

Struggling Toward Literacy

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By Alfie Kohn

Priscilla is buying food without much sugar these days. Neither her tastes nor her attitude has suddenly changed. It's just that until recently she couldn't read the labels in the supermarket. Her diet has improved because she is, at the age of 47, finally struggling toward literacy.

One of 12 children raised in rural Maine by a widowed mother, Priscilla was pushed along in school until the eighth grade. "I couldn't understand why everyone else could read and I couldn't," she says, sitting at her kitchen table in the Woburn housing projects. "I used to get so mad at myself. I was too afraid to step out and let people know I had that problem. The teachers didn't want to be bothered and my mother had her hands full with the other kids. I said the heck with it."

Like most illiterates, Priscilla devised an elaborate repertoire of ruses to get by. When she was handed a work application or a hospital admitting form, she would say she left her glasses at home and ask someone to read it to her. In other situations, she got one of her four children to help her or else she simply lied on her memory. And she "learned how to talk properly so people wouldn't know." The Census Bureau is still claiming that "virtually 100 percent" of the U.S. population is literate — a conclusion derived from asking people to read and respond to its questionnaire. Not so long ago, this figure was taken as gospel truth and was a source of pride. Today, the claim is more likely to elicit laughter or derision.

The word about illiteracy in the U.S. is getting out. The word is that something like one out of three adults in the world's richest nation is either functionally illiterate or marginally literate. While definitions vary and data collection is less than satisfactory, the U.S. Department of Education, the National Institute of Education, and other sources estimate that 23 to 27 million adults are essentially unable to read. The marginal category, which sometimes refers to those whose reading level is between 5th and 9th grade, is said to include anywhere from another 23 million to 45 million people. Jonathan Kozol, in his book *Illiterate America*, puts the total for the two categories at 60 million.

There are no literacy statistics for Boston, but it is not difficult to infer the scope of the problem from the fact that one third of all adults (defined as 25 years old and up) in the city never finished high school. It is true that some people without a diploma have managed to learn how to read, but the converse situation is far more prevalent: There are people who have sat through 12 years of school and still cannot make sense of a newspaper headline or a menu. "I can't say that Boston is any worse than any other urban area, but [the problem] is critical in all urban areas," says Ruth Nickse, associate professor of education at Boston University.

The astounding number of illiterates has been difficult to acknowledge because of what it suggests about our schools, our economic system, our priorities. And the problem has been reasonably easy to ignore because of its invisibility. People who cannot read have severely limited access to the tools for organizing themselves and pressuring policymakers. They also have a strong personal incentive to keep their handicap hidden.

Conversations with Boston-area residents who have made their way up from virtual illiteracy, as well as with the teachers and program administrators who have worked with them, produce a striking picture of the desperation that lies behind the numbers. Everyday life presents an unrelenting series of frustrations — and even terrors. "Even in the ladies' room, you have to read," says Doreen, 41, of Cambridge. "It's like being in a foreign country for people like us. It's scary." As a child, Doreen "used to watch my girlfriends' faces when they read the newspaper to see whether to laugh or be sad. I had to pretend."

Tragically, someone who cannot read often believes he or she is the only person with this problem. Illiterates have been encouraged to think their inability is their own fault, and they are typically guilt-ridden, humiliated, filled with self-hatred. Every time they must depend on someone else, especially their own children, to perform a simple task for them, this sense of inadequacy is reinforced. Richard, a handsome man of 27 with a ready smile, says he was "scared as hell" to admit he was illiterate. He talks about how difficult it is "for a tough guy to go and say, 'I don't know how to read.' And that's why they are tough guys," he adds. "Because they can't read."

The reasons so many adults cannot read are not easy to pin down. They begin with the weaknesses of public education in the U.S., which have been enumerated by scores of critics. Puny budgets, overcrowded classrooms, a history of racism, and ritzy private schools that siphon off the wealthy students and some of the best teachers — all have played a part in Boston as elsewhere. "The Boston school system's problems didn't start with desegregation," says Paul Grogan, director of the city's Neighborhood Development and Employment Agency (NDEA). "It's been a poorly performing bureaucracy for generations." But Carman St. John Hunter and David Harman, the authors of *Adult Illiteracy in the United States*, considered by many to be the definitive work on the topic, take pains to emphasize that education is only a small part of the problem. "A mere rearrangement of educational furniture is too simplistic an approach to the resolution of the social and economic issues of which illiteracy is only a symptom," they write. "Poverty and the power structures of society are more responsible for the low levels of literacy than the reverse." You don't end poverty by teaching people to read; you curb illiteracy by getting at the structural causes of poverty.

To emphasize this long-range perspective is not to deny the importance of programs designed to teach adults to read — many of which have begun in the last few years. Unfortunately, apart from their political or curricular deficiencies, these programs, at current levels of funding, are making only meager headway. Estimates of the number of adults served by all programs in the U.S. combined range from two to four million, representing only a few percentage points of those who need help.

In Boston, the struggle against illiteracy took a major step forward two years ago with the inauguration of a \$1 million Adult Literacy Initiative (ALI). NDEA director Grogan, who administers about \$22 million in community development block grants from the federal government, was in the process of setting up job training when it became clear that many of the clients could barely read or write. The precise dimensions of the problem were not clear, but Grogan decided the agency should not spend its resources on quantifying illiteracy when it could be combating it. The ALI funds 14 neighborhood learning centers, including both community schools and private social service agencies, to carry out its mission. Half of the 1208 students served in the first year of operation were enrolled in adult basic education (ABE), which is oriented to native English speakers, and the other half were in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. (The distinction is somewhat misleading in that some ESL students are illiterate as well.) As the program begins its third year, participants continue to be primarily minority group members (83%), from low-income households (88%), and women (70%).

But Boston's new initiative is hardly the only game in town. A directory of ABE programs compiled last January for the state's library commissioners listed 107 entries in Massachusetts, of which 35 were in Boston. Some of these programs, typically those offering one-on-one tutoring sessions, target adults whose reading skills are rock-bottom. The majority provide classroom instruction and cater to those with a reading level of 5th grade or above.

There is widespread agreement, at least in certain respects, on how not to set up a literacy program. The individual who finally summons the courage to get help will flee if the classroom situation is not conducive to learning. Richard, for example, recalls having to take classes in a high school gym, where the noise was deafening and the stigma of having to walk past other people was intimidating. "I said, 'I'm getting out of here. This ain't for me,'" he recalls.

Similarly, rote, fill-in-the-blank exercises that fail to provide a context for words or a real-world significance to reading can quickly squelch interest. Such exercises still are widely used in elementary schools, which may help to explain why so many adults cannot read. By contrast, many of the NDEA-affiliated programs use texts that will capture the imagination of their clients and keep them coming back. Any compelling or useful reading matter is fair game: the Bible, sales circulars, bus schedules, and menus. At the Jackson-Mann Community School, new readers grapple with *Our Bodies, Ourselves*; *The Color Purple*; and Studs Terkel's *Working*. At WEAVE, a program designed primarily for black women, *Essence* magazine is a favorite text. A copy machine that enlarges can turn intimidating books into accessible primers.

Literacy programs can avoid such obvious pitfalls as noisy classrooms and boring reading material while still differing greatly in their structure, methods, and client populations. At Cambridge's Community Learning Center in Central Square, where the 200 students receiving basic literacy training typically walk in at a 5th or 6th grade reading level, the program involves six to nine hours a week of instruction. However, those who are on welfare or below the 4th grade level or learning disabled come for 16 hours.

One Wednesday morning, Sylvia Greene is teaching a class for seven women in a dimly lit room with green walls. "For those of you weren't here on Monday, we've gone on to another suffix," she begins. The suffix is "-tion," and she distinguishes it from "-cian." The latter, she points out, usually is found in the names of jobs, such as "mortician." A brief discussion about attitudes toward morticians ensues. Before proceeding to the next word, Greene invites the three Hispanic students to talk about how "mortician" resembles "muerte," the Spanish word for "death."

An entirely different approach is taken by Literacy Volunteers of Massachusetts, a branch of a national organization that recruits unpaid tutors, trains them, and matches them to individual students. The students never meet each other, let alone work together. The makeshift office consists of a section of the library at Roxbury Community College, partitioned by a row of eight-foot metal bookshelves. The staff consists of Roberta Soltman, a casually dressed woman of 31 with waist-length brown hair, and a part-time secretary. Soltman oversees an 18-hour training session for the tutors. "It's not primarily what a well-meaning old woman in white gloves does or a housewife with nothing else to do. It's busy people who love to read and who make the time." Sessions are held anywhere — even at a McDonald's — and they take place two hours a week.

Soltman talks about the students who have called for help during the five years she has directed the operation. They often speak quietly so they won't be overheard, taking perhaps five minutes before finally admitting they don't know how to read. Some of them "describe themselves as retarded, as brain-damaged," she says. She remembers a woman whose husband of 20 years had no inkling of her illiteracy. He urged her to become a tutor; she signed up, but as a student. And then there was the 58-year-old man who ran his own business without knowing how to read or write. "He said, 'You just have to be a con artist.' No one ever questioned him. Other people took care of the books and no one ever knew." Soltman has been listening to these stories for years. "Each time I think, 'I've heard it all. Nothing could surprise me anymore,'" she says.

The tutor's handbook is produced by the national organization, which is based in Syracuse. It contains a list of useful words for filling out forms, a list of words drivers need to know, and a list of the 300 most frequently used English words. The exercises include turning the student's oral remarks into a written text, which is then used to teach the words he or she has spoken. Priscilla from Woburn is one of the Literacy Volunteers' success stories. She proudly relates that she missed only a few words in a seven-line paragraph read the other night and tells how she and her tutor have designed an alphabetical glossary with a check next to the words containing problem letters — "especially the 'e.' She is even starting to answer correspondence from her children and siblings all by herself, to use the dictionary, to read signs and labels. Visiting her sister in Maryland recently, she actually spotted street signs first. "Before, I'd just set there and not do anything. Now I can get involved. I'm pretty proud of myself," she concludes. "I've accomplished quite a bit."

Still another model of teaching reading to adults is provided by Collaborations for Literacy, directed by Professor Nickse at BU. Using a \$20,000-a-year federal grant, the program pays 15 work-study students to take two clients apiece and teach them how to read. The clients read at a 0-4th grade level, and they are directed to one of the NDEA classroom programs once they get up to speed. What makes this project unusual — even among the 18 colleges that are part of the same National Adult Literacy Initiative — is its focus on parents. The idea is to teach adults to read to their children. Nickse saw a PBS summer television program called "Reading Rainbow," whose purpose is to convince children that they should be reading instead of watching TV. "I saw this show and I said that's the key!" Nickse enthuses. "Approach adult illiteracy as a family problem. Build the skills and confidence of the adult so they participate in the teaching of the child."

Ideally, one can teach two birds with one stone: illiterate adults, who often depend on (and are embarrassed in front of) their children, will be motivated to stay with their tutor, while children will get off to a good start by having their reading skills reinforced. Most illiterates are "horrifyingly aware of what a detriment this has been in their lives and don't want it to happen to their kids," says Nickse. Indeed, the people interviewed for this article bear out this claim. For example, Melody, a 24-year-old mother who has just entered another ABE program, fondles her young son and says decisively, "He's not gonna be like his mommy."

The BU students who agree to tutor for \$5 an hour are encouraged to unleash their inventiveness in designing a curriculum. One used her friends and roommates to record a story, complete with playful sound effects; pauses were left for the client, who was following along in the book, to repeat each line. Another tutor had the client's daughter pick a favorite TV character and then worked with the mother to write a novel based on the character. The result was typed up, with blank space left for the child to illustrate it.

The question of how people are taught to read is influenced by the more fundamental question of why they are taught to read. This may seem painfully obvious, but the issue actually is not nearly so straightforward as might be imagined. If you run a large corporation, your motivation in funding a literacy program may be to train people to fill low-level jobs or, in some cases, to buy your product. If you are concerned about social and economic reform, on the other hand, your motivation may be to use language as a political tool that will empower people to change their own lives. The latter emphasis describes the literacy programs used with remarkable success in Cuba and Nicaragua and championed by the Brazilian writer Paulo Freire.

Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, sits on the bookshelf of Barbara Neumann, who runs the Jackson-Mann Community School's literacy program. Freire's book and *Liberation Now and Rights of Tenants* share space with *Word Power Made Easy* — which is just how Neumann directs the program. "The emphasis should be on collective action," she says. Indeed, her students interview teaching applicants and play an active role in generating the curriculum. "In my opinion, most of what's published as adult basic literacy training is really pretty bad news. At best, it's boring and irrelevant; at worst, it's insulting and degrading." She pulls out a sample book, part of the Follett Coping Skills Series, from the top shelf where it has been collecting dust. The book is called "Keeping a Job" and it obviously has been written with employers' interests in mind. "Do whatever you are asked to do," it instructs the student. Three quarters of the book entitled "Finding Housing" is about how to buy a home (rather than rent an apartment); the one on health care assumes the reader has a private physician.

Neumann and others believe that educational materials should not only be relevant to the adult student's likely experience but should awaken and reinforce a desire to change that experience. Sondra Stein, founder of the WEAVE program and now a private consultant, had her students write letters to legislators about the need for funding such programs. "We teach people to act," she says. At Mujeres Unidas en Accion (Women United in Action), the reading curriculum is blended with information about domestic violence and home weatherization.

All three of these programs come under the NDEA umbrella, but their political focus is not indicative of the views of agency bureaucrats so much as it is tolerated by virtue of the decentralized structure of the literacy initiative. Where NDEA officials and grassroots teachers are more likely to clash is on the question of jobs.

"We really do see [literacy] strongly as an employment issue," says Grogan. "Illiteracy is a barrier to employment. Business leaders are starting to see the demographics — a vastly reduced entry-level labor supply." The NDEA literature says that "occupational literacy" is most important, and Grogan is in the process of lining up corporations to help underwrite the program.

So, too, is Mayor Raymond Flynn, who has met with 60 business leaders over the last few months. "My job is to squeeze every penny I can out of them," he says. "We're not appealing to their compassion but to their enlightened self-interest."

This job focus means that success — and "literacy" itself — can get defined as high school diplomas and eligibility for job training programs. NDEA wants to see results for its dollar. But people like Neumann fear that this emphasis conflicts with the need to help illiterates who are a long way off from such credentials — or who may never be job-eligible. NDEA loves nothing more than a ceremony like the graduation exercises it sponsored last June 11 for students who earned a high school diploma through its programs. State officials dropped by, TV cameras rolled, and Mayor Flynn told the graduates they were "the example of where this program is going." But many of those wearing dark blue caps and gowns went into the program with reasonably good reading and writing skills. Given that \$1 million funds only 1200 students, each one needing only a nudge over the top who is admitted takes a place that could have gone to someone who requires far more help and may never shake the mayor's hand.

"I'm a bureaucrat," admits Grogan. "I wanted to see bushels of diplomas. But we've had to loosen up tremendously." He admits that he will continue to lean on those programs that admit too few job-eligible students, but says there is room for many different approaches. NDEA uses ambiguous performance criteria which so far have allowed the individual programs to work with lower-level students, too. Even in the new "Bostonworks" job training program that began on July 1 — a program that would rely heavily on funding from corporations and foundations — Grogan promises that "literacy as an end in itself will also be pursued." To some extent, literacy programs of whatever stripe can be seen as politically progressive. "It's a liberating thing to be able to read and write," remarks Grogan. "The result will take care of itself." If the latter point is doubtful — decent jobs must be available at the end of the line, for one thing — the former point is less controversial. Nickse argues that the greater self-confidence one finds in people who can read is necessary, but not sufficient, for social change. And Stein says, "People who are illiterate are incredibly isolated. The very act of teaching people to read and write connects them to the world and empowers them. These are political skills." An adult student may be thinking more about driver's license tests and children's absence notes than about tenants' movements and sexual harassment complaints. But a newfound command of the written word opens up possibilities — both personal and political — that were never even considered before. The full power of literacy, one might say, can be experienced only by the literate.

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