Creating Change in Literacy Programs: Taking account of violence

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Introductions

Over the last few years I have been researching, writing and speaking about the impact of violence on learning. In 1996 and 1997, I travelled across Canada and interviewed literacy learners and workers, as well as therapists and counsellors for a research study. I wrote my first analysis of what I learned from this research in the discussion paper, *But I'm Not a Therapist.* During an on-line discussion of the issues raised literacy workers, educators, researchers and academics wrote comments and developed collective thinking about the issues. I incorporated many ideas posted on-line into the book: *Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence and Education.* My current research builds on that study. At the outset I hoped my research would lead to changes in practice, this new study explores the process of change in literacy programs.

Making Change

For the current study I am working with Susan Heald (from the University of Manitoba). We are seeking to understand better what supports and what hinders making change in literacy programs so that they may more fully support learning for all women, and in particular, those who have experienced violence.

Our partners in this research are:

- Parkdale Project Read, Toronto, Ontario
- The Learning Centre, Edmonton, Alberta
- Malaspina University-College, Duncan, British Columbia
- World Education, Boston, New England

We asked different types of organizations to participate. Our contacts were programs that had been active participants in my earlier research, and programs we knew were planning to take on projects to address issues of violence.

Discourse

The language we use to understand what we do is crucial. Sandra Butler asserts that "with a different language comes a completely different understanding of what we are doing[1]." I have found the concept of discourse a useful tool for helping me to think about the language that is commonly used in a given field – such as the language of adult literacy – and to notice how that language shapes understandings and practices within that field. Some discourses are dominant, reinforced by social institutions and widely used, others are minority discourses used to resist dominant or mainstream discourses.

I have come to believe that a range of "dominant discourses" make it challenging to change literacy programs. Dominant discourses include the most common ways of talking. These shape what we come to see as given and take for granted about ourselves and the world. They are reinforced by institutions and common practices. Discourses underpin our practices.

I want to be clear that when describing discourses I am not trying to say they are wrong, or excuses for not taking up issues of violence. Instead, I am trying to reveal the processes that exclude the issue of violence from education and make change unlikely. I am not talking about attitudes, but about the ways the discourses we participate in shape how we think, what we see, what we imagine possible. For example, if we know that education is not therapy and all the "stuff" about the self and emotions is matter for therapy sessions, not the classroom, then we

[1] In her workshop: Dreams and Promises: A Day of Reflection and Envisioning, Toronto, May 2001.

won't see any need to learn anything about counselling, because that 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.

A variety of discourses shape not only how we see ourselves – as teachers, educators, administrators or policy makers – but also our colleagues and students, what we understand about literacy and violence and what we are capable of taking on. These discourses shape what we see and so limit recognition of the extent of violence and the effects of violence on learning. In North America, violence is rarely spoken about in public spaces. We need to ask who benefits and who or what is served by silences about violence. The impact of violence is traditionally seen as separate from education, viewed instead as a matter for therapeutic interventions. This approach contributes to silences in education about the impact of violence on learning.

Dominant discourses shape what we know as proper literacy work and so make it hard to change programs in ways 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 literacy programming. They shape policy and expectations and the resources most people involved in the teaching interaction deem essential or unnecessary. They also lead "us" to "know" what training is required by literacy workers - paid and volunteer - to support literacy work.

During this research, one college administrator said she has to be careful what she says about what the literacy work in her college means to students because it "goes way beyond our [educational] mandate." She also explained that if teachers cross the boundary with counselling there are "liability issues" and if the college broadly crossed the boundary into therapy, there would be problems with the provincial government saying "this work is funded elsewhere and is separate from the work of an educational institution." She was revealing eloquently both how dominant discourses shape practices in education and how they are resisted.

Although discourses shape what we know, we also shape discourses. Discourses are not fixed for all time. They do not operate independent of people. We participate in them, resist them, and struggle to create alternate discourses to the dominant, taken for granted ones. For example, there is now a growing discourse about connections between violence and learning. As literacy workers increasingly discuss these issues, we begin to create possibilities for new understandings of literacy work, to challenge medicalizing discourses about violence, and explore new literacy practices which recognize impacts of violence on learning. I believe that when we come to see the ways that particular discourses shape our thinking – especially those we are so steeped in we may initially have trouble seeing, because they just reveal "the way it is" - then we become more able to create or participate in alternate, resistant discourses which may open possibilities for new practices.

Seeing our language and practices as discourse offers a tool to get outside a focus on what is "right" and draws attention to examining how certain discourses open and close possibilities. Such an analysis points us to notice our own language closely and explore its implications. In our research focus groups, we invited everyone to become collaborators with us in noticing our language and how it shapes our practice.

Discourses about Violence

Over the course of this study I have begun to notice a wide range of awareness about the issue of violence. I have heard a variety of responses when I've asked literacy workers to look at how to take up issues of violence in literacy programs. Some literacy workers had not previously thought about the widespread nature of violence, others know of their own experiences or those of friends or family, and many repeatedly hear stories from students in their classes. Knowing about experiences of violence led some teachers to be sure violence impacted on learning and had to be addressed, even though it was not something spoken about in the field. For them my earlier research and book confirmed something they already knew, as Janice Armstrong from Farmington, Maine said:

> Your book, for me, is just right on. I mean, it's what I've experienced in adult education all these years.

Asked if she discussed this with other teachers this educator replied:

> No, on my personal level in working with people, but not with other teachers. We never really looked at it, identified it, said we need training in this area, we need training in that area. I just felt that this was something I needed to deal with as a teacher. These were issues coming up and they were interfering with what I was trying to do as a teacher, so talking to the person about what they could do - to me was just an automatic kind of thing. But I don't ever recall thinking about bringing this up at a staff meeting and saying this is really something we need to be looking at.

When I asked whether she hadn't brought it up because she feared being told she should not take it on, she laughed and said:

> May be that's one of the reasons I didn't talk about it. I didn't want anyone to stop me. (Interview, Farmington, Maine, May 2001)

I would like to understand more about what has enabled some literacy workers to "know" that issues of violence are part of their work as a teacher, in spite of the discourses that lead them also to "know" that the issues are not part of literacy work and should not be discussed with colleagues.

Many literacy workers, even those who had heard many stories, said they had not previously paid attention to issues of violence or thought about how violence might impact on learning. Several workers said they had simply thought about violence as part of poverty and not taken account of it separately. One experienced literacy worker at a workshop mused about how obvious the issue seemed as soon as she began to think about it in the workshop. She was surprised at herself and her own organization for not having recognized and addressed the issue previously. But she also commented that many teachers who usually attend professional development sessions were absent from this workshop on the impact of violence on learning. Some may be willing to learn more about the issue as soon as they come to recognize it, others may avoid learning more about it. One teacher told me that she was worried about attending my workshop, thinking it would be difficult but was relieved to realize it was possible to address

issues of violence without hearing detailed stories of violence. At many workshops one or two participants have been quite angry about the content of the workshop. Unfortunately, even though I created detailed evaluation forms hoping to elicit feedback on aspects they disliked and learn whether the problem was the issue, my approach, or something else, they rarely offered any more information.

Silence

Janice Armstrong, from New England said:

> We don't talk about violence that much. We tend to ignore it and deny that it's happening. (Interview, Farmington, Maine, May 2001)

There has been a profound silence about the issues of violence in society. There has been much writing about how the silencing of violence in society preserves violence as an individual experience outside the "normal," even when it is commonplace enough to be a normal experience or an everyday risk in women's lives. That silence, along with the widespread nature of the experience, is reflected in literacy programs. Many workers will have experienced violence themselves, or amongst their friends and family, and most will hear about the experiences of students they teach.

Many workers hear about violent experiences, yet pervasive silence about violence limits discussion about what it means for education.

We have observed a discourse that focuses on silencing all talk about violence. The suggestion is often that it is "better" or "wiser" not to talk, that it "serves no purpose" to open up the issues. Literacy workers realized that even when they were trying to speak about the issue they often found themselves being indirect, worrying about embarrassing the person they were talking to, wondering whether the other wanted to speak about it, not wanting to "break down" the person's defences.

When I sought to start a women's group I found myself choosing not to name violence directly in the advertising or calls to prompt women to attend. I quickly realized that I had to be careful about what I said to others in the women's households or on their answering machines, as I didn't want to increase the risk for any woman currently living in violence. When I did reach women in person I still found I could not speak directly about violence. I did not want women to decide they would not attend the group because they would not want to be known to be going to "that" group, or to decide that it wasn't for them because they hadn't experienced violence. I also did not want to separate out the women who have experienced violence, as I feared that could contribute to a sense that there are normal learners and there are "others" who have experienced violence and need special treatment. I want to argue that educational programs need to change in ways so that everyone, survivor or not, will be able to learn effectively, rather than provide something special for those who have experienced violence. But I worried that by not naming violence directly I was complicit in maintaining silences.

Yet a program worker told me that one student came to her women's empowerment group saying she hadn't experienced violence like other women in the group, and much later she mentioned in passing the times her husband had tried to kill her. When a group is billed as one that is going to address issues of violence, or is for survivors of violence, many women don't attend. In the New England project, more than one literacy program tried to create a group that would focus on violence but found that women didn't attend or attended, but resisted speaking

about violence. Some women said they had been through too much violence and didn't want to talk about it. A direct approach, which appears to open up talk about violence, may unintentionally recreate silence.

Program workers have to learn ways to create a space that names the presence of violence in many women's lives (instructors as well as students). This may mean focusing less on violence and more on creating a space for joy, for building strength to learn, for exploring "healing arts" as processes to support learning and supporting students in learning to resist being controlled and violated. Yet workers still question how to most usefully open a recognition of the presence of violence without pushing women to speak when they would prefer not to and without becoming complicit in silences that leave women isolated and ashamed.

Can of worms

The comment that probably haunts me most is the phrase, "it's a can of worms" which I have heard so often as the response to talk about issues of violence. The clarity that the issue is huge, contributes to silence about the entire area. Don't go there, it's wiser, safer, better left unsaid. The image of breaking silence as opening something far too complex, too messy, too nasty to deal with, that might spill over, is a compelling one – telling us that it is simply not wise to open up the can. Katy Chaffee, a literacy worker in New England, said that every time she mentions violence she feels listeners think immediately of domestic violence and then say, "Oh my god, don't take me there."

Connected to this sense of something unmanageable were repeated comments about it being "too big," too specialized an area, too technical. Frequently this leads to comments like "You would need training to address it." The development of training will be an enormously important aspect if the literacy field is to be able to take on issues of violence with a sense of competence and capacity. I am reminded of one literacy worker in my earlier research who talked about what it was like to feel she did not know what to do. She said she worried about "the build up of feeling inept at your job" and said she did not want to continue to teach adult basic education without "some counselling skills, some training" (Chapter 7, Horsman, 1999/2000) Yet as I listened to workers say that the area is too specialized, it often felt less a demand for training and more a way to say this is not something we should do. Which leads me to question the discourses that tell us what belongs in education.

This isn't violence

In one workshop a participant suggested I add the "this isn't violence" discourse. She felt that attempts to take up the issue in the labour movement were often blocked with the argument that "this isn't violence," so stop making a fuss. In a later conversation she spoke more about her sense of the extent of violence in organizational life in most workplaces that leaves workers so steeped in a culture of violence that it can simply seem "normal" - just the way it is. While enduring violence themselves it may also be difficult for anyone to take on addressing violence issues for others as there may be a tendency to feel "if I can put up with it why can't you."

This sense of "normalcy" reminded me of having heard many times from literacy workers a sense of "this is just the way it is," suggesting that violence had to be accepted. In many workshops where I introduced issues of violence I was told there was little literacy workers could do, because the people they were working with were of a different ethnicity and didn't perceive violence in the experiences the workers identified as violent. Some told me that a particular ethnic group accepted more violence against women than other groups. I have noticed

that talk about violence can easily slide into talk about "them" as if "they" are not also us. It seems so much easier to talk about the problems "they" have rather than our own - whether the "they" refers to learners or another class or culture. I've tended to find it useful to name that most cultures seem to have accepted some aspect of violence against women and children, but at the same time activists in each culture struggle to make change. I have suggested that literacy workers find activists from within the religious, cultural or ethnic group and invite them into the classroom to talk about the struggle they are engaged in and open up the possibility of changing conceptions.

Often violence is excused with the explanation that the person is only violent when he is drunk and so is not responsible, perhaps “it doesn’t count.” Kate Nonesuch suggested:

> Working with learners in Western Canada, I too find alcohol often involved when men beat up women. However, I think they know that if they drink, they may beat their partner, and they get drunk anyway--or maybe they get drunk so that they will be able to beat her up and then have an excuse for doing it.
>
> Here we give stiff penalties to people who drink and drive, especially people who kill or injure people while they are drunk at the wheel. The law says that they are responsible for whatever they do in a car while they are drunk. I think the same should apply to men who drink and batter.
>
> More positively, I am amazed at the change in attitudes to drinking and driving. While some people still do it, the idea of a designated driver who does not drink but who drives for the rest of the people who are partying, has made its way into the popular culture. Surely we could make the same sort of change in attitudes to violence. (NIFL Women and Literacy List, 19.9.2000)

What counts as violence is contested terrain. This reframing of drinking and violence provides an example of how to change the discourse and to reveal the possibility of shifting recognitions about violence.

Silence is not neutral

A recognition that silence is no safer than opening up issues – it too gives a message - is an important awareness for moving into assessing practically how to break silences about violence. The frames of “it’s too big,” “it’s safer not to open it up,” “I don’t know what to do so it’s better to do nothing” all operate on the assumption that doing nothing is safer, a way of doing no harm, wiser than risking doing the wrong thing. Recently, I have noticed that when I speak about my growing awareness that doing nothing is not neutral, those who were speaking about doing nothing as the wiser choice begin to take careful note and speak as if perhaps they might be prepared to think about taking action.

I frequently tell the story Kate Nonesuch told me of her lesson that doing nothing sends a strong message.

> This instructor reported that when she checked in with a woman student to see if a male student’s behaviour was bothering her, the woman remarked that she had seen the instructor watching the interaction. The student said that because the instructor did nothing immediately, she had assumed that meant that the instructor thought the man’s behaviour was acceptable. This is a powerful reminder that if an instructor does not take

> action when she sees violence – such as harassment in the classroom, or a woman's bruises - students witness that silence and lack of action and take a message from it. (Horsman 1999/2000)

I found this a chilling reminder of what can be conveyed by silence. What is the message taken when we look at a woman's bruises or subtler indications that she is in a violent relationship or struggling with memories of past abuse and say nothing? Have we given a strong message that we think she deserves the violence, or must just put up with it because there is no option, when we thought our silence was avoiding saying or doing the wrong thing? Have we given a strong message that past or present violence should not be spoken about here, or anywhere?

After one talk I gave about the importance of taking on the issue of violence if many students are to learn, one man talked to me afterwards, and said he was very wary about taking this on. He seemed to be particularly worried that as a man this was not something he could address. I responded with the story I have just told. I suggested that it might be even more important to take the issue on because he is a man. I argued that there is no neutral place for a man. He is either identified with the abuser or offers a different model of a man, one who respects the woman's right to be free of violence and to set her own boundaries. He can challenge assumptions that all men are violent or confirm assumptions that they all approve of violence. One male computer instructor recognized during a workshop that if he was careful about distance as he helped women at the computer and always asked before taking over the mouse or the keyboard, he would model respectful boundaries. In this way he could reduce the possibility that women were fearful of his presence and distracted from learning by their anxiety. Students from one program had told me that the gentle man who taught them computer skills and was very careful about touch and distance had been extremely healing, helping them to learn and to imagine the possibility of men who would not be violent.

Another male instructor at a workshop had talked about his discomfort at his own silence when women came into his class with bruises. Because he was not from the same culture as the students and they were not telling him that the injuries were caused by male violence, he felt unable to say anything. Together we thought about what he could say that respected their silence, did not make him the judge of their lives, yet was not complicit. His plan in future was to say: "I don't know how you got those bruises, but if somebody hurt you I want you to know that I don't think violence against another person is ever OK. Nobody ever deserves to be hurt." Preparing a response to a range of possible situations can be very helpful for both men and women in literacy – helping to avoid the silences that give messages we would rather not send out.

Increasingly, I argue that there is no neutral place to reach by staying silent. Silence gives the message of complicity with the dominant messages of society that condone violence. We can break the silence using posters, pamphlets, reading materials for students and teachers, workshops, ground rules about violence, and responding clearly to violence and to the pressure to "get over it." When I suggested in a workshop that we need to provide a clear message about the unacceptability of violence,[2] workers talked of ways their actions could give this message. Some suggested creating a series of posters to display individual statements about the

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[2] In the tutor training kit *Drawing the Line: Dealing with affective issues in literacy* I included a set of statements: *Key Messages* about the unacceptability of violence. The kit is available from the Saskatchewan Literacy Network at their website at NALD: http://www.nald.ca/Province/Sask/SLN/Resource/newordrs/drawline.htm

unacceptability of violence and the support offered in the program for learners experiencing violence or its aftermath and struggling with their learning.

Naming violence is not disclosing

Katy Chaffee, a literacy worker in the New England project, mentioned that the disclosures she hears in groups using the arts to explore well-being and support women's learning in her welfare to work program do not burn her out the way disclosures did in the course of her more traditional teaching work, heard around the edges of teaching. She thought the difference was the stories emerge within the class as part of each woman bringing her whole self to learning. In that instance, they were not in a "fix it" frame, but were simply part of the naming of the presence of the whole person, including her past or present experience with violence. In contrast Katy Chaffee realized she had been exhausted by hearing stories previously in a frame that said, "I have this problem – fix it" while it was also not part of the work. This recognition might be useful for other workers in the face of the fear that opening up the issue will be overwhelming.

When teaching an intensive women's group in which I was seeking to name and recognize that most women would have experienced violence, and to support them in discovering their strengths as learners, I was quite surprised to learn that the rest of the staff assumed I was hearing disclosures of the details of the violence women in the group had experienced regularly. They seemed immensely relieved when I told them this was not the case. I think they feared that I was opening an expectation that all instructors would be ready to hear stories in detail. Naming the presence of violence does not mean moving to a place with no boundaries where all stories can be told at all times. Clarifying this seems to be a huge relief to many workers who assume that is what naming the presence of violence will inevitably mean. In retrospect, I realize that after a three month intensive course with a group of women I know no details of the abuse they have all experienced. I know they have experienced much violence. I saw tears often, as they remembered how badly they had been mistreated in the past. I heard a little about the crises they lived as they sought to find a way to continue their studies and hold their lives together. But I did not hear details. The acceptance that violence was present in their lives, the availability of counselling supports and their own acknowledgement that each other's stories would be too hard to hear, meant they were all careful to limit what they shared.

As literacy workers begin to publicly explore ways of naming violence and of making the presence of the impact of violence on learning clear, and to experiment with innovative ways to support the learning of all students, new discourses of violence and literacy will begin to be formed. Janet Isserlis, a literacy researcher focussing on issues of violence and learning, from Rhode Island, suggested that it is important to notice that when we begin to name violence many of us are drawn to all or nothing approaches. We will dive right in and open everything up. She suggested that it might be helpful to explore middle ground – ways of "layering into considerations of violence that bring it to light gradually, subtly" (e-mail correspondence, 5.5.2001). In this way we may be prepared to believe we can open the "can of worms" without chaos erupting!

"What about the men?"

During workshop the question about men's experience often came up. Although the detail varied – what about men's experience of abuse as children and as adults, men as students, and occasionally men as abusers – the oft repeated question seemed to suggest that it is not legitimate (or not possible) to talk about women's experience unless we also take account of men's

experience at the same time. In one workshop the literacy worker seemed angry that I dared to focus my research, and my workshop, on women. Even though I agreed that research on men's experience is also important and suggested that men in literacy needed to take that on, he was not mollified. Margaret McPartland, an administrator in New England, commented that there is not enough research about men who are victims of violence, and wondered whether it existed but she just didn't know about it. She thought it was important for women's sake saying: "Whatever affects men, affects the women too." For some the focus on material about violence seemed to be seen as women's material, only suitable to be used in women only groups. Others were eager to talk about the tension of taking up issues in mixed groups with men they knew to be abusive in the class. I was also often asked about women as abusers, towards each other and particularly towards children.

Medicalizing Violence

The aftermath of violence is spoken about primarily in medical terms. This sets the scene for an approach to issues of violence in education that is clearly focussed on diagnosing who has a problem and referring them for "help." That process can easily become one of sending them away to deal with it. Several literacy workers said that counsellors tell students they need to deal with their issues before they come to school. One counsellor said when he told his supervisor that one of his students needed more support or was in danger of dropping out, his supervisor asked whether it was: "appropriate for her to be here in the first place? Would it make more sense for her to be somewhere else?"

This approach leads to a focus on the diagnosis of an ailment, and a frame that "normal" students can cope with the education system, those who cannot, must have something wrong with them. They need to change, but the education system can remain the same. Literacy workers commented on how saying "you need to talk to a counsellor" can be silencing, giving the impression that the person who has begun to tell is not normal, and has special problems that need to be dealt with outside of the classroom. Recently, I was asked to review a pamphlet written for front-line workers in a range of services because the authors were wondering whether it might be useful in literacy. It did include much useful information but the focus was on identifying clients who are suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and convincing them that they need medical help. I was concerned that such a booklet would strengthen the medicalizing and individualizing approach to the aftermath of violence and deepen the divide with literacy, rather than strengthen the recognition of the complexity of women's lives

"Dealt with it"

We noticed that workers were surprised to find themselves talking about their own experiences of violence, and we got the sense this rarely happens in the literacy field. Several colleagues seemed to be talking with each other about their own experience with violence for the first time. We also felt we heard a discourse of "dealt with it," in relation to whatever experiences workers had been through themselves. Later, in a focus group, several workers agreed they did feel pressure to have "dealt with" their experiences. One worker said that when working with students triggered her own memories of abuse, she took a leave of absence and wondered whether she had disqualified herself as a literacy worker.

This discourse parallels the pressure on learners to go away and heal if experiences of violence are getting in the way of learning. For workers, it seems that pressure to have "dealt with it" increases the separation between workers and learners: professionals give help, they

don't need help. This silences possibilities for talking about how their work impacts on them. Several literacy workers talked about the difficulty of trusting colleagues and asking for support if they are triggered in the classroom. It seems to be part of the discourse of the professional that you have "dealt with all this stuff." This leaves unquestioned the idea that there is a place where violence is left behind and won't be triggered by life experiences. In the face of a discourse of this sort, workers would avoid anything that might make it clear to them and to others that they haven't "dealt with" their past and put it behind them. For "survivors" of violence, then, there is the danger of opening up issues of violence in the classroom. Those who have little experience of violence may feel ill-equipped and inexperienced to take up the issue in the literacy program. Perhaps they may even be wary of discovering common ground with those who know they have experienced violence – leading to questions about their own experience.

I'm not a therapist.

I often heard a teacher say she could not address issues of violence in any way because "I'm not a therapist." This couples with the notion that violence issues create medical problems to be addressed by a therapist, which also excludes teachers from "doing therapy." The discourse of the professional fosters the belief that because teachers are not trained as therapists, and because emotional and violence issues are properly subject matter for therapy, teachers should not take up issues of violence.

This division of the professions sets up the idea that "there are liability issues if teachers who are not trained therapists act like therapists." Teachers believe this is not their terrain. Students also share this discourse. On several occasions when I talked about emotions blocking learning with a literacy group, students have asked whether I am a psychiatrist, or therapist, or questioned whether we are still doing literacy. They, too, know the discourse and remind me that I have strayed away from the expected ground of education. This assumption that anything to do with violence or emotions must be doing therapy, limits the possibilities for exploring new educational practices. I do not want to suggest that teachers should "do therapy," though we may want to learn from the therapeutic field as we explore new ways of teaching and practices that recognize the emotions and draw on the whole self to support learning. Through such exploration we may redefine the taken for granted divide between the work of educators and therapists.

Living beside...

Tanya Lewis (1999) offers a reconceptualization of the impact of violence which allows for moving away from medicalizing the impact of violence and shifts from discourses that suggest there can be a place of having "dealt with" trauma. The conceptualization of a journey from sickness to health puts impossible demands on survivors of trauma. When they are expected to put their experiences behind them and "get over it," pressure mounts to do so, or at least to appear to have done so.

Lewis offers an alternative conceptualization that contrasts with the medical model of sickness and healing, the image of "living beside the violation." She asserts that the experiences of trauma "live on" and suggests a new frame, "familiarity with violence:"

> Living beside the violation becomes much more possible if I understand myself as someone who is familiar with violence rather than someone whose life experience is pathologized. My familiarity with violence contributes to my knowledge, my sense of

> strength and my capacity for empathy rather than as something tainted with pathology that must be overcome. (Unpublished presentation, 1998)[3]

Though medical diagnoses can be reassuring (and sometimes useful[4]) to a person who has experienced trauma, they can also be a trap, identifying a sickness to be cured, leading to self-blame or blame from others, when she is not cured fast enough, cannot leave the pain behind, get on with "normal" life again and learn successfully. This trap can be particularly acute in literacy. The experience of taking part in a literacy program can potentially explore possibilities of living beside trauma. But, if literacy workers have learned the medicalizing and pathologizing discourses well, then workers and learners will seek to show they have left violence and its impacts behind or risk the judgement they are not "ready" to be there.

Canaries in the mine

I also found the metaphor of people who have experienced violence as like "canaries in the mine"[5] useful for shifting from more pathologized views to approaches that recognize no where is free of violence, there is no safe place to retreat to and heal. Instead, it offers the idea that those who have experienced violence are like the canaries, offering a warning that the levels of violence in society are toxic to us all. It is not they who must return to "normal" and accept future possibilities of violence, but society which must change and reduce the ongoing possibility of violation, particularly for women and children. The concept of living beside trauma, along with the idea of survivors as canaries in the mine, shifts away from the demand to act "normal" and get over it. This invites all survivors, whether learners or teachers, to honour their experience of trauma and impacts on the self, rather than seek to deny and hide them.

These new discourses also allow for an opening to tears and a recognition of their value. In my group, I heard myself and others often saying, "Don't cry." Checking this response to tears with other literacy workers I heard from several First Nations instructors that in their traditions tears are to be valued as life-giving, and a means of honouring the grief and those who are trusted to bear witness to the grief. Other instructors were often aware that they, too, had sought to quell tears in themselves and others. Although they were, on the one hand wanting to recognize the value of tears, they, too, drew on the well-worn phrase "don't cry," when seeking to offer a comforting comment. Yet this comment denies the value of expressing feeling. The concept of honouring traumatized parts of the self is consistent with the Aboriginal tradition of valuing tears. Lewis explains what this shift means to her:

> Living beside means acknowledging the traumatized parts of self as they arise in daily life. It means honouring them and giving them space for expression. As soon as I resist and refuse these parts of myself, I quickly move back into relationships and a sense of self that reflect past patterns of survival. When I honour the trauma, I gain the flexibility to move into different parts of myself to create new possibilities. (Lewis, 1999:120)

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[3] 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 outside medicalizing discourses.

[4] Thanks to Nicole Ysabet-Scott for her insights about how a student can use medical diagnoses to bargain concessions from the academic system which may make it easier to gain entry or achieve success within the formal academic system.

[5] Thanks to Susan Heald for this concept and for all her help in recognizing the discourses of violence and education.

Discourses about Education

In our first paper on this research we described several discourses of education that became visible to us through the research. I want to outline these briefly here.

Violence as a barrier to learning

This discourse bridges divides between violence and education, but does it in a way that preserves dominant discourses about violence and education. The concept of violence as a barrier to learning initially seemed as if it might open up the possibility of addressing issues of violence. It has increasingly been a way that I and others have found not only to open talk about the impact of violence on learning, but also to argue for funding to address these issues. However, I have gradually come to see that although it may reveal women's felt experience of ceasing to learn after an incident of abuse, it does not reveal what is learned though violence or the ways in which that learning is in accord or in conflict with other learnings for girls in western society.

Judy Titzel, a literacy worker from Providence, Rhode Island, modified this approach by stressing the widespread existence of violence as a systemic barrier to women's learning. She argued "the pervasiveness of violence is preventing equal access to quality education for women." This approach allows attention to move from the individual who experiences violence to a consideration of what quality education might look like and to the broad range of systemic barriers to creating that quality for all students in all levels and types of educational setting.

In contrast the focus on a barrier to individual learning separates out those who have experienced violence and conceptualizes them as "other," maintaining a concept of the normal student who has not experienced violence. Students who have experienced violence may be seen as having "special needs," or needs which should be addressed outside the education system, while the educational system itself can remain unchanged.

This discourse also contributes to assumptions that only literacy learners will have experienced violence, as those who have successfully negotiated the education system can not have experienced these barriers. This allows other educational institutions to ignore the issue entirely. Or this appproach can lead, as happened in one of our focus groups, to questions about how those who do succeed in the educational system in spite of having experienced violence did so, with the idea that may be this knowledge could be helpful to allow success for those who have failed. This direction opens many questions about what is success, and success at what cost?

The severed head[6]

One possible cost is the "severed head." The educational system can be a place of escape for the mind, but can, at the same time, contribute to a fragmentation of the whole person. Western educational systems do not often 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 have been able to do so only when they can find a space outside the

[6] Sylvia Fraser speaks of taking her severed head to college and seeking to bury emotions and self-hate through putting together a "rational and successful person" she could respect. (1987:130)

discourses of “proper teaching” and “acceptable outcomes” through working in the guise of research or with the protection of special project funding. Yet workers in the New England project, for example, who are using “healing arts” as part of their experimental literacy work, speak with enormous enthusiasm about the shifts they see in themselves and in the students who participate in the program.

To attempt to bring the whole person into the teaching and learning process is to go against the widely shared sense of the “real” work of education. Instructors talked about their recognition that when time is short they get drawn back to practising math and steered away from spending time on supporting students to reflect on their learning and to learn about learning, even when they believed in the importance of the alternative approach. They were surprised to see how the pressure to do proper teaching operates.

Similarly, I have increasingly noticed that when I speak about the importance of focussing on issues of violence my listeners often veer into talk about the methodology of teaching reading. I am reminded the value of one method over another is an appropriate focus in education, especially in literacy, but talk about violence and the necessity of bringing the whole self into the learning process is not. In response to one talk about silences about violence and learning and the necessity of shifting discourses of education in order to encompass the experience of violence, I was asked in the silence that followed about the merits of whole language over phonics. Violence was not mentioned again. On another occasion, after speaking at length about violence, the impact of violence on learning and the need to shift discourses of violence and education, I was asked what I thought about probing into the past of a child who is failing to learn to read, in order to diagnose whether violence is the cause, and how to teach those failing kids to read successfully. It was clear the questioner was looking for method, not suggestions about changing the education system, curriculum or creating space to bring the whole self to learning.

The “correct” ways to be a student or teacher are well-known, the apparent neutrality of this discourse makes it appear that one’s competence as a student is a function of the presence or absence of personal qualities, rather than biases concealed within the discourse. One administrator talked about the “why don’t they just” mentality, as she often heard that question asked by instructors and saw it as a way that the discourse places demands on the student. Learners who don’t conform to the requirements of the good student are judged as unmotivated, not ready, not committed. One counsellor said “there is a sense held by some that if you can't handle the education system you're not normal. Such attitudes dismiss the diversity and needs of students.” The good student does not have problems. This frame allows the educational system to continue unchanged, as if everyone knows how to learn and to be a student, and those that don’t ought to.

Drawing the line

At the end of one workshop a teacher came up to me. She had just realized that the approach “they won’t learn until they’re ready” is another discourse that works against taking on issues of violence. She suggested that the work that might be necessary to help a student get to a point where they are ready to learn is made invisible in the institution, a task for the student alone to deal with. Now she was rethinking, realizing that there might be a crucial role for the institution and the teacher to support that process. The taken for granted discourse draws a line between the preparation work to be done by the student and tasks appropriate to be carried out within the institution.

Drawing the line is also often used to describe the “self-evident” divide between literacy work and therapy. As suggested earlier in this paper, this shared assumption helps to rule inadmissible any talk that might be identified as doing therapy in the classroom. Because there is clarity about what is outside the role of teacher, and in college settings there are counsellors on site, institutions can provide no support and no recognition for teachers who take on a role of supporting students struggling to learn. But, over and over again, we heard that counsellors in institutions often focus on “advising” instead of counselling, that counselling hours are insufficient for students to see counsellors. In community-based programs without counsellors on-site, teachers worry about the long waiting lists and lack of appropriate free counselling in the community. These pressures lead some teachers to feel that they have no option but to counsel. But if they do so, they take on the work illicitly, without resources, office space, supports, time and with the risk of being blamed for becoming “over-involved.” Institutions benefit from this unpaid, unacknowledged work, while teachers can be framed as the problem.

What is missing?

We also heard often about the ways in which expectations about education were framed by particular situations. In various settings, instructors spoke about the challenge of taking up issues of violence given the specific lack of resources students and teachers experienced, the lack of institutional support for their work, and the outright hostility of some colleagues or the subtler resistances. Structural constraints such as attendance policies and waiting lists for places in programs increased the challenge. Literacy workers at Parkdale Project Read, a community-based literacy program in Ontario, mused about whether they would need to move from using volunteer tutors if they were to adequately address issues of violence.

Committed literacy workers were open to thinking about this challenge, but the lack of funding to make a shift from volunteers a realistic possibility, along with the lack of time for reflection and professional development, limits the possibilities for radical solutions. In the same program, the level of stress was revealed as they talked about the difficulty of taking on this work in the total absence of supports:

> I think we could do more, I think we could take more chances without feeling irresponsible about it, because *you open up this can of worms*, possibly, with people, you encourage this kind of speaking about their feelings and then—my sense is that there are no resources in the community. So, people have their defence mechanisms for a reason, and *who are we to try and pry them open* and then they have no supports to… but if there was this on-site counsellor... we’d always know that there’s extra supports.
>
> Even if we went to get information from a counsellor and talked about students... We could deal with some of the problems better if we had some backup. (Interview, Toronto, Ontario, March 2000)

The discourses outlined earlier - the can of worms and the fear that naming is demanding disclosure - remain in place. They are hard to shift without supports to risk embarking on this new terrain.

Safety is fundamental

In the first paper from this research we argued that the lack of a discourse about safety limited what instructors could take on, given organizations that didn't recognize the need for safety for instructors and students alike. We suggested that the lack of a discourse about safety leaves teachers responsible to cope with everything that happens in the classroom. We explored an example of a teacher stretching to try to contain a loud, angry student so that everyone could learn. We speculated what learning organizations would look like if safe, relaxed settings for learning were a priority.

When we took this paper back to instructors I was surprised to learn that Kate Nonesuch didn't think there was an absence. She was regularly able to make use of a discourse around safety in her class. She described using a discourse of safety to create ground rules about accessing chat lines and internet sites in her program. A focus on safety can support learning in a variety of ways, making it feel safer for instructors to open the "can of worms," knowing how to approach this work while maintaining a safe environment for teachers and students. This same instructor described what this looks like in her setting:

> So when a student discloses to me, I can listen, honour her telling, and ask if she has someone to talk to. If she says yes, then I know I'm not on the spot for being the main counsellor. If she says no, then I pull out the little card [of services in the community], and because it is a small community, she will usually have a connection at one or two of the programs listed there, and be willing to go in to talk to someone.
>
> This back-up makes it possible for me to refer to violence and abuse in class, in the material we read, for example, or in the activities we do. I give lots of warning before we read it--"the story we are going to read tomorrow is hard to read emotionally. It is about a girl who was sexually abused--" and students have the freedom to come to the reading class or to work in the other room with the other teacher. I give the warning so students who don't want to hear it can keep themselves safe. Other students come and some will disclose.
>
> I like it better when people disclose to a small reading group, rather than in secret to me, even though they may tell me privately more details than they reveal in group. The culture at our Centre is that abuse is wrong, and that nobody deserves violence, no matter what they do. (Nonesuch, NIFL Women and Literacy List, 27.9.2000)

A discourse of safety can open talk about what might be required to maintain it and what exactly it might look like in each context.

Integrating New Discourses

When literacy workers imagined the possibilities of shifting discourses and creating spaces for new practices in adult literacy, they often spoke of constraints within their own institutions and within government discourses. They struggled with the limitations that could not be moved unless they could shift the frames of their work at the highest levels. Teachers might feel the constraints from the administration, but administrators were clear that they were limited by provincial or state constraints and policy change was needed at that level. In different provinces

and states, literacy workers itemized a similar direction of government policy which they saw as completely opposite to what was needed if the lives of learners were to be taken into account and issues of violence taken up within educational practice:

> It feels like there's a constant tension between [the ministry] and integrating this stuff into the program. You're constantly sort of going like this [stretches in two directions], because it doesn't fit, it doesn't fit in the matrix, there's no way, there's nowhere for any of this stuff to be recorded. ...So it seems like the only way out is to diversify the funding and not be so dependent on [government] and then have the freedom to go the way you want to go as opposed to the way you have to go. (Interview, Toronto, Ontario, March 2000)

In programs lacking space to rethink possibilities and flexibility to carry out new ideas, workers talked about trying to cope and feeling unable to stretch to even think about new approaches. Where any space could be created – through professional development, supportive colleagues and supervisors, project funding, counselling supports – literacy workers are carrying out ground-breaking work.

Provide legitimacy for new concepts of education

Literacy workers who had the opportunity to take part in special projects talked glowingly about the possibility created to explore the unknown and to launch into unlikely experiments. Funding paid for and legitimized talk about new possibilities, allowed for new collaborations, supported a focus on creating beauty in the classroom and made it possible to try out new curriculum such as learning about learning, self-empowerment, writing and creative arts. It is only within such a space that new models could be generated to demonstrate the "success" of shifting what counts in education and provide a basis for challenging policy.

Katy Chaffee, a participant in the World Education project, described the project as a "life raft." A life raft provides safety in a dangerous situation, and literacy workers talked often about the project shifting them out of isolation, creating a supportive group working towards a shared goal. Being part of this group allowed them to withstand the expectations of others about what constitutes the work, permissible items to fund, and appropriate ways to carry out the work. Colleagues in their programs talked about becoming more aware of what is going on in students' lives. This attention helped them to shift the common tendency to blame students, saying "she's not trying hard enough," and reminded them of what they "know but may not regularly think about."

Many of the programs, encouraged perhaps, by my experimentation, transformed the physical space where groups met and were able to justify spending on things that might usually have been seen as frills, such as flowers and food. As Char Caver, a literacy worker in New England, said:

> Food has symbolic meaning. Food as nurturance has been an important part of the program. People feel taken care of. (Interview, Dorchester, Massachusetts, March 2001)

Each program spent some time and money on creating a physical space that showed women they were respected and valued, provided beauty and nurturing food and music. The opportunity to try making change in a way that might often be judged frivolous and inessential, allowed them to

see hoped for changes in women. Transforming the physical space did transform the "inner spiritual space" of the women. Flowers were experienced by women as something that gave them hope. Workers described the flowers as a "metaphor for [students'] own growth, their own lives." The opportunity to create change in this way allowed the workers and the students some "space" outside the everyday experience of violence. Char Caver said it created space for the possibility of hope. She questioned the prevalent attitude in human services, of always making do with "less than," and appreciated a program she had seen where they had said to the participants:

> We value you. We value your endeavour. So we put the resources here to show this. We're not just saying it in words. (Interview, Dorchester, Massachusetts, March 2001)

How often do literacy workers feel that they and their endeavour are not valued, and then stretch to try to offer both the resources and the concrete message to students that the students and their efforts are valued? For women who have been devalued this may be the most crucial message to make learning possible.

Char Caver valued a training that confirmed her own belief in the importance of "acting outside the oppression" in order not to "repeat the oppression." Workers in several programs talked about how easily their own way of working with each other and with students could be part of the "whole structure of violence." Taking part in a project that offered a little extra space could allow literacy workers the opportunity to "ditch the craziness" for a little while and create some well-being for themselves and their students. The question for many who participated was, how to get that message heard more broadly in a climate that was, as several said, getting worse, not better.

Draw new lines between healing and learning

Project funding also created the time and space to explore building connections and collaborations with therapists and healers, and integrate the creative arts into learning opportunities. Instead of trying to draw a line to divide these areas of work, literacy workers had permission and support to explore drawing new lines to link work that is connected within each person, and imagine new programming and new collaborations. Literacy workers often spoke about the new insights these collaborations gave and about the freedom of knowing that they had support in the form of somebody to whom they could take the tensions and worries of their work. Programs explored co-leading groups with a counsellor; having local counsellors offer training for themselves and their colleagues; meeting with counsellors in study circles to learn more about the intersections of their work; and meeting individually or in staff teams with counsellors who could help them think through problems.

My own experience with meeting regularly with a counsellor offered me new insights into my self as a facilitator, new ideas for how to work with the group, support to try new ways of interacting with some students and new language to talk about the work with others. I was always lightened by meeting and talking, by being heard and hearing new possibilities. I noticed that sometimes we could slide into approaches that felt too close to therapy, but other times we were able together to discover new modes that did not invite me to act like a therapist, or stay in the old model of teacher, but instead invented a new place from which to act. For example, I could explore ways of using an easy chair in the corner of the room as a place for women to retreat to when they wanted a rest from participating in the group, but wanted to continue to listen. I could become clearer at seeing this way of providing space for emotions and a container

for the tension and fear of taking on difficult work. It was something therapeutic that offered enormous potential for supporting learning in the educational classroom. I came to realize, from mentioning these ideas or new understandings to the rest of the staff, that this practice of talking to a counsellor might also provide them with valuable support. The staff began to meet with the therapist when they felt it would be useful, sometimes individually and sometimes together. They valued these sessions so much that when we ran out of money, all knew our first priority was to find a way to continue the practice.

Women in several New England programs spoke eloquently about the gains they saw in women who participated in innovative classes. Programs began groups they labelled: empowerment, wellness, love yourself, mindfulness, and so on. The common ingredient was allowing space for women to explore themselves and their lives. Programs used journal writing, meditation, yoga, relaxation, collage, quilting and other healing arts in a variety of ways. They brought in counsellors, artists and a wide variety of teachers. They arrived at trainings which brought all the workers participating in the project together full of stories of the transformation they saw through this process. One central challenge remains what valuable supports to learning and growth they will be able to continue and integrate into the on-going program after the special project funding ends.

Where to from here?

Drawing new lines linking literacy and healing may offer great potential for learning. A key question now is whether the literacy movement will be able to build on the discourses which support diverse possibilities for teaching in ways that recognize the widespread nature of violence and the impact of violence on learning. Change is already occurring in many individual literacy programs. As new discourses become more broadly recognized, the simple divide between literacy and therapy may shift. Addressing the impact of violence on learning may seem less of a "can of worms" and more enticing, offering the potential for creating nurturing spaces for workers and learners alike. Or, as Tammy L. Stockman a job coach based in New England suggested, maybe we can come to see worms as life-giving and necessary for growth, not something to be contained at all cost. I am left with questions about what will allow discourses of violence and education to shift radically in order to create the necessary, widespread change in the whole terrain of literacy work.

Acknowledgements

This paper is the result of collaboration with many wonderful people. I could not have even begun without the support and collaborative conceptual work of Susan Heald. Many literacy workers talked to us in focus groups and interviews and thought through the issues along with us - I learned wisdom from many more than are quoted here. Working with participants in the World Education project and Women's Success Group at Parkdale Project Read gave me many insights. Jennifer Woodill and Nicole Ysabet-Scott provided much needed support with notes and transcription. Janet Isserlis read my notes and gave helpful feedback. Judy Hofer and Elizabeth Morrish offered crucial help when I was blocked, talked through ideas, read drafts and generally made it possible for me to keep going. Moon Joyce, as usual, listened to my struggles through the whole course of this project. Mike Kelly generously posted this paper on my website and Ann Decter, as always, pared clarity out of my words even within the tightest deadlines. I offer a heartfelt thank you to everyone whose wisdom is reflected here and who supported the

process of research and writing in any way. Finally I thank you for spending time to read and engage with these ideas and continue the discussion.

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Appendix: "Key Messages" (see page 8)
(Edited from *Drawing the Line: Dealing with affective issues in literacy*. Saskatchewan Literacy Network: Saskatoon, 2001)

Many people experience violence.

Violence affects people from all races and classes (this includes students, tutors and staff.)

Violence is never justified except for self-defense, or to protect someone else when non-violent attempts have not stopped the violence.

Everyone has the right to be safe and free of violence of all kinds.

If you are experiencing violence now there are options to obtain safety. If you experienced violence in the past there are options to work through the impact of that experience.

If you are hurting someone. It is not their fault. You must take responsibility, seek help and stop. There are supports to learn how to stop using violence.

People who have experienced violence are strong survivors and should not be judged badly.
If you have experienced violence it may have got in the way of your learning.

This literacy program supports all students to learn. This includes adults who have experienced violence whether as children or as adults.