

# Freedom to Read

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The censorship of printed material is appalling and frightening. Hating the written word – even advocating against it – is one thing, while disallowing the members of your civil society even to see it is quite another. Both our intuition and historical memory are roused to suspicion by the banning of a book.

Imagine, now, if it were not a particular text forbidden, but rather a particular group of people forbidden from reading it. A book, say, banned for only and all expectant mothers. What agenda could possibly fuel such an interdiction? At best it would be paternalistic; at worst, it would be downright sinister.

This disturbing thought experiment offers needed perspective to our thinking about reading, about literacy. Few would go out of their way to deny that literacy is a right, human or civil. Various literacies (reading/writing, numeracy, and all the skills needed to negotiate communities, institutions, and bureaucracies) are *the* sites of contact between individuals and mechanisms that put us more-or-less in charge of our lives. But a look at why this right is not enjoyed by certain people – and who they are – might renew or even radicalize the discourse around the “freedom to read”.

Of course, we can’t paint “who they are” with one essential stroke. It is useful, though, to consider what people struggling with literacy have in common. What brings someone to adult literacy, to a community or college programme? What conditions have set the stage for adults “from our culture/society” not being able to read?

Poverty is an unsurprising answer. Illiteracy is founded on the economic violence of how poverty reproduces itself across generations, and the social violence of a culture that in turn ignores this phenomenon and takes advantage of it. This is not even to touch on how these violences are racialised.

But “violence” is the most salient word on the table. Every time. People are systemically disempowered above all through violence. Researcher and author Jenny Horsman is taking up the nexus of violence and literacy with depth and seriousness. The title of one of her books, *Too Scared to Learn*, is a poignant synthesis of how powerfully violence and difficulty learning are often connected.

Experiences of violence underpin perhaps the majority of the accounts of people who have “fallen through the cracks”. In fact, physical, sexual, mental and emotional abuses reveal precisely those cracks, the fault lines of systems that routinely damage the human being. The impacts of violence do not leave individuals broken and in need of “healing”, but rather, on Horsman’s analysis, they are more like the canaries that miners would use to test for lethal gas underground. She suggests that reactions to violence are “useful warnings that societal violence needs to be brought under control, rather than seeing traumatised people as needing to reduce their reactions, heal and increase their tolerance of violence. If society is a toxic mine, there is no place free of toxic irritant.” (Horsman,

50) It is an analysis that acknowledges both the interconnected oppressions that cost us all too much, and how this web intensifies in the lives of women.

Sexual and gender-based violences figure overwhelmingly in the literacy struggles of women. Girls pulled out of (erstwhile compulsory) schooling by abusive fathers, girls who experienced violence at home during childhood and thus were too disturbed to pay attention, seek help, or stay out of trouble... statistics about women, school and violence are problematic and intensely difficult to gather, but the anecdotal evidence shows a crystal clear picture: "I used to teach a class for welfare women, 98% of whom had either been in abusive relationships and gotten out, or were still in them. The figures for the women in my class that had come from a background of childhood violence or abuse were horrifying - 100% (there were 20 women in my class)." Beth Crowther, coordinator, ESOL project, Texas (Quoted in Horsman, 1999/2000:1)

Past and/or present violence undermines the self-esteem required to do the thing that makes us *all* feel vulnerable: learning (which involves making mistakes, trial & error, confusion, etc). If we are given the message a million times, it is hard not to believe that we are too stupid, that we can't learn, are bad or wrong or worthless; and then it becomes a challenge to value ourselves enough to imagine a different future or even that we deserve one. Nor is "fight, flight or freeze" a state conducive to learning; survival mode takes all one's energy. On a cognitive level, trauma can compromise capacities essential to learning: complex thought, memory/retention, attention, resiliency in front of correction or criticism, etc. On an emotional level, literacy work (even just being in an institutional setting) can be stressful and trigger retraumatisation.

The impacts of violence truncate the capacity to learn – but they *do not* destroy it. Though the "regular" channels of schooling have failed many, the failure lived and breathed in those channels, not in the learners. Given safety and encouragement, given a politic that insists that the bad things that happened to them were not their fault, given flexibility in access protocol, curriculum and methodology – people can thrive as learning adults. They can gain a structural awareness of their situation that leads to self-advocacy, and a bit of breathing room in which to see life as something to be built intentionally, not just to survive. This is mobility; this is freedom. Literacy also contributes toward increased chances of living free from violence now.

How we frame freedom is near the heart of the discourse around the right to literacy. Will we speak about freedom in the laissez-faire way of the free market, where all are free to compete however and consume whatever they like? Or speak about freedom as real choice in our own livelihoods, family and housing arrangements, and other activities that constitute having a life? If we are to commit to the latter, then we will recognize that we are in crisis. The lack of sovereignty – the systemic marginalisation and erasure – of people struggling with literacy is as blatant as any of our historical narratives about keeping a group of people down, and out of the seat of power.

Now, this is not a conspiracy; I do not imagine devilish suited men in boardrooms tweedling their fingers together seething, "Eeexcellent..." over the intersection of

violence and literacy. I do not, because I know they have yet to reckon with that intersection. The problem is not planned; the problem is rather a criminal lack of planning, of vision, of understanding. Author Peter Steven says that “when literacy development is low priority, the result is as stark as censorship”. Clearly it is as bad as that; it is worse than that. It is also oppression that blames the oppressed, and puts the onus for change and “improvement” on their shoulders alone.

But drawing attention to this issue, and framing it within a conversation about justice rather than charity, is a beginning. Recognizing how various violences limit the freedom to read just as surely as if all the books were banned comes next. Learning more about the complex ways violence affects learning, and what educators can do to support literacy in the face of violence, is the next step. Advocating for adequate conditions in which to implement this learning will reveal what the canary has shown over and over: we need to change, we can’t live like this. We are not free like this.

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This article was commissioned for the Freedom to Read Kit. A substantially shortened version will appear in the kit and be available across Canada in January 2009.