

Section 3.

Literacy matters: violence, literacy and learning

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Introduction

This paper is about the often-invisible relationship between violence, learning and literacy. Using a life history approach it describes Suzanne (her chosen pseudonym) and her attempts to learn and use literacy in her everyday life. Her experiences of adult literacy learning takes place at a time in the UK when the national strategy *Skills for Life* has targeted adults like Suzanne, classed by government policy as a member of a 'priority group' of single parents who are unemployed, to improve their skills. Her story shows some of the difficulties people on the margins, often on the edge of social and economic inclusion, have in accessing the learning they need: learning which recognises the complexity of their lives and the barriers they encounter in being able to fit in with the patterns and content of provision. It also says much about the ways that bureaucratic literacy practices surrounding official texts support legal, educational and social services systems which frequently control people's everyday experiences disempowering them as learners and as people.

Suzanne describes learning as being central to an independent future, but feels that finding literacy learning that acknowledges her experiences of violence, and finding learning about violence that acknowledges her difficulties with reading and writing has been difficult. According to Suzanne, the lack of connection between her experiences of violence and her literacy needs has been a major obstacle to her adult learning. The experiences that she describes tell us much about the constraints and possibilities available to her as a learner, and as a woman with experience of domestic violence; although her experience is individually unique it is also a powerful 'telling case'.

Looking at lives and uncovering experiences of violence

The work with Suzanne was carried out as

part of a larger study carried out in England between 2002 and 2005. The Adult Learners' Lives (ALL) project, a three-year ethnographic study, was carried out by Lancaster Literacy Research Centre and funded by the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC www.nrdc.org.uk). The study looked at the relationship between people's lives and their involvement in learning opportunities as part of the national strategy. We worked in literacy, numeracy and ESOL classes, as well as in different types of provision in a range of community settings (for more detail see Barton, Ivaniè, Appleby, Hodge and Tusting, 2007). We focussed on peoples' everyday lives, looking at their uses and meanings of literacy, numeracy and language.

As we talked to, listened, and engaged with the adult learners in our study we became increasingly aware that many people had experiences of violence and trauma in their lives. Often this was invisible. Some were seeking refugee or asylum in the UK and came with experience of physical violence, torture, imprisonment, loss of family and dislocation from their home countries. Others who were young and homeless had experienced violence within families or relationships, on the streets and in relation to drug or alcohol dependency. Some we talked to had experienced extreme poverty and neighbourhood violence. Many described school as violent or traumatic. Several women had also experienced gendered violence in families and within intimate relationships.

Where writers/activists have looked at violence against women in adult literacy and post-compulsory education (e.g. Horsman 1990, 2000, 2004; Morrish, Horsman and Hofner 2002; Raphael 2000; Mojab and McDonald 2001) they provide compelling evidence to show how violence affects learners' and their learning. Many of these writers make the link with the physical and physiological effects of experiencing violence

with those of post-traumatic stress. This affects the ability to concentrate, to trust others, to interact in social settings, to be able to plan for the future and to have confidence in ones self and the ability to retain information and learn new skills. This understanding has underpinned work, mainly from Canada and Australia, in creating curriculum and a supportive learning environment that acknowledges violence in women's lives (see for example CCLOW 1996; Alderson and Twiss 2003; Isserlis 1996; Gunn and Moore 2002 and www.learningandviolence.net). Much of the literacy learning in this work is organised through various community learning projects, supported by national or federal funds as part of national literacy policies.

In the UK Suzanne is included within the national targets to improve the Basic Skills of adults responding to governmental concerns that up to seven million people have literacy skills below the level required to 'function effectively' and 'productively' as an adult in England (DfEE 2001). Suzanne, in receipt of state benefit and as a sole parent, is one of the adults identified within the priority groups as needing to increase their skills for employability and social cohesion. Suzanne's experience, as for other adults on the edge of social and economic inclusion such as refugee and asylum seekers and older women (Appleby and Bathmaker 2006), shows that this is not always easy to achieve.

Suzanne and I worked together over a period of three years recording her life story and her experiences of literacy and learning. We met at the domestic violence support group, at her home, in a pub and spoke on the phone. We recorded our conversations which I reported back to Suzanne and the themes that were emerging. She enjoyed participating in the research, as she felt it gave her the space to think and talk about things that she didn't otherwise have the opportunity for. We shared many cups of tea and moments of laughter as she shared and we recorded her thoughts, feelings and aspirations. Suzanne's life story which we wrote together is on the domestic violence support group's website – this gave her

enormous satisfaction as she said for the first time she had a voice and was able to speak out and share her experiences with other women.

Suzanne's life story

When we worked together Suzanne described her life in her own words. What follows is a summary of the experiences she related in our research conversations. At the time the research took place she was forty years old and had been living on her own for nearly eighteen months with her three-year-old daughter. Suzanne described how she came from a large family in Liverpool where she experienced physical violence and neglect from an early age. Her family lived in poverty with much ill health and with the children experiencing bullying and violence both inside and outside the home. Suzanne explained how she was sent to a special school from the age of five, with no tuition and no expectations of being able to learn she left school unable to read or write. In her late teens she lived with her father in a one bed roomed flat looking after him. He, reliant on her care, did not allow her out and she was unable to do paid work or have any independence. Suzanne acknowledged that her early marriage was her escape route, soon finding that she had left one place of domestic and financial imprisonment for another. According to Suzanne, her husband was controlling and became increasingly violent with the birth of their two sons; refusing work and staying at home to "keep an eye" on her and monitoring all her movements. Suzanne described being very dependent on him for her day-to-day existence, as she was unable to read household bills or read instructions on food. She said that an attempt at learning to read at a local college led to derision and resentment from him accusing her of "being stupid". Suzanne described becoming increasingly frightened, isolated and lonely "going off her head" as her sons began to adopt their fathers' behaviour and were also violent towards her.

After the birth of her daughter Suzanne said that she feared for their safety and left for a refuge. Her social worker put her in touch with a housing association and local self-run

domestic violence support group. Suzanne described this early time of living independently as terrifying. She talked of being scared of the ever-present threat of her husband's violence towards her and her daughter; and of not being able to manage to run a house, of getting into debt; of not being able to look after her daughter properly, and of giving her food poisoning because she was unable to read the food instructions. Her biggest fear was that she would lose her daughter if the "authorities" deemed her to be an unfit mother. Without being able to read she had to navigate the complex legal system to divorce her husband and establish supervised visiting to their daughter. Suzanne described being depressed and sometimes overwhelmed by the stress not knowing "whether they are going to take my baby" and not being able to read the documentation and reports that were written by various professionals about her. She said that this made her angry, both because she couldn't read what was written about her and also because she felt that her values and experience as a parent were disregarded by the official system. The court, to teach her parenting skills, stipulated her attendance at the Family Matters course. Suzanne wanted to learn to read and write for herself, she wanted to live independently and to be able, for the first time in her life, to get a job.

Reading the world if not the word

Suzanne had many ways of managing. She learned words like 'Pizza' from the flyers that came through the doors; she managed her money by using a card rather than coins and practised words from nursery rhymes in her daughter's books. Her determination, and the literacy practices involved in engaging in a text-based society, is worthy of an article in its own right. However, the purpose here is to explain, from the experiences that she reported, the built-in barriers of the 'systems' she was up against.

Suzanne's aspirations were like many other adults; she wanted to learn to read and write to get paid employment increasing her own and her daughter's opportunities. To do this she tried learning at a domestic

violence support group and at a local Sure Start centre. Both attempts were frustrating as she explains:

But everyday I'm just waking up and finding all the different things what I've got to cope with, and I'm finding it hard but I'm getting there. Like some days I'm crying and some days I'm really down in the dumps where I don't even want to go out side the house because I just feel ashamed of myself. Not because of the way things are, it's because I can't do nothing, you know, just sitting here day by day and I can't do much for myself because I can't read and write and without reading and writing I don't know how I'm going to do it, because I just can't do it.

She attended a local domestic violence support group which offered advice, provided practical support and ran courses to increase confidence. The group's approach to learning was one of empowerment – where women could be supported to become empowered to take control of their lives. They recognised the importance of learning as many women who came had missed large parts of school, or had done badly because of violence at home, and felt they lacked the confidence and skills they needed to be independent.

A local lifelong learning provider, experienced at delivering community education, provided an assertiveness course for the support group which Suzanne attended. This ran in a local community centre on evening a week for two hours. From the outset there were problems. Childcare arrangements fell through, some women felt unsure about exposing their experience with others they didn't really know and there were tensions in achieving learning goals required by the provider (to finance the accredited course) whilst having a pace of learning everyone felt comfortable with. In the midst of this Suzanne struggled with the reading and writing. The tutor was told of Suzanne's 'learning difficulties', not a term she would use herself, but was unaware of her literacy difficulties. Although it was possible to participate in discussions

it was not possible for her to read materials or write at home. The tutor, experienced and supportive in exploring personal and social experiences of violence, was inexperienced at supporting literacy learning and had little support to do this. The support group were supportive about taking on board 'the issues' about violence but were inexperienced and unable to support Suzanne's literacy learning. The course finished after five weeks leaving Suzanne, as she described, feeling a failure as it exposed her literacy learning needs and reminding her of past failures.

Suzanne also went to a parenting course called Family Matters and a literacy and numeracy class held at the local Sure Start Centre. The court had stipulated she attended the weekly Family Matters course as her daughter had been placed on the Children's Register. She explained that she attended the literacy and numeracy classes to help improve her reading and writing skills for the Family Matters course. She felt she had no choice in attending, as to refuse would have been seen as non-compliance and might weaken her position in maintaining custody of her daughter, rather than this being awarded to her husband which he threatened to pursue. Suzanne felt humiliated by the course as her life and her parenting skills were being scrutinized and judged. The professionals delivering the course, people she collectively called the "authorities", had middle class values focussing on 'good' parenting, whilst refusing to acknowledge domestic violence in women's lives. When she did disclose violence from her own past it prompted a National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) investigation, more court delays and additional reports. Suzanne said that she was upset and depressed by the reports, written by the different professionals in her life, as they were judgmental, inaccurate and ignored the domestic violence that she had experienced in her marriage. The reports scrutinized and made a public record of her private home life. Because of the support she needed with reading and writing, every detail of her life from her finances to the contents of her weekly shopping was under

the official gaze. She felt under constant surveillance. The fact that she could not read the reports further increased her sense of powerless and lack of control.

Her experiences of learning on the parenting course were frustrating; she wasn't learning what she wanted and it wasn't linked to her life. Her experiences of domestic violence, something which had shaped the previous twenty years of her life, was completely ignored whilst at the same time she felt under constant surveillance as a mother. The stakes were high, as she constantly feared losing her daughter if she were judged to be an inadequate parent. She continually made the link, assuming the authorities would, between being judged as someone with 'inadequate literacy skills', and being judged an 'inadequate mother'. Overall, she felt disempowered by the learning process and frustrated that she had not been able to learn to read and write. Suzanne did not experience this as a safe learning environment, responding to her learning needs; instead she felt it was one that responded to the "authorities" needs to monitor her behaviour and progress. In spite of these difficulties Suzanne remained motivated to persist with finding learning to enable her to achieve her goal of gaining employment and becoming independent.

Violence and learning: literacy matters

Suzanne's experiences of violence impacts upon her learning and literacy practices. We have described this as recognising people's histories, current circumstances, current practices and their imagined future in literacy practices and learning (Barton et al 2007; Appleby and Barton 2008; Appleby 2008). We need to understand what has happened in the past to be able to understand how this shapes both what is happening now and how it may be part of people's futures. In Suzanne's story it is clear to see that where those providing learning opportunities (both formal and informal) failed to see her as a whole person she was unable to succeed with learning.

Suzanne's particular experiences of violence and learning are mediated through her different identities; she described herself as

being poor, white, and from working class background. Her narrative shows how institutional textual mechanisms of power, within the legal, educational and social services systems, also shape these experiences. Texts are powerful (Crowther, Hamilton and Tett 2001) and can produce what Denny Taylor describes as toxic effects in people lives (Taylor 1996). Her ethnographical research shows how official and bureaucratic texts were used to disempower people, particularly those with little formal education, who were black or didn't fit social norms. Drawing upon this, and looking at Suzanne's experiences, institutional power, located within texts, needs to be understood as part of people's histories, current circumstances and images futures in literacy practice and learning

Such an approach, based upon a social practice perspective, provides a way to explore and analyse some of the interconnected aspects of Suzanne's experiences of powerlessness and surveillance. For example being unable to read food labels or read bills enabled her husband a greater degree of power and control over her life whilst she lived with him. Being unable to read and write enabled the legal system's almost total control over what was written about her and what professionals presented as 'evidence' about her in court. Unable to read the documents and paperwork written about her she only had her memory to rely on. This, she acknowledged although pretty good, was affected by the violence and trauma in her life (see Horsman 2000). Horsman's work, discussed below, shows how learners who have experienced violence often develop forgetfulness as a physical response to the trauma of violence.

A view of literacy, rooted in the lives and everyday practices of people, provides the possibility of making explicit the sometimes hidden ways that oppression and inequality play out in people's lives. It challenges the dominant view of literacy, as a functional skill privileging white, western language steeped in power by looking at the uses and meanings of literacy, and of literacy learning, in people's lives and in their

communities. This includes the sense, purpose and the ways that people use reading and writing accounting for what people can do in their lives rather than what they can't (Barton, Hamilton, Ivaniè 2000; Barton and Hamilton 2000; Mace 2002). As such it can provide a challenge to what can be seen as an externally imposed deficit model that people like Suzanne are measured against, both by the national strategy and the 'authorities' that 'deal' with her.

Suzanne was passionate about learning to read and write: she wanted to be able to run her home and care for her daughter and she also wanted to be able to understand the legal procedures that she was involved in. This was the motivation that led her to the two classes mentioned. In spite of being a highly motivated learner both classes, in different ways, were unable to respond to her needs. The assertiveness class run by the domestic violence support group, whilst acknowledging her experiences of violence, was unable to support her literacy needs making her as she described feel a failure. Rather than being empowered by the process she felt silenced and unable to contribute. The Family Matters course ignored her experiences of violence and increased the scope for surveillance as she was unable to record or document her daily life. . Suzanne described feeling that her experiences, and lack of skills, were seen negatively in this environment and provided the "authorities" with an opportunity for official documentation of her life and mothering. Neither learning opportunity provided Suzanne with a way of acquiring literacy skills that related to her life and her experiences of violence. From her story there is a clear need to connect literacy learning with her personal experiences of violence enabling her to feel confident and progress with learning the skills that she wants. Yet this remained, for her in these two learning environments, unobtainable.

Discussion

This raises some important questions about how to support literacy learning of women who have experienced violence like Suzanne. Can anyone support literacy

learning in adults, for example the workers in the domestic violence support group? And, should adult educators and literacy workers take on board issues of violence in their student's lives? Suzanne is one of many adults who were failed by compulsory schooling and as adults feel they do not have appropriate literacy skills to provide choices in their lives. Many women will experience violence and there are particular populations within society who experience poverty, bad housing, bad health and social or economic marginalisation where the likelihood of both occurring is high (Stanko 2003; Hanmer and Itzin 2000).

One solution to the dilemma of providing adequate and aware support is through networking and working across agencies or groups. This has the potential for combining what can be offered in particular areas of knowledge and teaching strengths. However, as the Australian project 'Redesigning social futures: supporting women from domestic violence situations with literacy needs' found this was less than straightforward. The project, designed between community health agencies and an adult literacy provider, found different value base and methods of working made collaboration very difficult (Gunn and Moore 2002). Finding others with similar values and ways of working is not easy, particularly for small groups. This helps to explain why the domestic violence support group's assertiveness course experienced such difficulties. There was a mismatch of cultures and of learning and teaching styles. Even though everyone involved was working towards a similar purpose and end goal, their approach, language and understandings were different.

Such a mismatch of values, language and literacy practices was further illustrated by Suzanne's experience of having her experiences of domestic violence ignored by those who taught her in the more formal setting at the Family matters course and the Sure Start Centre. Jenny Horsman (2000) argues that in general society deals with violence through silence. She explains that whilst invisible and silent the impact of violence is pervasive in society and in

education. She argues: " Violence is widespread throughout our society. It is not a minority issue experienced by a few women, with impact only on rare educational interaction" (p. 24). Because of the extent of violence it can never be ignored in an educational programme – it is always present, whether it is acknowledged or not. This and her earlier work (1990) show how violence and trauma impacts upon individuals and their learning physically, mentally and emotionally. It affected confidence and the ability to learn as women were unable to concentrate, had gaps and experienced memory loss. Listening to women showed that non-attendance and 'tuning out' were strategies for survival, although they were often mistaken by educators as signs of apathy or lack of motivation. Her later research carried out with Canadian literacy educators, showed that tutors were unaware of violence in their students' lives and were uncertain how to respond in an educational setting (Horsman 2004). Educators felt they were crossing the line from the public concerns of how to teaching reading and writing, to private ones such as acknowledging and dealing with violence. This was experienced as difficult and exposing. Jody Raphael (2000) describes through the life of Bernice how poverty and violence remained invisible in literacy learning, required in the States by the Welfare to Work programme. There are echoes here with the English court's recommendation that Suzanne attend a parenting class, where equally poverty and violence, defining features of her life, were ignored.

New work, based upon earlier models of research informed practice, is exploring the potential of social practice pedagogy which explicitly makes links between people's experiences and their learning visible to literacy tutors (Pahl and Rowsell 2005; Barton et al 2007; Appleby and Barton 2008). In the practitioner guide *Bridges into learning for adults who find provision hard to reach* (Appleby 2008) several key messages emerge for supporting people who find accessing learning difficult. These start from the premise that it is the

provision that is hard to reach not the people who try to attend, although they are frequently labelled as such. The conclusions suggest that teachers need to take advantage of people's existing skills, that teaching in the community complements existing networks, that teachers can support long term aspiration and can themselves be important bridges helping learners move between different types of provision. Suzanne would have benefited from such a bridge.

It is not enough for literacy practitioners to simply work with a social practices model that only looks at what people 'can do'. This is potentially a Pollyanna approach which does not fully recognise, or challenge, the barriers which account for what people 'can't do'. This work needs to be embedded in teacher training and professional development; as to ignore it colludes in the silence that Jenny Horsman and Suzanne both speak of.

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RaPAL

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