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Four Puzzles in Adult Literacy: Reflections on the National Adult Literacy Survey

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Four puzzles in adult literacy: Reflections on the National Adult Literacy Survey

The National Adult Literacy Survey (1992) and subsequent studies provide a rich but puzzling picture of adult literacy in the United States. This article examines these puzzling results that do not seem to fit expectations.

The 1990s might be nominated as the “Adult Literacy Decade” if we were to look at the statements of state and federal government in the United States. In the past 7 years, representatives of state and federal governments have repeatedly expressed a commitment to improve the literacy skills of American adults. In 1990, for instance, the National Governors’ Association identified adult literacy as one of six key areas for improvement during the decade. In 1991, Congress passed the National Literacy Act, designed “to enhance the literacy and basic skills of adults, to ensure that all adults in the United States acquire the basic skills necessary to function effectively and achieve the greatest possible opportunity in their work and in their lives, and to strengthen and coordinate adult literacy programs” (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993, p. xi).

In 1996, President Clinton launched the America Reads Challenge, designed to improve the reading abilities of children. To support that effort, the Parents as First Teachers Grants will award US$300 million over 5 years to encourage literacy in the home. In doing so, the grant program complements the efforts of “family literacy” programs throughout the U.S.

Some skepticism about this professed commitment may, in fact, be warranted. Basic literacy instruction for adults remains a largely piecemeal enterprise, provided by a variety of state and federal initiatives, workplace programs, and volunteer literacy associations. Furthermore, some recent efforts in adult literacy reflect a narrow
conception of literacy, seeing it primarily as a vehicle for economic advancement. Such economic attainment would seem to be essential—for individual adult learners and for the nation—yet it is not the only reason to improve literacy skills. Adult literacy students come to literacy instruction with a wide range of goals: to get or to advance in a job; to help their children succeed in school; to take on greater responsibilities in their church or community; to have access to higher education; to read and write for pleasure. When funding for literacy education accentuates a single dimension of literacy, such as economic advancement, we risk developing literacy programs and curricula that sell short adult learners' needs and potential.

**National Adult Literacy Survey parameters**

Nevertheless, the recent interest in adult literacy has produced some real benefits, one of the most notable being the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS). Commissioned by the United States Congress and conducted by the Educational Testing Service in 1992, the NALS is the largest assessment to date of the literacy skills of U.S. adults. The survey, which involved over 26,000 adults (including more than 1,100 inmates in state and federal prisons) gives the United States a picture of how well adults can understand and use information from a wide range of printed sources typical of those that adults encounter at home and at work.

The survey defined literacy broadly, describing it as the ability to “use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential” (Kirsch et al., 1993, p. 2). Guided by that definition, the NALS assessed respondents' literacy skills on three scales: prose literacy, the ability to understand and use information from articles, consumer brochures, and fiction; document literacy, the ability to locate and use information from charts and forms; and quantitative literacy, the ability to solve practical problems in arithmetic. Each of these scales was divided into five levels, with Level 1 being the lowest, with scores of 0–225, and Level 5 the highest, with scores of 376–500.

Even 4 years after the first results of the NALS were released, the study continues to offer a rich—and occasionally puzzling—picture of adult literacy in the United States. That picture has been supplemented in the intervening years by other research and additional assessments of literacy, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Campbell, Reese, O'Sullivan, & Dossey, 1996; Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue, 1997) and the International Adult Literacy Survey (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Nevertheless, several puzzles remain. Survey data reveal, for instance, that despite significant public expenditures on education, there are greater disparities in adult literacy levels in the United States than in many other countries. Moreover, a large portion of those with the most limited literacy skills report that they read and write well. This high level of satisfaction among those with limited skills may affect the efforts of literacy programs to attract and retain learners.

Although literacy campaigns often suggest that increased literacy leads to improved economic well-being, the NALS data show that literacy instruction, by itself, may be insufficient to help those with the most limited skills get out of poverty or off welfare. It is evident that we need to develop effective programs for low-income, low-literate women, who have traditionally been poorly served by educational institutions and who now face special pressure to find employment as state and federal aid for the poor is reduced. This article will examine these four puzzles in detail and consider their implications for literacy programs and policy.

**Extremes of literacy**

In 1994 the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was undertaken to assess adult literacy in seven countries in Europe and North America (Canada, Germany, The Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States). Using the framework developed in the NALS, the International Adult Literacy Survey assessed the prose, document, and quantitative literacy skills of approximately 1,700 adults in each nation. As in the NALS, scores in each area were divided into five levels, from the lowest, Level 1, to the highest, Level 5.

In comparing the literacy skills of adults in the United States with those of adults in other nations, we find that
compared to most of the other countries assessed in 1994, the United States had a greater concentration of adults who scored at the lowest levels [italics added] across the prose, document, and quantitative literacy domains. However, the United States had one of the highest concentrations of adults who scored at or above Level 4 [italics added] on the prose scale. (U.S. Department of Education, 1997, p. 1)

In other words, although the United States by most measures is the richest and most technologically advanced nation of those surveyed, its adult citizens are more likely to read and use information poorly than are adults in any of the other nations surveyed except Poland. (By comparison, Sweden, whose citizens scored highest on each of the three scales, had just over a third as many adults scoring at Level 1 as did the United States.) At the same time, a higher proportion of American adults can read in sophisticated ways—integrating and synthesizing information from complex passages—than in most of the other countries surveyed. Overall, the ability to use printed information effectively is more unevenly distributed in the United States than in any other country surveyed.

Granted, as David Berliner (1996) points out, tests, even well-designed ones like the NALS and IALS, are likely to underestimate literacy skills. Such tests, Berliner argues, reveal individuals’ “typical” literacy skills; only real tasks, in which individuals need to read and write to accomplish purposes important to them, are likely to reveal what Berliner calls their “maximum literacy skills” (pp. 344–345). Such differences between maximum and typical literacy skills, however, are likely to affect respondents in all the countries in this survey. They do not account for the higher percentage of adults with very limited literacy skills in the United States.

One factor that does contribute to the large number of adults scoring in Level 1 is that the United States has a higher proportion of immigrants than do the other countries surveyed. Since many of these immigrants do not speak English as their native language, their scores on a test of literacy in English can be expected to be low. Indeed, the NALS found that native-born adults outscored their immigrant counterparts in almost every category—hardly a surprising result since the test assessed literacy in English only. Nevertheless, immigration does not account for the largest part of the scores in Level 1. In fact, only 25% of those who scored in Level 1 were born outside the United States (Kirsch et al., 1993, p. 18), including some in English-speaking countries. The remaining 75% of those in Level 1 were born in the United States.

The disproportionate number of adults with severely limited literacy scores raises troubling questions about equality of education in the United States. While the United States invests a higher proportion of its Gross Domestic Product than do many other nations (U.S. Department of Education, 1996, p. 158), spending on public education is uneven. Schools in the wealthiest school districts provide, on average, 36% more revenue per student than do schools in the poorest districts (U.S. Department of Education, 1995, Indicator 53). Even when that figure is adjusted to account for the higher cost of living (and higher expenses) in wealthy areas, the difference remains a substantial 16%. This increased funding compounds the advantages that children in wealthy districts bring with them to school.

Conversely, school districts in which more than a quarter of the children live in poverty receive 20% less money per student than do districts in which less than 5% of the children are poor, even after adjustments for the cost of living (U.S. Department of Education, 1995, Indicator 53). As The Condition of Education, 1995 (U.S. Department of Education) points out, “districts with high percentages of disabled, limited-English-proficient, and poor children may have to raise more revenue to provide education comparable to those in districts” where fewer children suffer these disadvantages (Indicator 53). Instead, students who come to
school with the greatest needs receive less, not more, than their more advantaged counterparts.

The disadvantages in funding that poor school districts face are likely to account, in part, for the surprisingly large number of adult Americans with limited abilities to read and use information. Many of those with limited literacy skills have, in fact, spent many years in public schools. Sixty-four percent of those who scored in Level 1 on prose literacy had at least 9 years of education (Kirsch et al., 1993, p. 116). In fact, 26% of those in Level 1 had obtained a high school diploma or its equivalent, and another 12% had attended or graduated from college (p. 116).

The limited literacy skills of those who have spent years in school suggests, among other things, that some schools do not receive the funds needed to provide students with an adequate education. As Americans consider how to respond to the disparities in resources—and to the court challenges they have inspired—we might do well to remember President Franklin Roosevelt's exhortation more than 50 years ago: "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little." Poor children in schools that receive less than average revenue may indeed be those who have "too little."

Performance and perception

The National Adult Literacy Survey also revealed an apparent gap between "performance and perception" in literacy skills (Kirsch et al., 1993, p. 20). Even among adults with the most limited literacy skills, most reported that they were satisfied with their abilities. In fact, of the 40 to 44 million adults who performed in Level 1 on the prose scale, only 29 percent said that they did not read English well and 34 percent said they did not write English well. Similarly, on the document scale, 25 percent of the adults who performed in Level 1 reported having limited reading skills and 30 percent reported having limited writing skills. On the quantitative scale, 26 percent of the respondents in Level 1 reported not being able to read well and 30 percent said that they did not write well. (Kirsch et al., 1993, p. 20)

This gap is even more evident among those who receive public assistance. Using data from the NALS, Barton and Jenkins (1995) report that 88% of those receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or welfare, and 87% of those receiving food stamps, reported that they read English "well" or "very well." Yet the average score of AFDC recipients who said that they read well or very well was only 255, mid-Level 2, and the average score of the corresponding food stamps recipients was 250, also mid-Level 2. By contrast AFDC and food stamps recipients who reported that they read English "not well" or "not at all" scored 153 and 140, respectively, scores that place them in Level 1 (p. 32).

For most of those who read and write with ease, these data are puzzling. Level 1 literacy tasks seem rudimentary. For example, they required adults to locate a piece of information in a short, uncomplicated newspaper article or to total two numbers on a bank deposit slip. Some of the adults whose scores placed them in Level 1 did these tasks with difficulty or without success.

Respondents were also asked about the amount of help that they typically received from family or friends on everyday literacy tasks. Twenty-three percent of those in Level 1 said that they got "a lot" of help reading printed information; 25% said that they got "a lot" of help filling out forms (Kirsch et al., 1993, p. 21). By contrast, those in Level 2 reported seeking help at less than half that rate. We might take these figures to mean that about a quarter of those with scores in Level 1—or about 10 million Americans—frequently find their skills inadequate for the tasks they undertake.

Such an interpretation, however, may be misleading. Arlene Fingeret, former Director of Literacy South, who has worked for years in community literacy projects, observes that

all adults participate in a community of close friends, family members, neighbors, and sometimes coworkers.... Nonreading adults find assistance with reading and writing tasks from members of their communities, and they in turn offer help with other tasks or information.... When this exchange process is viewed as mutually beneficial, nonreading adults see themselves as contributing members of their communities. (Fingeret, 1980, p. 11)
Taken together, the findings of satisfaction and assistance suggest that most adults with the lowest literacy scores consider their skills adequate and get help, when needed, with more challenging literacy tasks. If that is so, we may wonder whether the need for basic literacy instruction is smaller than it initially appears. More fundamentally, is it presumptuous to conclude that those with limited literacy skills need to improve them? Discussing functional literacy, de Castell and Luke (1983), for example, ask, “Is it in the interests of the literate individual to become ‘functional’ within any and every economic and political circumstance?” (p. 175).

Certainly Heath (1983, 1988), Freire (1972), Freire and Macedo (1987), Fingeret (1988, 1989), and others have helped us recognize that many adults with limited literacy skills nevertheless interact with printed information frequently and in complex ways. These literacy skills have often been overlooked or dismissed, Heath (1988) argues, since they may “contradict such traditional expectations of literacy as those taught in school or in job training programs” (p. 351). At the same time, Harman and Edelsky (1989) observe that increases in literacy often come at a cost: The learner may feel estranged from his or her own community and yet not fully accepted in the larger, literate society.

These arguments should make us cautious about assuming that literacy can be imported into communities without attention to the existing ways of managing printed information, or even that literacy is necessarily beneficial to those communities. At the same time, it would be reckless, and possibly self-serving, for those with education and power to use findings on satisfaction and assistance to suggest that many of those with the most limited literacy skills do not need the opportunity to increase their skills.

Adults who are satisfied with low literacy skills may be unfamiliar with what they could accomplish with more sophisticated skills, particularly if many of their family members or associates have similarly limited skills. This problem is particularly acute in the inner cities whose inhabitants are increasingly isolated from the towns and suburbs that surround them. To argue that literacy programs can—and even should—present learners with new possibilities for reading and writing is not to dismiss the competencies that these adults bring with them. Clearly, literacy programs can respect the dignity, intelligence, and varied experiences of learners (Fingeret, 1989, pp. 9–10). At the same time, literacy programs can change learners’ expectations for literacy. In fact, Freire and Macedo (1987) argue that literacy programs “must [italics added] help learners get involved in planning education, help them create the critical capacity to consider and participate in the direction and dreams of education” (p. 139).

**Literacy and income**

Findings about literacy rates and income reveal a third puzzle in adult literacy. There is, in general, a strong relationship between literacy and economic status. Approximately 43% of those scoring in Level 1 lived in poverty; only 4% to 6% of those scoring in Level 5 did. Among adults as a whole, income increased consistently as literacy skills increased (Kirsch et al., 1993, pp. 60–61). In fact, all measures of economic success—rate of full-time employment, number of weeks worked, weekly earnings, and interest earned from savings accounts—increased as literacy skills increased (pp. 61–65). Differences in occupational status follow a similar pattern. The majority (65%–70%) of those with literacy scores in Level 5 reported holding managerial, professional, or technical jobs; only 5% to 6% of those in Level 1 reported holding similar positions. Most adults with literacy scores in Level 1 who hold jobs are employed in service industries or as craftspersons (pp. 66–67).

The NALS data show, however, that increased literacy does not always correspond with significant increases in earnings. In a report on the literacy skills of welfare recipients based on data from the NALS, Barton and Jenkins (1995) observe that substantial income disparities are found between welfare recipients and adults in the general population who performed at the same literacy level. The wage differences between the welfare populations and the general populations are so large, in fact, that welfare recipients who performed in the fourth level of prose literacy earned less, on average, than adults in the general population who performed in the lowest level. [italics added] (p. 52)

More detailed figures from their report illuminate these differences in the relationship between literacy and income. Adults in the general popula-
tion with Level 1 prose literacy scores reported earning, on average, US$15,480 in 1991. The annual income of food stamps recipients with the same literacy skills was about half that much (US$7,740); that of AFDC recipients slightly more (US$8,520). While earnings rose as literacy skills increased for both AFDC and food stamps recipients, the rate of increase among welfare recipients was far below that in the general population. For instance, among adults in general, those with Level 4 prose literacy skills earned approximately US$50,000 more than those with Level 1 skills. Among AFDC recipients, the difference was only US$7,000 (Barton & Jenkins, 1995, p. 53). (Too few AFDC recipients scored in Level 5 to allow comparisons at that level.)

At first glance, these figures on literacy and income are surprising. Why, for instance, do increases in literacy skill not pay off for welfare recipients as dramatically as they do for adults in general? Why are adults with Level 4 literacy skills—who can read lengthy, complex texts and interpret various kinds of documents—on welfare at all? To answer those questions, we need to look more closely at some of our assumptions about literacy and its effects.

Certainly, some of the welfare recipients who have benefited economically from literacy instruction do not show up in these figures. Having improved their ability to read, write, and calculate, these adults were about to get jobs sufficient to support themselves. These successful learners no longer qualify for welfare. Still, as Barton and Jenkins (1995) note, “higher literacy levels appear to have a smaller payoff in the welfare population than in the general population” (p. 53).

Because literacy is generally related to higher income and expanded social opportunities, we often assume that literacy is, in itself, responsible for these advantages. This tendency to attribute enormous power to literacy and, as a result, minimize the effect of other factors is widespread. Hunter and Harman (1979) observe that literate persons often believe that it is their literacy per se that has been responsible for opening doors for them in society, conferring social status or economic success. They are inclined, therefore, to endorse literacy campaigns under the illusion that illiteracy is the cause of the poverty, ill-health, and the crime-infested neighborhoods in which they see others living. (p. 108)

These assumptions about literacy sometimes shape the ways in which literacy efforts are developed and promoted. During the 1970s, in particular, the “functional literacy” approach dominated adult basic education. It made a specific connection between increased literacy skills and increased job opportunities. As Fingeret (1988) points out, economic factors are again being highlighted in the public discussion of adult literacy. Low literacy skills are cited as a cause of both welfare dependency and the United States’ problems competing in the global marketplace.

While there is some truth in both those claims, the results of the NALS show that the relationship between literacy skill and economic advancement is not straightforward. Increased literacy in itself does not ensure that people will earn enough to support themselves. A number of other factors contribute to economic need, most notably lack of employment, discrimination, the need to care for children or elderly relatives, disabilities, and addiction.

If improved literacy skills do not always lead to significantly improved economic status, then we have to be careful in assuming that literacy training will, by itself, move people out of poverty or eliminate the need for welfare. In Literacy and Dependency, Barton and Jenkins (1995) provide probably the most complete assessment to date of literacy programs designed for welfare recipients and those with profoundly limited literacy skills. They conclude that the results of most of these programs are “not encouraging” (p. 56).

They found that “assigning women to existing adult education programs appears to have little measurable effect on raising their literacy proficiency” (p. 8). Even what they consider an exemplary program (Project GAIN in San Diego) produced increases in literacy skills, but not increases in income. They note that “raising the incomes of welfare recipients is likely to require job development and placement, child care, and other services in addition to education and training” (p. 59). These essential adjuncts to literacy instruction are, however, expensive and more difficult to promote to the public.
Women, welfare, and literacy

The final puzzle grows out of the difficulties that literacy programs have had in reaching and working effectively with low-literate women. Until recently, little attention had been given to the influence of gender on adults’ experiences with literacy. This lack of attention to gender is reflected in the analysis of the NALS data by Kirsch and colleagues (1993). Their discussion of gender—or “Results by Sex”—constitutes two short paragraphs and part of a chart in the 150-page report. By contrast, 11 pages are devoted to an analysis of the relationship between race or ethnicity and literacy. In fact, gender receives less attention in the report than either “illness, disability, and impairment” or “region” as a variable in literacy. The brevity of the treatment of gender in this report does not suggest that Kirsch and colleagues deliberately dismissed gender as an influence on literacy, still less that they were unconcerned with women’s experience in literacy. Rather it reflects an assumption that has been fairly common in research on adult literacy: that men’s and women’s experiences with education are largely similar.

The findings from the NALS, however, reveal that there are, in fact, significant differences in men’s and women’s literacy skills. While men’s and women’s scores on prose literacy are statistically equivalent, men’s average scores for both mention literacy and quantiative literacy are significantly higher than women’s (Kirsch et al., 1993, p. 46). Nationwide, about 21 million women in the United States had very limited literacy skills in 1992 (Kirsch et al., 1993).

These figures suggest that the need for effective instruction of women is large. Such instruction requires a clear understanding of the factors—economic, cultural, emotional, and intellectual—that affect women’s participation and experiences in literacy programs. At the elementary and secondary school level, considerable research has already been done on gender in education. (See, for example, Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, 1992; Winkelmann, 1996.) These studies have examined the role of gender and, more recently, the interaction of gender and class in shaping girls’ experience as learners. Yet, as Imel and Kerka (1996) point out, little attention has been given to the role of gender in adult literacy in the United States.

Recent changes in welfare regulations in the United States will make it even more important to develop effective programs for low-literate women. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 will profoundly affect millions on welfare, most of whom arc women. The law abolishes Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), replacing it with a block grant to states for temporary aid. The law requires that almost all adult aid recipients find employment within 24 months and imposes a 60-month lifetime limit on federal aid. States may impose additional restrictions.

The NALS found that most welfare recipients have sharply limited literacy skills: 34% scored in Level 1 on prose literacy: another 36% scored in Level 2. These figures suggest that many women who have previously received welfare payments will still need literacy training if they are to qualify for jobs or even job-training programs. (It is still not at all clear that a sufficient number of entry-level jobs will be available for these “graduates” of welfare, nor that these jobs will pay a living wage.) One thing is clear—those who provide literacy instruction will need to draw on research, experience, and imagination to develop successful programs for low-literate, low-income women.

There is, however, little research—and even less agreement—on the best approaches to helping women improve their literacy skills. Those who design and run literacy programs primarily for women hold divergent, even contradictory, views of the needs of learners, the goals of literacy instruction, and appropriate pedagogy. Traditionally, of course, literacy instruction has not been “gendered”—that is, it has not given explicit attention to ways in which gender shapes learners’ experience inside and outside the classroom. Attention to gender, if present at all, has usually been limited to practical concerns: providing childcare or offering classes at times when parents, especially mothers, can attend. For the most part, however, literacy programs have treated gender as largely irrelevant, or at least peripheral, to learning. Such programs, in the classroom or at the workplace, will no doubt continue to constitute a large part of literacy instruction offered in the United States. These programs, however, have not effectively served those with greatest
needs, particularly low-income women. We need, therefore, to consider new approaches.

Two new models of literacy education have emerged in the past 2 decades, influenced by developments in fields such as ethnography, psychology, and women's studies. These models give particular, although not necessarily exclusive, attention to women. The first—the family literacy approach—addresses the literacy skills of parents and children. Morrow, Tracey, and Maxwell (1995) maintain that family literacy programs recognize “the critical nature of literacy experiences and home and...the value of parental involvement in children's school experiences from early childhood through adolescence” (p. 1).

In intergenerational family literacy programs, “parents and children are viewed as co-learners.... Adults are taught how to improve their literacy skills as well as how to work with their children to foster their literacy” (Morrow et al., 1995, p. 49). Family literacy programs frequently encourage parents to read to children and teach parents “learning activities” that they can do with children at home. Programs may include classes for parents on reading, on English as a second language, and on parenting skills. (See Morrow et al., 1995, for a more complete review of family literacy projects in the United States.)

While family literacy programs are careful to address both parents as children's “first teachers,” most programs, in fact, serve primarily mothers and their young children (Cuban & Hayes, 1996). Some, such as Mothered Inc. in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Mothers' Reading Program in New York City, are explicit about their focus on women and children.

Family literacy programs are relatively well established in the United States. At the federal level, they have been supported by the Even Start program, which provides funding for literacy projects that offer “a combination of adult basic education, parenting education, and early childhood education” to participants (Morrow et al., 1995, p. 4). At the local level, they have been supported by a variety of community initiatives. Reports from individual projects show benefits for both children and parents (Morrow et al., 1995), but large-scale, reliable assessment of the approach remains to be done.

The approach has been criticized, however, as being poorly suited to meeting the real needs of low-literate, low-income women. Auerbach (1989) contends that family literacy programs are too often based on a narrow “transmission of school practices' model” (p. 169) which asks only “How can we transfer school practices into home contexts?” rather than “How can we draw on parents' knowledge and experience to inform instruction?” (p. 177). One result of this “transmission model,” Auerbach maintains, is that family literacy programs have given too little attention to parents' development of their own literacy skills.

There is, however, little research—and even less agreement—on the best approaches to helping women improve their literacy skills.

In what they describe as a feminist critique of family literacy programs, Cuban and Hayes (1996) examine what they see as five drawbacks of the “transmission model” for women in such programs. They argue that programs informed by this model view women as conduits of literacy, give primary attention to children's learning, devalue women's home literacy practices, view mothers as deficient, and offer restrictive models of reading behavior (pp. 7–8).

The other major approach to literacy instruction for women has emerged from women's studies. Called either “feminist” or “woman-positive,” this approach seeks to make women's needs "more central in literacy programming (Imel & Kerka, 1996, p. 1). Feminist approaches to literacy are typically concerned with both the individual learner and with the ways in which gender shapes the learner's experience. The research agenda of a project sponsored by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women illustrates the approach. That project sought to examine how gender and the power of balance of the male/female relationship affect women's access to, and experience of, literacy programs and how it affects the impact of literacy programs on women; to determine how literacy programs and literacy practices might be changed to better re-
spond to the reality of the lives of adult women learners; and to share this information with women literacy students and workers...to foster the development of relevant, appropriate, and accessible literacy opportunities for women. (Lloyd, 1991, p. 4)

Feminist literacy programs are not all alike. Some are designed for women only; others include men. Some have examined the role of “literacy workers” (tutors, teachers, and program developers), looking at the ways in which social conditions shape their experiences as well as those of students. Despite their differences, these feminist theory based programs are linked by a commitment to make the women’s experience, and the role of gender in shaping that experience, a central part of literacy programs. Such a commitment is essential, advocates maintain, if women learners are to use literacy to critique and change the social conditions that restrict them.

The feminist approach to literacy is better established outside the United States. Leading work has been done in Canada by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW). Established in 1979, that organization has networks in every Canadian province and territory. Other feminist literacy projects have been developed in the United Kingdom and Australia. In the United States, however, the feminist approach to literacy has just begun to make headway. There have been several obstacles to its development in the U.S. First, few low-literate women identify themselves as feminists. Even those who seek greater opportunity and autonomy in their own lives often see feminism as disconnected to their goals. Similarly, few literacy workers identify themselves as feminists.

At the same time, the U.S. feminist movement has largely been concerned with other questions, such as abortion, sexual harassment, and identity politics, in the past 2 decades. Moreover, the political climate in the United States may discourage program developers from seeking federal or state funds for explicitly feminist projects. While literacy projects have the potential for linking feminist theory to community action for women, they have just begun to do so in the U.S.

Currently, the most ambitious feminist literacy initiative in this country is Laubach Literacy International’s Women in Literacy/USA (WIL/USA). Part of a global campaign launched internationally in 1990, WIL/USA began in the United States in 1994 and is designed to reach 100,000 women by the year 2000. Because “women bear an unequal share in the burdens of illiteracy and poverty, as well as those imposed by social expectation and sexism,” the program attempts “to put women’s lives at the center of the work” (WIL/USA, n.d.). Its goals include supporting local programs that “empower women to take control of their own lives, exercise leadership in their communities...teach other women to do the same, [and] raise awareness about the gender-related barriers women face in improving their basic literacy and ESL abilities” (WIL/USA, 1996). As the oldest and one of the largest volunteer literacy organizations, Laubach Literacy has the resources and experiences that may make such an ambitious program succeed. This review of findings from the NALS indicates both how urgently such literacy programs are needed and what complex obstacles they face.

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