face the deficiencies of many brief literacy campaigns, three or four months long, in which little was learned. These programs were aimed at the newly-literate. Later on, post-literacy programs were propounded to deal with the broader question of functional illiteracy.

Functional illiterates are those people whose mastery of reading and writing is so faulty that they are unable to benefit from their skills either economically or socially. Functional illiteracy is the result of lack of or low-quality schooling and of low learning levels in school because of adverse socio-economic conditions. Functional illiterates are those people who have learned the rudiments of writing at home or, having received some formal education, fall back into illiteracy because of the inadequacies of their education or for lack of opportunity to use their knowledge. Usually these factors are combined; functional illiteracy is the product of educational and of economic, social, political and cultural factors.

Post-literacy work is strongly tied to the idea of functional literacy. The 1978 General Conference of Unesco adopted the following definition of a functionally illiterate person: *a functionally illiterate person cannot participate in any of those activities that require literacy for effective action in his or her group or community, and that allow the continued use of reading, writing and mathematical calculation skills for his or her own development and that of his or her community.*

By using this definition we are considering functional illiteracy to be directly related to all fields of social life. Demands for literacy vary according to the kind and degree of development of each country and region and the cultural standards of each social group. Like literacy work, post-literacy work is a process by which the learner improves his or her relationship to the world of work, science and technology, culture and politics.

Because functional illiteracy is produced by factors other than education, these factors end up being the focus of post-literacy programs. Many post-literacy programs are associated, for example, with programs for improving

production techniques, community organization, health and hygiene and developing critical capacity, according to local needs or following the ideological perspective of those who design the programs. However, in many cases, post-literacy programs have served as a preparatory phase for integration or reintegration of the target audience into formal education systems; the educational demands of the contemporary world are growing, increasing the demand on formal education systems by those excluded from them.

Post-literacy in the present Latin American context

The post-literacy issue has gained importance in Latin America in recent years because of the high rates of functional illiteracy. The situation over the last decade explains this: we have been through a period of increased democracy that coincides with a deepening economic and social crisis. Relatively receptive to popular demands, the new Latin American democracies have promoted an increase in school attendance. However, the increase in number of places in schools has been affected by the economic crisis; there was a fall in national income in these countries and fewer resources to finance public education systems.

An increased supply of places together with restrictions on investments has caused a negative impact on the quality of education. Expansion was financed by the reduction of teachers' pay and cutbacks on funding for research and on spending in infrastructure, equipment and maintenance. The number of shifts was increased, diminishing the length of each student's school day; and the number of students in each class was increased. The result of this process was more students with lower-quality education, evidenced by the high drop-out and failure rates. The rates of absolute illiteracy have dropped but functional illiteracy rates have risen as a direct consequence of the failure of basic education. Today in Latin America, a high percentage of youth and adults, about 50%, are unable to complete primary school. This is the target audience of post-literacy programs.

Post-literacy as part of full literacy

Some years ago, "post" meant that literacy as such was limited to the mechanical practice of deciphering, to the learning of letters, words and simple phrases. Contact with real texts and the development of specific knowledge was to occur at a later stage.

Over the last few years, researchers in the fields of psychology and linguistics applied to education have criticised this view of literacy, showing that learning to read and write involves, from the start, much more than the

simple deciphering of letters and sounds. Deciphering is always a search for meaning and depends in large measure on prior information on a subject, medium, genre, etc. From the beginning, the researchers say, learning to read and write should be done on the basis of significant, informative and literary texts, emphasising the functional nature of writing.

The separation of an initial stage of learning the codes of reading and writing (literacy) from a second stage that makes the initial learning significant (post-literacy) is being overcome. Now the aim is to give meaning to literacy from the beginning, carrying out a much more thorough educational action affecting a range of the attitudes, existing knowledge and skills, the wishes and values of each newly-literate person. The focus changes from the methodologies and cumulative stages defined by them to epistemology, that is, to the way the learning process occurs, the meaning of learning from the learner's standpoint.

In a more philosophical approach, Paulo Freire - the renowned educator - had already eroded this differentiation between a mechanical introduction to the written code and a period of post-literacy training oriented to the functions of literacy. When he formulated the thesis that "reading the world precedes reading the word," Paulo Freire proposed that culture circles - the name given to his literacy groups - begin the process by "reading the world," knowing and interpreting the situation in which the word would be written.

Post-literacy and culture

Leaving aside this more traditional and erroneous distinction between literacy and post-literacy, a process of full literacy can still be considered to have two stages. In the first, the learner spends considerable energy discovering the relationship between letters and sounds and depends a great deal on the help of the literacy worker to read and produce meaningful texts. In the second stage, that could be called post-literacy, the learner becomes increasingly able to perform these tasks alone. In both stages, the literacy worker should bring reading and writing as close as possible to the needs and interests of the learners and ease their access to written materials that make up the universe of literate culture.

In many post-literacy programs specific materials are produced, usually brief illustrated texts aimed at new readers. When these materials avoid a stereotyped school language, they can be a valuable contribution to the literate culture of a region. But it is also important for learners to have contact with a variety of written materials

and receive advice as they gain access to newspapers, books, bulletins and other materials. In regions where these materials are not available, subscriptions and organizing people's libraries can be encouraged.

Another procedure that has been used successfully to enrich the literacy process and add to a group's literate culture is the use of texts written by the students themselves. This procedure can be a powerful instrument of communication between people in a single cultural universe as they express their own worldview; it can be an opportunity to record the memory of their experience and a means of encouraging dialogue between different cultures.

In this sense, a full literacy process, from the first stage until post-literacy, should necessarily be part of a broader process of socio-cultural development.

Post-literacy and political-cultural commitment

There remains one fundamental question that arises in many post-literacy programs: to what extent can they have quite immediate effect, improving the lives of their clientele, usually underprivileged groups? This question is related to other, economic and political variables.

We know that the economic and social exclusion to which large numbers of the Latin American population are submitted compromises the effectiveness of educational programs. Satisfaction of basic needs is limited by structural factors that education projects by themselves cannot revert. For example, the effectiveness of a post-literacy program oriented to improving of agricultural techniques is compromised by unfavorable agricultural policies; and a program oriented to participation in the urban labor market seldom produces immediate effects in a context of economic recession.

For this reason, many literacy and post-literacy programs carried out in popular education movements were oriented to the mobilization and conscientization of grass-roots groups about the need for structural transformation of society. Often ideological disputes influenced by political leaders took over learning to read and write and other specific skills.

But recently, the centrality of these skills has been recovered in post-literacy programs. Emphasis has been given once again to the instrumental dimension of being able to read and write and use other specific skills. This change came about because of deteriorating living conditions caused by economic adjustment programs to which the majority of Latin American countries were submitted, as well as the a

review of political strategies that oriented popular mobilization in past decades.

Even in the face of structural limitations, education programs for underprivileged youth and adults that seek remedial solutions are opportunities for human development, for training in job skills and the exercise of citizens' rights. Popular education can mitigate some of these groups' disadvantages, providing a school-quality standard that meets their aspirations and basic, immediate needs. Any divergence between teaching needs (the objectives of educators) and learning needs (the objectives of the learners) should be overcome with the development of the schooling process.

Worsening poverty and social exclusion makes the failure of the hegemonic development model obvious, and we must commit ourselves to searching for structural solutions. The situation also demands an ethical commitment to action in solidarity to serve those rejected by the system. The great challenge posed now to educators that work with post-literacy of youth and adults in Latin America is to keep our balance dynamically and competently between the search and the action in solidarity.

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