

“But Is It Education?”
The Challenge of Creating Effective Learning for Survivors of Trauma
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Introduction

Women often start literacy programs with a desperate hope to finally improve their education and begin to make essential changes in their lives. Some, who live with daily domestic violence, may believe that literacy or a better education will be a first step towards finding a paid job and escape. Others may hope to "heal" through pursuing their education<<1>>. However, unacknowledged impacts of trauma on their learning may mean learners get only a chance to fail, to falsely confirm to themselves that they really cannot learn. This pattern leads learners and educators alike to become frustrated with the lack of possibilities for educational success or other fundamental change.

This paper introduces research<<2>> I carried out from 1996 to 1999, looking at the impact of violence on women's literacy learning and program participation in order to develop approaches to literacy work which will assist women to learn (1997, 1998, 1999/2000). The research included individual interviews and focus groups with literacy workers, literacy learners, therapists, counsellors, and staff of various organizations in five Canadian regions: British Columbia, the Prairies, Central Canada, Atlantic Canada and the North. Key questions for participants were: What impacts of violence do you see in your literacy program/your work? How can/should literacy programs address these impacts of violence? During workshops, presentations, and an online seminar, literacy workers and others (from the U.S., Australia, Europe, Asia, and Africa, as well as Canada) commented on my early writing and thinking, adding voices and honing the analysis I was beginning to develop (Alphaplus, 1998).

Because I hoped my research would lead to changes in practice, I followed the first study with one<<3>> focussed on what supports and what hinders making change in literacy programs to more fully support learning for all women, and in particular, those who have experienced violence. In a collaborative process with literacy organizations in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and New England, we sought to explore the discourses which support and limit possibilities for change (Heald & Horsman, 2000; Horsman, 2001; Morrish, Horsman & Hofer, 2002). In the face of objections voiced as we spoke about addressing issues of violence as part of education, we wanted to understand more about the discourses which create different understandings of literacy work. Influenced by particular forms of poststructural theory (Weedon, 1987) I was interested in examining discourses as a tool to get outside a focus on what is "right." Instead, I wanted to examine how certain discourses - both language and practices - open and close possibilities for re-conceptualizing adult literacy work to support learning for all.

Dominant discourses shape what we understand to be "proper" literacy work and education and impede program changes that might support learning for those who have experienced violence. Discourses about violence and education seem key in shaping what "we" – literacy learners, teachers, administrators, researchers, policy makers and funders - take for granted about education, students, and teachers. These discourses shape policy, expectations and whether resources are deemed essential or unnecessary. For example, if we "know" that education is not therapy and that dealing with the self and emotions is matter for therapy sessions, not the

classroom, then we see no need to learn anything about counselling. Counselling, in this frame, is not part of the work of a teacher. When dominant discourses have the force of government behind them; when they inform work practices, reporting processes, and structure funding, they are hard to resist.

In literacy, the dominant discourses limit recognition of the extent of violence and the effects of violence on learning. The impact of violence is traditionally seen as separate from education, and viewed as a matter for therapeutic interventions. As a result, though many literacy workers hear repeated accounts from students of current or past violence, there are few venues to talk about these issues and how best to respond. Although little is written or spoken about the links between violence and literacy, anecdotal accounts of literacy workers suggest that frequently all, or most, students in a class have experienced sexual or physical abuse as children and many have continued to experience violence as adults (Horsman 1999/2000).

People often ask me about the statistics, but I chose not to focus on the statistical question in my research. For me, the most pressing question is not how many literacy learners have experienced trauma but how literacy programs can teach most effectively. Statistics Canada (1998) states that: “51 per cent of Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence (as defined by the Criminal Code of Canada) since the age of sixteen. 25 percent of all women have experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of a marital or common-law partner.”<<4>> Even if the numbers of women in literacy programs who have experienced violence only match the general population, we still need to know how to carry out literacy work in ways which are inclusive and effective for women who have survived trauma. We have to assume that every educational class will include at least some with this experience.

Violence and Learning

It is particularly important to look at the impact of violence on learning in the area of literacy. This is not simply because there may be extremely large numbers of adult literacy learners who have experienced trauma, but also because literacy learning is likely to work as a strong trigger for memories of violence. Literacy learners who have experienced violence in childhood, in the home or at school, can find that the horrors of their childhood are brought back to the present when they return to the classroom and try to improve their reading - something they first learnt in childhood. Literacy learning may be the first return to a school-like situation for many learners, and that, in itself, may be terrifying and lead to panic. As well as the direct impact on attempts to learn, literacy workers and counsellors talked about the importance of recognizing self-inflicted violence, threats of suicide, and suicide attempts as legacies of childhood violence which may be firmly intertwined with the terror of attempting to learn and change as an adult.

Literacy workers described a range of violence they had seen or heard about in their classrooms, and spoke of feeling “inept” as they wondered how to respond in ways that would support learners and learning. Learners are often abused and controlled from all sides, by husbands, children, landlords, bureaucrats and program deliverers. Deaf students and those with intellectual disabilities are particularly vulnerable to abuse by those they depend on (Ticoll and Panitch, 1993). Literacy learners from outside Canada may have fled their homelands because of war, oppression, imprisonment or torture. When women try to escape violent situations they may often experience greater danger, leaving situations of public violence only to become more

trapped in “private” domestic violence (Dosanjh, Deo, & Sidhu, 1994), taking on education only to be stalked and increasingly subjected to violence, leaving an abuser only to be mired in increased poverty, bureaucratic nightmares, and at greater danger from the abusive spouse. For some, the classroom may be the only safe place they experience; for others, it too may be dangerous, as they are exposed to harassment and put-downs by other students, teachers, or family members.

In addition to instances of individual experiences of violence, few adults with limited literacy skills will have avoided the violence of oppression and marginalization around issues of poverty, class, race, ability, and language. The more I looked at the violence experienced by a broad range of women, the more I saw intertwining contexts of racism, ableism, classism, homophobia and ageism as integral to how individual abuse is experienced. These systemic injustices create specific forms of violence that add to the oppression of sexual, physical and emotional abuse for many women. Historical violence, such as slavery, colonialism and genocide, continues its legacy into the present, providing a backdrop to further violence. First Nations students bring the legacy of Residential schooling with them to their learning, even those who did not experience it directly. Most adult literacy students will have experienced daily put-downs and erasures that oppress and contribute to a well of anger and frustration. When I refer to violence, I want to encapsulate the complex interconnection of all types of violence and include a recognition of the power of systemic violence to shame, silence and exclude. This whole range of violence in learners’ lives is vividly present in the classroom, affecting the possibilities of successful learning for large numbers of students.

Literacy, But Not Only Literacy...

Although literacy learning is an acute example of problems that occur whenever people try to learn and teach, it is not the only learning where the experience of violence creates an impact. My research also included Adult Basic Education (ABE), upgrading and job-readiness teachers, teachers of English to speakers of other languages and, unintentionally, university and college instructors and staff. During the online seminar, Mary J. Breen described the demands:

...all teachers deal with violence in their work because violence is an issue for everyone in this culture. For many people, a teacher is the only outside person they can talk with. I think of a good friend of mine who teaches in a community college. In any typical week, he hears stories... My reason for stressing [this] is that I often hear people speak of the poor in terms of the violent, disruptive lives they lead - as if domestic assault and sexual abuse were issues only pertinent to “them” not “us”... (Alphaplus Literacy & Violence Online Seminar, February-April, 1998)

Unless the everyday presence of violence is acknowledged, teachers can only question how to teach and respond adequately, as a university professor explained:

What happens usually is that students will come and talk to me, so there's usually an increase in disclosures after a classroom discussion or lecture dealing with a topic such as colonization, structural violence, patriarchy etc. I'm not a counsellor. I can listen and I can suggest where people can go for help, but beyond that I can't counsel. I often end up wondering how I can best deal with this. (Personal correspondence, July 1999)

Not all instructors will experience disclosures in this way. Many may not be perceived as trustworthy or approachable and may never know why students do poorly in their course, leave a class with no explanation, miss classes frequently, or drop out entirely. One college librarian spoke of numerous students who tell her their stories when they retreat to the library fleeing a class that disturbs them and leaves them unable to stay.<<5>> Another online participant, Kathryn Alexander, a university tutor, explained:

I feel that the trajectory of violence and literacy has been a theme in many students' lives - even if they are able to succeed and go on to university - it still affects them - mainly I have heard and experienced stories from women who are searching for means to make sense of their experience of abuse and survival in their own education - choosing certain areas for study - and then struggling with the institutional structures that may in fact mirror back the violence/disrespect/control/or discrimination they have survived. (Alphaplus Literacy & Violence Online Seminar, February-April, 1998)

Unless education at all levels acknowledges the violence in the lives of women and children and its impact on learning, many students will not only fail to learn, but may also experience the educational setting as a silencing place, or another site of violence, where they are controlled, diminished and shamed by institutional structures or classroom interactions.

Breaking the Silence

The aftermath of violence is most often spoken about in medical terms. This approach leads to a focus on the diagnosis of an ailment, and a frame in which “normal” students can cope with the education system. Those who cannot cope must have something wrong with them and should be referred elsewhere for "help." They need to change, not the education system. To continue to maintain silence about the extent of violence in society and to understand their experience in terms of pathology and ill-health is to fail learners.

The experience of trauma cannot be framed as “abnormal” and individualized. In light of the statistics on the numbers of women and men who experience violence in this society, what is “normal” is at least questionable. Is it normal to experience trauma or to live a life free from such experience? The fragmented view, which considers different types of violence – child abuse, domestic violence, rape, torture, war - separately, and obscures the role played by racism, ableism, classism and other forms of systemic discrimination, disguises the enormity that might be visible if we viewed all forms of violence together. Framing trauma as outside “normal” helps to preserve silence about individual acts of violence and their aftermath. Focusing on re-conceptualizing the impact of violence, shifting from private, individualizing, medical approaches to a public recognition of all forms of violence and their effects on learning, can serve to change our awareness of violence and its impact. It is important that educators do not preserve the myth that violence is not "normal," or pressure students to get over it and to return to “normal.”

In literacy programming, we must recognize the effects of trauma and create opportunities that are viable for learners who are “familiar with trauma,” enabling them to learn while they continue to “live beside the violation.”<<6>> Seeing survivors of trauma as canaries in the mine<<7>> who offer a warning that the levels of violence in society are toxic to us all, reminds us that it is not they who must return to “normal” and accept future possibilities of violence, but society which must change. With this understanding, survivors - whether learners or teachers - can honour their

experience of trauma and its impacts on the self, rather than seeking to deny and hide them. We should design literacy programming that supports learners to value themselves and the increased sensitivities that living with trauma brings. From that place of strength, they will be better able to develop their literacy skills.

Silence is not neutral. In literacy programming, we cannot take refuge in silence about trauma. The common suggestion, that it is wiser not to open up talk about violence, operates on the assumption that doing nothing is safer, but silence gives a message of complicity with the dominant messages of society that condone violence. Information posters and pamphlets, reading materials and workshops for students and teachers, ground rules about violence, and responding clearly to evidence of violence and to the pressure on students and teachers to “get over it,” can all break the silence.<<8>>

Beyond Appearing “Normal”: “Hidden” Impacts of Trauma

It is not possible to remove the impact of trauma from literacy programs, nor perhaps to remove it from any educational setting. There is nowhere that is free from violence, nowhere to retreat for “healing.” Even learners who have already worked or are concurrently working therapeutically on their trauma issues still bring their trauma issues along when they come to class. A comment by Evelyn Battell, an adult basic education instructor in a community college, illustrates this:

She thought she pretty much had sorted out her childhood but math has brought it back BIG TIME. She is going to keep a journal - she’s very articulate and observing. We are talking a lot as she struggles but the struggle is really extreme and I’m worried.... (Personal correspondence, 1997)

If we do not recognize that trauma issues are present in the classroom, and that instructors’ actions can help or hinder learners’ processes, we leave learners and educators isolated and unsupported. Evelyn Battell continues:

When she arrived she couldn’t feel her lower extremities at all. A couple of times through the test she was having trouble breathing. I did everything I could - let her talk about it - gave her help with the questions to make it more like a class and not a test, etc., etc. but she was determined to go on with it. Finally she quit and left - she was okay I think - I urged her to figure out how to care for herself in the afternoon. (Personal correspondence, 1997)

Impacts of trauma may often be present, but invisible, in the classroom. This particular student, for example, might have felt stupid and ashamed at missing the test and feeling unable to sit through it. An instructor who had no other possible explanation, might, without opening up talk about what is going on for the learner, simply assume the student is not “serious” and not “motivated.”

Impacts of trauma I heard about from therapists, counsellors and literacy workers led me to an exploration of what these impacts might mean in the classroom and to an examination of new possibilities for literacy practice. For example, “all or nothing” is one theme which can frame a learner’s reactions to issues of trust, boundaries and openness. Heather Bain, an Edmonton-based psychologist, talked about trauma survivors as frequently showing opposing “patterns” at the same time, moving between complete control and abdicating control, between complete trust and

no trust at all, between a defended self and no boundaries or self-protection. She spoke of women switching between extremes and having enormous difficulty with ambiguity:

All or nothing - one hundred percent or zero percent... I think it would be a really evident pattern, you may see students who do really really well for a while and then maybe do less well, but certainly they're still viable within the program, but they won't consider that they're still viable and they'll leave, because there's no middle ground, there's not a continuum, there's just that switch from I'm here and I'm doing well - to I can't cope with this, I'm failing I'm doing really really badly... (Interview, Edmonton, December, 1996)

Heather Bain suggested that it would be valuable for women to learn to find middle ground. She stressed that if one pattern is present you could expect to see the opposite also:

...there often is no middle ground and healing is partly about creating that middle ground, so I think if you see one pattern you also need to assume that the opposite is there somewhere, and it may not be played out in the moment, it may be played out next week, or it may be played out somewhere else. But the opposite is always there... (Interview, Edmonton, December, 1996)

Therapists and counsellors I interviewed also spoke of experiences of trauma leading to “dissociation.” Therapists use this term to refer to a process whereby a person who is experiencing unbearable trauma distances herself from her body in order to separate herself from the trauma. This response, developed to survive the initial trauma, can become an ongoing state into which a survivor may unconsciously slip. Heather Bain began our interview by speaking about dissociation:

I begin with dissociation because it's the big one. I work mainly with adult women and I see that adult women who've experienced trauma in their life will either use school as a way to cope, or escape. So they do really really well or else they can't cope with school at all and they drop out early, or there's big gaps and you know there's dissociation, that ability to separate and to move out of the traumatic experience and to shut that off. But what happens is that anything that reminds a kid or an adult of that experience can lead to a separation. The cues can be unnoticeable to us, or they can be really minimal... (Interview, Edmonton, December, 1996)

It is important to avoid sliding into pathologizing learners as “ill” because they dissociate, or focussing on diagnosing whether a learner is dissociating or merely “daydreaming” or distracted. I choose to focus on the nuances of presence, rather than on dissociating or absence as a problem, and to move away from a divide that posits daydreaming as a healthy, natural phenomena and dissociation as a symptom of trauma and ill-health. A focus on what constitutes presence avoids the suggestion that absence must always be problematic or has only one cause. There is no benefit in simply replacing one framework of judgement (motivation) with another framework (dissociation). Instead, new and nuanced discourses are needed, which allow us to recognize impacts of abuse and conceptualize new ways of working that neither medicalize the issues, nor preserve invisibility.

The complexity of learners’ “presence,” their lack of comfort with ambiguity, and a tendency to see everything as “all or nothing” are overarching challenges which interlock with a series of issues impinging on literacy learning. These issues include the challenges to build trust, establish boundaries, decide which stories to tell, learn to move out of crises, and assess the level of safety

in the class or group. Seeing the complexity of awareness for both workers and learners around these issues adds to an understanding of why learning to read is such a difficult and lengthy process. Where the struggles around each of these issues are carried out by the literacy learner in private (because to reveal her difficulties in these areas is to be judged “abnormal”) the energy required is compounded. Energy is needed not only to struggle with the difficulties, but also to hide the struggle. It is crucial that within the literacy program, the range of what is normal is broadened and the discourse opened up to include regular talk about the struggles that many learners have in a broad range of areas.

All learners benefit when the challenges learners face are an active part of the curriculum. These challenges include exploring what it takes to be fully present in the classroom and the knowledge gained from the times of less presence; discovering a deeper understanding of ambiguity and middle ground rather than staying with the stark contrasts of all or nothing; considering crises and how to live both in and out of crisis; examining questions of trust in terms of the possibility of trusting their own knowledge and trusting others in the class or group not to judge and put them down; learning to set boundaries and respect the boundaries of others; deciding which stories to tell when; and creating a safer place to learn.

Learning in the Context of Trauma: The Challenge of Setting Goals

The description of trauma used by Judith Herman reveals connections between literacy and trauma. Herman states that trauma is caused by events which “overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning” (Herman, 1992, p.33). Many writers have suggested that, for trauma victims, therapy should be directed at helping the survivor to regain a sense of control, connection and meaning in her life. A shift away from addressing these issues solely as aspects of individual healing and toward a focus on control, connection, and meaning in education is integral to literacy learning. Control, connection and meaning are centrally connected to the task of setting goals, a key aspect of how literacy programming is increasingly organized. Setting goals may seem a straightforward task, where simple skills can be taught to those who have difficulty. But for survivors of trauma, setting goals is far from simple. The difficulty is not skills acquisition, but a far more complex intertwining of issues requiring more nuanced learning.

Control is an important terrain for those who have experienced trauma. Common experiences are: feeling out of control, trying to regain control, not wanting to own any control, controlling in hidden manipulative ways, feeling responsible, or disowning responsibility. Seeking control, but feeling helpless and believing that control is an impossibility, is a contradictory dynamic. Being in control also entails being responsible, being blamed and blaming oneself. The complex dynamic around control is important within literacy. Many literacy programs stress “learner-centred” learning: learners designing their own individualized plan, selecting reading materials, and setting goals. Some also seek to involve learners in sharing control of the program through participating on committees or boards of directors. This “mine field” is often entered without preparation or even awareness of how complex and problematic raising control issues may be for some literacy learners as well as for some workers.

More and more in adult literacy work, identifying measurable outcomes, (or at least “observable” outcomes) and organizing learning around learners' own goals, is the dominant

discourse organizing literacy practice. It is hard to question such an approach. Who doesn't want learners to shape their goals and learn material that will help attain them? Yet for survivors of trauma, working with the complexity of control, connection and meaning, goal-setting may be a challenging, if not impossible, demand. To set goals you have to believe in the possibility of control, have at least some connection to the self, and believe that life can have meaning.

Engaging the Whole Person in Learning

Recognizing the whole person offers new potential for literacy learning. This concept came primarily from the various Canadian First Nations educators I talked to who told me about the Medicine Wheel and balance between four aspects of the person - body, mind, emotion and spirit. Aline LaFlamme, a pipe carrier I met in Yellowknife in the North West Territories, made the concept most powerfully clear when she drew the Medicine Wheel for me. Instead of a balance between the four quadrants, she drew most of the circle as the mind, two tiny "quadrants" for the body and emotions, and an even smaller section for the spirit. Her drawing illustrated the lack of balance in North American society, with the mind given far too much weight. Given that lack of balance, it is not surprising that literacy learners who are judged as not excelling in the mind often feel judged and devalued. In the literacy field we need to recognize that "healing" for individuals will be problematic if we think of healing as learning to function better in a "sick," off-balance world.

Looking at the person in terms of four aspects challenged me. Could the damage I heard about in my interviews also lead to new possibilities for literacy work? Could a focus on the body, mind, emotions and spirit become more than just addressing "damage," a process in which each aspect was fully engaged in creative learning, literacy is more fully holistic, part of "healing" not only of the individual but of the educational process?

Canadian First Nations literacy workers have created diverse holistic models appropriate to their communities. The challenge remains for other communities to develop appropriate models. Western educational systems rarely invite the whole person into the learning process. Success in this system is often gained at the cost of balance of the whole self. For those who have experienced violence and already feel fragmented, this further severance may be particularly costly. Those who have sought to create a space in literacy programs to draw the whole self into the learning process are supported to do so when they are able to find a space outside the discourses of "proper teaching" and "acceptable outcomes." These new teaching models have often led to effective learning and exceptional achievement of even the expected outcomes (Horsman, 2000; 2001).

In New England, each program spent some time and money on creating a physical space that showed women they were respected and valued, providing beauty and nurturing food and music. The freedom of project funding allowed them to see that transforming the physical space transformed the "inner spiritual space" of the women. Workers described flowers as a "metaphor for [students'] own growth, their own lives" and students spoke of flowers giving them hope. The opportunity to create change in this way allowed the workers and the students some "space" outside the everyday experience of violence; space, workers suggested, for the "possibility of hope" (Morrish, Horsman & Hofer, 2002).

Literacy workers who have taken part in special projects talked glowingly about the

possibility created for exploring the unknown and launching into unlikely experiments. Funding can pay for and legitimize talk about new possibilities, support new collaborations, enable a focus on creating beauty in the classroom, and make it possible to try out new curriculum such as learning about learning, self-empowerment, writing and creative arts. Although individual teachers and programs can explore interesting new possibilities alone, funding may be crucial to support the development of publications, networks and greater visibility so that new models can demonstrate the “success” of shifting what counts in education and provide a basis for challenging policy.

Examining the Costs of Bearing Witness

Literacy workers experience an enormous number of challenges in their work. Contradictory pressures in relation to violence silence talk about the extent of violence workers and learners experience, while at the same time leading many workers to believe they should be able to listen to anything learners want to share, provide exhaustive support to learners and successfully teach everyone to read in record time. Women working in literacy bear witness to the violence in learners’ lives. Sometimes they also experience an increased threat of violence in their own lives, because of their role creating a safer space for literacy learning. Many literacy workers feel they have little option but to hear disclosures of violence when learners ask. They also frequently struggle with feeling that what they offer is inadequate. Literacy workers spoke about how rarely the many dimensions of issues of violence were discussed in their programs or local networks. Yet even the possibility of taking up these issues in networks and programs will create more work for literacy workers themselves. Whether or not workers are experienced at setting boundaries, there is a cost to themselves and a limit to what else they can take on in their lives as a consequence of their work in literacy.

Educators bring their own histories to the classroom. There is pressure for literacy workers and other educators to have “dealt with” whatever violence they may have experienced, parallel to the pressure on learners to go away and heal elsewhere if violence is getting in the way of their learning. This makes it unacceptable for literacy workers to be “triggered,” and encourages them to avoid opening issues of violence for fear of raising their own issues.

Educators need a wide variety of places to talk to address these issues. They need peer support and supervision and far greater recognition of the cost of the work they do. They need support and encouragement to recognize their own needs and look after themselves carefully in the face of the widespread presence of violence in their students' and their own lives, and the impact on learning that is inevitably present in the classroom.

Bridging the Divide between Literacy and Therapy

Traditionally, education and therapy are seen as entirely separate. Frequently, however, educators, especially literacy workers, are called upon to carry out a counselling role, though many feel unprepared and unclear about whether they should. If they do, they take on the work illicitly, without resources, office space, supports, or time, and with the risk of being blamed for “crossing the line” into therapy. Institutions benefit from this unpaid, unacknowledged work, while teachers risk being framed as the problem.

There is tension between the benefit of clarity about boundaries between therapy and literacy and recognizing that the division between the two fields is arbitrary and unreal. Creating a variety of bridges between the two disciplines, and making therapy and counselling more visible within literacy programs, disrupts the frame that implies impacts of trauma are only to be addressed in isolation between a woman and her therapist, and the illusion that the impact of violence can be removed from education. It is important both to recognize the value of individual therapy, and to move away from assumptions that a woman should go away and heal and come back to literacy when she is “better.”

Currently, few programs explore the creative links they might be able to generate with outside counselling programs, counselling departments in their institution, or other healing arts. Programs could build greater visibility and more creative alternatives for learners getting counselling support. Programs need to assess what services are available in their community, and consider what capacity is needed within the programs to make good links and provide solid support for learners in their program, who are also seeking counselling. Project funding can create the time and space to explore new discourses and practices which build connections and collaborations with therapists and healers, and integrate the creative arts into learning opportunities. Instead of trying to draw a line dividing these areas of work, literacy workers need to be able to explore drawing links in work that is connected within each person, and imagine new programming and new collaborations to support both students and workers to take up issues of violence and learning (Morrish, Horsman & Hofer, 2002).

Conclusion

This research challenges the literacy and wider educational field to break silences about violence in a myriad of ways. We must create new curriculum and discover new ways of working that normalize the challenges many literacy learners bring to their learning (and educators to their teaching). We must recognize the complexity of the demands made in literacy work and provide innovative supports for learners to explore control, connection and meaning, to learn to set goals and imagine possible change in their lives. Holistic programming, which offers exciting ways forward, needs to be recognized as a legitimate part of education. Workers need a variety of supports if they are to nurture themselves, work supportively with learners, create new options for programming, repeatedly break the silence about the violence in women’s lives and make the links between the aftermath of trauma and difficulties with learning. The creation of links between literacy organizations and organizations offering counselling could support learners’ and educators’ access to counselling and bring about program models that do not exclude issues of trauma from learning.

Within literacy learning, there is potential to move away from diagnostic models which pathologize those who have experienced trauma and instead, to support all literacy learners in learning, claiming their power and questioning the concept of “normal life.” Change is already occurring in many individual literacy programs.<<9>> As new discourses become more broadly recognized, the question remains whether the literacy movement will be able to build on these discourses, to develop diverse possibilities for teaching all students in ways that recognize the widespread nature of violence and the impact of violence on learning.

Notes

In this short paper I cannot list the names of the many people who spent time talking to me in both research studies, and in workshops and online discussions, or all the people and organizations that supported the research process in diverse ways. I can only offer a collective thank you to the many people whose wisdom contributed to the ideas and analysis on these pages.

Endnotes

1 This may be particularly true of students in women's studies who hope to find a safe place to explore issues in their lives (Rundle & Ysabet-Scott, 1995).

2 The research was funded by the National Literacy Secretariat of Human Resources Development Canada and sponsored by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW).

3 This study was carried out with Susan Heald, University of Manitoba, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the National Literacy Secretariat of Human Resources Development Canada, Valuing Literacy in Canada. Literacy organizations in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and New England were partners in the study.

4 In addition The Badgley Report (1984) concluded “approximately 54 percent of the females under the age of 18 have been sexually assaulted. The definition of sexual assault here is sexual activity ranging from unwanted touching and threats of unwanted touching to rape causing bodily harm.” “Badgley also showed that about 31 percent of the males of all ages have been sexually assaulted. The majority of these males were under 21 when the first assault took place.” (Mitchell, 1985 p.88).

5 Many autobiographical writings provide vivid accounts of women's experiences in school or college classrooms when past or present violence impinges on learning (Eg. Nyquist, 1998; Rundle & Ysabet-Scott, 1995). Two special issues of Women's Education also contain many articles (1994, 1992).

6 These concepts were articulated by Tanya Lewis as part of her thesis defence - I thank her for the tremendous insight of such metaphors for enabling a vision of something outside the all-pervasive imagery of a journey towards health. Her thesis is available as a book (Lewis, 1999).

7 Thanks to Susan Heald not only for this concept of canaries in the mine, but also for many lengthy discussions which have supported my analysis.

8 Educators often fear that recognizing the impact of violence on learning, and naming violence, will open up detailed stories of violence. When there is acceptance that violence is present, counselling supports are available, students realize they would find it hard to hear accounts of violence from each other, most students prefer to limit what they share.

9 For example, in New England workers in a variety of programs have been exploring change as part of World Education's Women, Violence and Adult Education project (Morrish, Horsman & Hofer, 2002). In Alberta (under the auspices of Literacy Alberta) a similar project is taking place where literacy workers are studying the issues and trying out research in practice projects. In Ontario, Parkdale Project Read continues to explore how to respond to the needs of those who have experienced violence to strengthen all aspects of the program for all students (Parkdale Project Read, 2003).

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