

BALID Informal Literacy Discussion No.21

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Transformational Change: exploring the difference that literacy makes, from the learner's perspective.

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The real strength of the BALID Informal Literacy Discussions, in my view, is that they provide a very pleasant opportunity to discuss literacy issues informally with a group of people who are all passionate about literacy. Such discussions can be very stimulating.

This was certainly the case when I presented the research I am doing with my colleague, Joel Trudell, which is exploring the changes which come about when people in minority language communities in Africa learn to read and write in their own language. The occasion allowed me to highlight many fascinating people whom I have met recently who have experienced changes in their lives as a result of learning to read and write in their own language.

In the first phase of our research, we are focusing on identifying the changes which can occur, by asking people who learned to read and write in their language some years ago to reflect on the changes they have experienced since they learned. As they have told us, these changes may relate to their own personal lives or to their community around them, or both. In the second phase of our research next year, we will explore more deeply how these changes have occurred. Our research methodology is based on the Most Significant Change technique which maximises the participation in the research of the beneficiaries of a development intervention and which allows them complete freedom to express how the intervention has affected them.

Over the last year, Joel and I have interviewed a total of 95 adults in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana and Kenya. The great majority did not have the opportunity to learn to read and write as children at school; they learned to read and write for the first time in their own language through a non-formal literacy programme provided by a local NGO. A minority of the interviewees had previously learned to read and write at school but not in their own language; they subsequently learned to read and write in their own language.

Joel and I are currently analysing the information which the interviewees have given us. Many of them, especially those who became literate for the first time in their own language, have told us about how being able to read and write has changed their view of themselves. They feel that they are now people who are capable of handling the text-based tasks in their lives without the help of others; this is very significant for them. Some have experienced a greater sense of self-confidence. As one lady in Cameroon said, "Now I am free, I can stand, I can address people".

Many people have expressed that reading and writing in their own language has given access to other learning. For some, this has meant being able to enrol in formal schooling; for others, it has meant being able to read textual materials about things that matter to them. Others have found that reading and writing in their own language has enabled them to learn to read and write in other languages more easily.

Many of the interviewees are members of local churches. Literacy has enabled them to read the Bible translated into their language and to deepen their spiritual lives. One man in Burkina Faso explained that reading the Bible "enables you to know yourself and to live with others more peaceably".

Learning to read and write in your own language can also change the way people see themselves as members of a minority language community. Once a writing system for a minority language has been developed, reading and writing in the language becomes possible; this innovation can alter the status of that language (and of its speakers) in relation to other languages, especially those nearby.

I took the opportunity of this informal discussion to put forward the view that learning to read and write makes people feel more fully human. Not surprisingly, this triggered a good deal of debate! On the one hand, this statement appears too absolutist and too much of a generalisation about the “effects” of literacy which, as we know, are highly contextual. It can also imply that people who cannot read and write are in some sense less human (which is obviously not the case). On the other hand, we know from our own professional experience with people who have learned to read as adults that being able to read and write can change in a very profound way how they see themselves and how they feel able relate to others around them. Literacy can be very empowering at a very fundamental level of identity. Much of course depends on how “being more fully human” is defined but if it involves feeling more capable of managing one’s affairs without the help of others, more connected with one’s community and more significant in it, and more able to influence others (including, for parents, one’s own children), then being able to read and write provides avenues for realising these aspects of humanity which are not available to those who cannot read and write. There is something vitally important here to do with personal fulfilment and dignity.

The discussion also allowed me to reflect on the way in which literacy is conceived, and especially how there has been much debate over the years about the so-called “effects” of literacy. Literacy is seen in some quarters as capable of bringing far-reaching and important changes, particularly in terms of economic development. I argue, however, that at one level, reading and writing is simply a channel of communication, the effects of which depend on the uses to which that channel is put. Reading and writing are the textual equivalent of speaking and listening, another significant channel of communication; since there is no discussion about the effects of speaking and listening, it seems strange to hold the view that reading and writing can have effects.

Yet is there not something about reading and writing which differentiates it from speaking and listening? Although the argument that literacy has cognitive consequences was discredited a long time ago, literacy is nevertheless put into a category of its own as something important and special. This may be due to the fact that, whereas the ability to speak and to listen is acquired in the natural process of development in early childhood, this is not the case of reading and writing. The ability to read and write has to be acquired in a deliberate process; literacy is therefore something which some people possess and others do not; it then becomes a “good” which may be valued by those who possess it and desired by those who do not possess it. Although this understanding of literacy may be nothing more than a social construction, it is nevertheless one with a powerful meaning, especially in contexts where not all people are literate.

As literacy professionals, albeit with different experiences and approaches, we had a most lively discussion which I believe helped us to consider our own assumptions and beliefs about our work. I hope to have another opportunity at a later date to discuss this research project as it develops.

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