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Life-Span and Life-Space Literacy: National and International Perspectives

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Swain: We're constantly struck with the paradox that children are born with a tremendous capacity to learn, and yet many children have great difficulty in school, and grow up to lack the facility with reading, writing, and oral language that is so needed in a complex society. Families across cultures and languages are successful in supporting their children's learning and achievement, and we have much to learn from these successful families and their children. And yet other families have great difficulties. . . . Yet, within families with great difficulties, we have children who are resilient to these forces, and others who suffer great harm.



INTRODUCTION

We have all seen the headlines in the newspaper: the literacy "crisis in the schools," the debate over "high skills vs. low wages," the President appealing for more volunteers in the campaign to eliminate adult illiteracy in America, Jonathan Kozol claiming that 60 million

Americans are functionally illiterate, and more recently, the Governors' education "report card" showing the United States lagging behind many other industrialized nations.

Education in general, and literacy, in particular, are fast becoming a national preoccupation in the United States. In this chapter the focus is on literacy, but perhaps a more expanded and inclusive framework for literacy than is typically the case. Indeed, it will be argued that a new field is beginning to emerge—what might be termed "life-span and life-space literacy"—a field ripe for researchers to explore and of practical consequence today for addressing the educational crisis in America and abroad.

Two stories help to illustrate the present thesis. The first takes place in the distant land of Morocco. I got to know an elderly woman during the period of time when I was working intensively on literacy in developing countries. What follows is a short vignette I once wrote about her in connection with literacy:

Oum Fatima has labored virtually everyday of her 55 or so years of age, and with 4 children and a chronically ill husband unable to help financially, she could only hope to do housecleaning in the wealthier homes of the labyrinthian *medina* (or old city) of Marrakech.

Beyond regular washer-woman duties, it was normal for Oum Fatima to handle a gamut of contacts between the "outside world" and the home and children for which she worked so hard. Such activities varied enormously. On some days, the mailman would arrive with letters; Oum Fatima would deliver each to the addressee, knowing simply by the type of handwriting or script used—Arabic or French—who should receive which letter.

Once a month, the "electric man" would arrive to collect money for the months charges; Oum Fatima handled this affair with just a question or two, drawing money from a earthenware jar in which she stashed odd coins and bills in anticipation of his visits. At the *souk* (market), Oum Fatima's skill in mental arithmetic and bargaining was legendary. Not only could she switch effortlessly between the several parallel currencies in use—dirhams, francs, and rials (a base-five system)—but her ability to negotiate the lowest possible price made her a well-known figure in the *derb* (quarter). To those of her social class, as well as to those "higher up," Oum Fatima was a woman worthy of great respect.

Now, I relate a second story, seemingly quite different, which relates to my own son, who was 5 when I noted this observation. Each night his mother and I would take turns reading to him, as we probably have done since he was about 2 years old. Over the years he has become

very involved in the stories told and stories recited. He knows what is on every page, although he still only knows the letters of the alphabet and cannot recognize more than a few isolated words. He loves his books, I think, almost as much as his legos (plastic blocks), which are pretty high up on his priority list. He is, obviously, just beginning to learn to read. With more time and practice and nurturance, his parents have every expectation that he will become a part of the literate world.

What is the relationship between these two disparate stories across lifetime and life space? There are two relevant linkages. First, each actor—Oum Fatima and my son—are “normal” for their context. Each functions well, and neither is stigmatized for being “behind” or underdeveloped, although neither would be considered to be extraordinarily “intelligent” by the terms of IQ that we in America tend to apply. Second, both are active learners and are motivated to seek new information with all the skills they possess. Are these individuals “deficient” in “basic skills?” Probably, by current Western normative definitions of literacy. Could each of them learn more of such skills? Yes, of course. But, unfortunately it will not be easy. Oum Fatima has her busy life to lead, and so does my son. Fortunately, for my son, we will provide him with such a rich literate environment that it will be impossible (we think!) for him to escape from books, print, and the like.

Thus, in their own milieu, both Oum Fatima and my son are contributors to their contexts and should not be stigmatized as “deficient.” But how do we create contexts for individuals to wish to read, even though they may function reasonably well in the lives they lead? This fundamental problem—essentially one of culture—is basic to literacy work today. My son will inevitably become literate if things continue as they are. Oum Fatima will continue to be a smart lady with print and numbers, but still will be unable to read or write with competence, and this is unlikely to ever change.

In sum, literacy is practiced in ways that can and should be understood *across the life span*, and *across life spaces*, whether in America or in Africa. It is becoming increasingly clear that in a number of fundamental ways, a more literate society cannot be created in America or elsewhere without a more comprehensive conceptual framework—one that explicitly attempts to link children’s acquisition of literacy with that of adult’s, and one that assumes that there is no single normative theory to literacy development.

CONCEPTUALIZING LIFE-SPAN AND LIFE-SPACE LITERACY

It would be impossible to provide a complete review and synthesis of the type of approach that is being advocated in this short chapter. What

I would like to do is suggest that it is possible, and important, to create such conceptual linkages in literacy, both for theory and practice.

Let us take the essential domain of the acquisition of literacy in children and adults as a first attempt to create a life-span and life-space conceptualization. The study of literacy acquisition appears to be heavily influenced by research undertaken in the industrialized world.¹ Much of this research might be better termed the acquisition of reading and writing skills, with an emphasis on the relationship between cognitive skills and reading skills, such as decoding and comprehension. Most of this work has been carried out with school-aged children, rather than with adolescents or adults.² Surprisingly little research on literacy acquisition has been undertaken in the Third World and on non-Western languages, and most has typically focused on adult acquisition rather than on children's learning to read. Despite these gaps in the research literature, it is possible to put forward a number of conclusions about how literacy is acquired across different societies.³ The present conceptual framework for life-span and life-space literacy utilizes three dimensions for the collection and interpretation of findings: environmental-cultural, linguistic, and cognitive-psychometric.

The Environmental-Cultural Dimension

Children. In industrialized countries, it is usually assumed that most children grow up in "literate households," that is, with both parents educated and able to read and write proficiently. While specialists in industrialized countries are now much more likely to discuss the diversity of their respective societies (which is also useful as explanations for the diversity of literacy achievement in the entire population), the so-called "average child" typically starts to come into

¹Similar complaints about the ethnocentrism in the social sciences have been made in psychology. Only recently a volume has been published that takes psychology as a part of global social science (Segall, Dasen, Berry, and Poortinga 1990).

²This tendency, at least in the industrialized world, is undergoing rapid transformation. For example, in the original edition of the *Handbook of Reading Research* (Pearson 1984), adult literacy appears neither as a chapter nor in the subject index. However, in the next edition, published only 7 years later (Barr, Kamil, Mosenthal, and Pearson 1991), there are dozens of entries on the topic, and several main chapters report new research on adult literacy.

³It should be underscored that claims based on the research literature remain weak, given the disparate pieces of evidence available across societies, especially because the research on children has been dominated by Western researchers studying Western children.

contact with written language at about the age of 3 or 4 years, beginning with what has been termed the preliterate skills of scribbling and storybook "reading."⁴ Subsequently, children are socialized for literacy through many years of attendance in school, reinforced by parents who read and wish their children to read.

Naturally, this normative, schematic, and perhaps idyllic picture of literacy learning in industrialized countries leaves out many children in today's world, both in those (industrialized) countries and in the developing world. With respect to illiteracy or low literacy in former colonies, specialists have stressed the importance of class structure and ethnicity/race as explications of differential motivation and socialization of young literacy learners. Some specialists claim that many minority and marginalized children in industrialized countries (constituting what is sometimes called the "Fourth World") are simply unmotivated to learn to read and write in the cultural structure of the school (see Bourdieu 1977, Vermes and Kastenbaum 1992, Ogbu 1983). This approach to understanding social and cultural differences in literacy and school achievement has received increased attention in that it avoids blaming children for specific cognitive deficits, but focuses attention more on changes in the social and political structure of schooling.

Such an approach to children's literacy achievement in developing countries seems to have received only modest attention from Third World specialists, most of whom see the problem of illiteracy in broader social and economic terms. Rather than focus on those who "fail" in the school system (which is usually the emphasis of Western social scientists), these researchers are mainly concerned with how to provide more literacy to the entire population. Thus, the developing country context is seen as one in which there is simply too little literacy in the environment (e.g., books, newspapers, etc.), too few literate parents to teach and add value or "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1977) to literacy in the home, and too few children who attend sufficient years of schooling to become literate.

Overall, when consideration is given to children in low-literate settings (whether in the Third World or America's urban ghetto), the environmental-cultural dimension of literacy learning provides a ready explanation for the lack of literacy acquisition among children and youth. As societies become more literate (measured in terms such as greater numbers of educated and literate parents), the environmental-cultural dimension of literacy development can be expected to play a more nuanced and selective role.

⁴See Vygotsky (1978), and Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982), on writing in the early years. See Sulzby and Teale (1991) on "emergent literacy," the new term for the early socialization of literacy.

Adults. Compared to the considerable progress made in understanding the acquisition of literacy in children, far less is known about literacy acquisition in adults. Indeed, the research base is so slim that there are no major journals that specialize in adult literacy research, and there are few university research centers that specialize in research on literacy acquisition in adults.⁵

In contrast to the study of children, adults who do not learn to read and write in industrialized countries are often considered to be "failures" because they should have learned to read and write in school. Children, although eventually stigmatized in school for failing to read adequately by the end of the primary grades, are nevertheless given time to develop skills "naturally" through home and school learning. By contrast, adult illiterates or low literates are assumed, in most industrialized countries, to already have failed. This distinction is exceedingly important and is one of the key issues in adult literacy work today. Especially in industrialized countries, in which the population density of literacy and literacy requirements are relatively high, the illiterate and low-literate individual may become demoralized by the stigmatization of illiteracy. Thus, motivation to achieve and to become literate is a critical element in the success of most contemporary adult literacy programs in industrialized countries.

The situation may be more mixed in developing countries. With a population density of literacy so much lower, the stigmatization factor may be considerably diminished, as in the story of Oum Fatima described earlier. But a diminished stigmatization may not necessarily have a salutary effect on the motivation. Even if literacy in many Third World countries is reserved primarily for the educated classes, uneducated and illiterate individuals may, for a variety of sociohistorical reasons, perceive themselves to be stigmatized and unable to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy. Thus, motivation for learning can be just as great a problem for adult literacy programming in developing countries as it is in industrialized ones.

Cultural and environmental explanations for adult illiteracy and low literacy in industrialized and developing countries are quite similar and reside principally in the individual's lack of school-based learning (through nonattendance or premature dropout). As in the case

⁵In 1990, the U.S. government established its first National Center on Adult Literacy (NCAL) in Philadelphia which engages in research and development on adult literacy. A somewhat similar center was the Unesco International Institute for Adult Literacy Methods in Teheran, which functioned in the 1960s and 1970s. The Teheran Institute dealt primarily with Third World literacy matters, but lost its funding with the Islamic revolution. NCAL focuses primarily on American adult literacy matters, but also has a strong interest in international literacy issues.

with children, the low incidence of schooling and, more recently, lack of participation in adult literacy programs and campaigns may be seen as a sociological and cultural phenomenon. Adults, certainly more than young children, are prone to making decisions independently, particularly vis-à-vis their parents, although this can vary importantly across societies. This means that the dual coercive and supportive influences of parents and teachers have considerably less influence on the adult learner than on the child learner. As a result, motivational forces may not only be reduced, but also the incentives for participation in adult literacy programs may be entirely absent in developing countries.

Whereas statistics on adult literacy programs are far from adequate, statistics on participation can be quite revealing (and disappointing) for providers of literacy services. It has been estimated, for example, that only 1 in 10 Americans in need of basic skills training is in, or has previously received, such training (Kirsch and Jungeblut 1986). In addition, the available evidence suggests that more than half the new adult literacy students in America drop out before having completed four weeks of their program (Mickulecky 1982, Mickulecky and Drew 1991). Similarly, it has been reported that low participation rates are an important factor in the inability of many countries with significant adult literacy program investments to make significant progress toward improved adult literacy rates (Lind and Johnston 1990).

The Linguistic Dimension

Children. Almost two decades ago, Downing (1973) published *Comparative Reading*, which surveyed the acquisition of reading skills across different languages and different orthographies. Based on his work and the work of others, we know that mastery of the spoken language is a typical prerequisite for fluent reading comprehension in a given language.⁶

Until fairly recently, it has been taken as "axiomatic"⁷ that learning to read in one's "mother tongue" or first language is *always* the best educational policy for literacy provision, whether for children or adults. Based on several well-known research studies undertaken in the 1960s, it has been generally assumed that children and youth who had

⁶There exist, nonetheless, many exceptions. Some Islamic scholars can read and interpret the Quran even though they cannot speak classical Arabic, the language in which the Quran is written (Wagner, 1986). And, of course, many individuals can read and write languages that they may not speak fluently.

⁷See Unesco (1953: 11) and Bijeljic-Babic (1983). National language policies reflecting national attitudes about adult literacy tend to reinforce this claim concerning the importance of learning to read first in the individual's maternal language.

to learn to read in a second language were at a disadvantage relative to others who learned in their mother tongue. While this generalization probably holds true in many of the world's multilingual societies, more recent research has shown that there may be important exceptions.⁸

We also know that languages that have a relatively close correspondence between the spelling and sounds of written language (such as Spanish) tend to make literacy learning easier than in languages in which there exist many exceptions to "sounding out" rules (such as in the English language). Yet, it has also been shown, contrary to earlier anecdotal information, that reading problems (and disabilities) exist in all known written languages, even those in which there is no spelling-sound correspondence (such as in Chinese) (see Stevenson et al. 1982).

Overall, it can be concluded that although important differences exist amongst languages (written and spoken), the normal healthy child, with the proper environment and instruction, should be able to learn to read and write in an environment that socializes for literacy at home and in school. That there remain large individual differences in literacy achievement is usually thought to be explicable by addressing individual-level approaches to literacy learning (as described later in this chapter).

Adults. It has often been assumed by national and international development agencies that the language learning characteristics of children are roughly the same for adults. Indeed, there are extremely few references to the child-adult distinction in the international policy arena. Generally speaking, international and national policymakers in most countries appear to assume that, like children, it is preferable to teach adults in their mother tongue rather than in a second language. The only caveat is that a few governments, putting learning efficiency aside, may prefer a second (usually metropolitan or European) language for the larger purposes of economic development. In the developing world, especially, there have been many about-faces on language-of-teaching policies, so that a clear record of language policy for adult learning is virtually nonexistent. The scientific research literature is similarly absent on the topic of first and second language and literacy learning in adults.⁹

⁸See Wagner, Spratt, and Ezzaki (1989) for details of a study involving Berber-speaking children learning to read in Standard Arabic. See Dutcher (1982) and Engle (1975) for more general reviews.

⁹The exception, of course, is in the area of second language learning by secondary and tertiary (university) students learning a "foreign" language. See, for example, Lambert and Freed (1982).

In second language learning (oral and aural skills), the available literature seems to be varied in its conclusions. Contrary to popular belief, some specialists believe that adults are faster at second language learning than are children, particularly with respect to syntactic and lexical development; by contrast, children may out-distance adults in learning proper pronunciation of a second language, since their muscular habits are less ingrained (McLaughlin 1985; see Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukomaa, 1976, for a major empirical study of mother-tongue learning). Thus, it is doubtful that adults should be considered "like children" in the domain of second language learning, as they possess many more lexical items in their native language than children and have cognitive and metalinguistic skills that may make second language learning far easier than it is for children.¹⁰

Thus, the picture of second language and literacy learning is more uncertain with adults. Even if literacy learning in the mother tongue is necessarily easier than in a second tongue (and this has yet to be substantiated), it does not follow that adult literacy should always be taught in the mother tongue. For example, the presumed cognitive advantage of learning a first literacy in one's mother tongue may be small relative to the motivational aspects of learning to read in the second language of literacy. In the few studies that have looked at the preferred language of literacy in adult literacy programs, policymakers have been surprised to find that individuals often prefer the metropolitan language of literacy to the relatively ineffective (for economic purposes) mother-tongue local language, whether in the United States or developing countries (Wagner 1990, Lind and Johnston 1986).¹¹

In sum, linguistic factors in adult literacy acquisition are just beginning to be understood. In most countries around the world, the issue of "which language of literacy" is often bound up in a host of political issues. Oftentimes it is difficult to obtain objective information on adult preferences, as political figures and lobbyists tend to take opposing positions on the issue of language learning.¹²

¹⁰Indeed, the available educational research suggests that it is probably incorrect to treat adult learning "like children's learning" in almost any respect.

¹¹On a visit to Botswana in 1992, the author heard government officials complain that adults would not attend nonformal education classes unless they were provided in English, rather than in the local Setswana language.

¹²Unfortunately, selected (rather than comprehensive) scientific findings on the matter of language policy are often used by one faction or another in support of a political agenda that is not always in the best interests of the individual learner.

The Cognitive-Psychometric Dimension

Children. Perhaps the greatest corpus of research on literacy has been undertaken within the traditions of psychological testing, developed at the beginning of the 20th century in Western countries. This tradition, often termed psychometric in the intelligence testing community, became better known as the cognitive or skill-assessment movement by mid-century and up through the present.

Because studies using psychometric tests (on samples of Western middle-class school children) demonstrated that reading ability was usually statistically correlated with cognitive skills, such as perceptual discrimination, eye movements, and aural (auditory) discrimination, it was concluded that these skills (the ones that correlate most highly with reading skill) are the basis for effective reading (see Barr et al., 1991, for several chapters on skills and reading). This finding, which has been replicated many times, has had major ramifications for literacy instruction the world over.

First, it was concluded that such basic cognitive skills (sometimes termed prereading skills) necessitate direct instruction of these same skills in the school curriculum. As a result, the past several decades have seen a tremendous growth in the use of "basal" textbooks that stress the learning of cognitive skills and an instructional approach favoring the decomposition of the reading task into simple skill (or subskills) components. One main example is the emphasis on the "sounding out" of simple words or wordlike strings (morphemes).

Second, it was suggested that children who were "slow learners" of literacy (sometimes termed *dyslexics*) were thought to lack certain cognitive skills, therefore requiring remedial instruction on the skills themselves (rather than more practice on reading itself). This approach to seeing literacy acquisition as a consequence of the basic cognitive skills or subskills that underlie reading led to a long-term tendency of reading and literacy specialists to emphasize the individual learner as the "cause" of his or her reading deficiencies (see, for example, Vellutino and Denckla 1991).

Third, the cognitive approach has led to a number of important theories of reading and literacy acquisition. One of the most prominent has been termed the "stage theory" of reading (see Chall 1983). In this theory, it was proposed that all children (and, implicitly, adults as well) would normally learn to: (a) decode the alphabet, (b) learn to read written language, and then (c) read to learn from the written language. Accordingly, these are stages that all readers must go through to become proficient in any written language. While this theory has been debated

in the United States, it has yet to be tested widely in other societies.¹³

Finally, because most of the research on which these conclusions are drawn have been based on Western middle-class children, cultural and linguistic factors have tended to be minimized. It was only with the advent of ethnographic studies¹⁴ that the cognitive-psychometric perspective came under critical review, particularly with respect to the large-scale literacy problems in Third World countries and among minority populations in industrialized countries.

Adults. While there exists a vast literature on the cognitive and psychometric properties of literacy acquisition in children, the opposite is true in studies of adult literacy acquisition. Work is only just beginning on establishing testing equivalencies among the various standardized tests currently used in Western countries. Because almost no direct assessment of adult skills (i.e., out-of-school literacy and basic skills) has taken place in developing countries, there is little basis on which to form solid conclusions for other parts of the world.

As with language learning, it has usually been assumed (due to lack of relevant data) that adults learn literacy like children do, perhaps faster or perhaps slower, depending on the commentator and on the limited research cited. However, it is often taken for granted in literacy campaigns that adults can learn to read in "crash" courses in a matter of weeks or months, even though it is usually assumed to take years with children.¹⁵ Whether such adult literacy learning is retained for functional use is seldom explored, and this area of research has just begun to receive serious attention (Wagner, Spratt, Klein, and Ezzaki 1989).

In summary, when data from research studies are brought together, it may be seen that considerable progress has been made in understanding the *life-span* acquisition of literacy in children and adults, particularly in industrialized societies. Far less is known about literacy acquisition in a truly global or *life-space* perspective and in multilingual societies. Because the bulk of nonliterate people live in these areas of the world, there is much more that needs to be known if we are to improve literacy provision in the coming decades.

¹³It would appear that the Chall (1983) theory, although normed on American children, has some wide applicability to other societies. One major lacuna would occur in societies in which alphabets are not the primary form of written language, such as in Chinese, a nonalphabetic script.

¹⁴See Heath (1982) for an important early study of this kind; and also Wagner (1983).

¹⁵See Arnove and Graff (1987) for some examples of literacy campaigns and time to teach adults to become literate in campaigns.

adult learning and children's learning, such as in the early emphasis on alphabet learning and decoding. But important differences are also apparent. Perhaps most important is the observation that learning to read may have enormously different personal significance to adults than to children, who tend to be socialized by parents and teachers (and even coerced) into literacy. Motivation will depend greatly on differing perceptions of literacy learning, and these may vary enormously by context and across individuals. Similarly, we have numerous studies of second language literacy learning in children, but almost none with adults. A comprehensive life-span approach will require a filling in of the "empty cells" across the life cycle. In sum, despite some important preliminary conclusions that carry across life spans and life spaces, much work remains to be done to construct a comprehensive and intersecting research base in this field.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF A LIFE-SPAN AND LIFE-SPACE APPROACH

In the view presented here, literacy may be understood as a cluster of skills and practices that begins with early oral language skills in all children and develops into literacy skills acquired and retained in varying degrees across the lifetime of the individual. Individuals who never come into contact with written materials will not learn to read, but many who live in contact with the literate world may only learn a few of the practices and skills defined as literacy.

If the present trends continue, particularly with the universalization of primary schooling, the world of illiteracy will diminish over the next century. Indeed, the number of "naive" illiterates—those with no knowledge that literacy exists and with no knowledge of the uses of literacy by others—is dwindling as we begin the 1990s; few, if any, Americans would fall into that category. As other observers have noted, the absolute numbers of individuals with low literacy skills (e.g., with only a few years of primary schooling) continues to increase in many parts of the world, whereas in the United States, these trends are particularly sensitive to race, ethnicity, and social class (Kirsh and Jungeblut 1986).

What are some of the policy implications of this life-span and life-space approach? A few suggestions are provided below.

1. Connect child and adult literacy theory with action. Both child and adult literacy programs need to benefit not only in terms of new knowledge, but also in the contexts in which literacy learning occurs. One new area of work, that of family literacy, is an excellent

occurs. One new area of work, that of family literacy, is an excellent example of this nexus of work. Yet, work has only begun, and the study of both children and adults learning to read together is an important new area of research.¹⁶

2. Build on local cultural strengths. Although obvious in everyday life, building on cultural strengths is a concept often ignored in educational programming, such as adult literacy, as well as in schooling for children.¹⁷ For example, if a government seeks to promote literacy, then literacy training should be built on the languages which people have the most motivation to learn. Literacy programs can be built into family and social services, such as early childhood education programs, as well as in cooperation with agencies for health, labor, and agriculture. Clearly, to be effective, literacy and basic skills programs need to be much better linked with people's work lives, home lives, and life spaces. Only in this way can the real disincentives (such as time away from work and family) for participation in literacy programs be reduced.

3. Do not assume that literacy is a vaccine. Talk of eradicating literacy, as in some national and international agency documentation, creates the illusion that literacy learning and literacy programs can be achieved not only very quickly and inexpensively, but that such learning is virtually permanent (perhaps with a little booster from time to time). The vaccine metaphor seems erroneous on almost all counts. We have not yet integrated what we know and what we still need to know about the trajectory of life-span literacy skills. Some skills may increase, others may wane, all as a function of the practice and practices engaged in by individuals in a diverse and variegated set of life spaces.

FINAL THOUGHT

With the advent of new literacy initiatives nationally and internationally, we have a unique opportunity to support educational efforts. In spite of the clear need for cultural sensitivities and specificities, this new effort implies important economies of scale. Methodologies

¹⁶Family literacy or intergenerational literacy programs usually utilize settings that can involve parents and young children learning to read together. Little research has, as yet, been undertaken on this area of work.

¹⁷The well-known Kamehameha project for children in Hawaii is one of the most cited examples of trying to build local cultural dimensions into the school curriculum (see Au and Jordan 1981).

textbook preparation, as examples, may be transferable with local adaptations to many cultural contexts in this country and others. The need for literacy and other basic skills has never been greater, as the gap between literate and nonliterate life styles becomes ever wider, with parallel growth in income disparities. Understanding and developing the conceptual framework for literacy across the life span and across life spaces may be useful in improving the way we think about and create the literacy programs of the future. It may not be easy to apply such a theoretical approach; but, as has been said before, there is nothing as practical as a good theory. In literacy work, the difficulties and failures of the past necessitate some new thinking if we are to move forward in an increasingly complex world.



Beck: I'm intrigued by the idea of literacy not being retained. I guess I consider it like riding a bike. And I don't understand how something like that can be lost.

Wagner: If you have ever had contact with the international literature on literacy, you will have heard phrases like *literacy retention* or *literacy relapse*, or *relapse into illiteracy*. These phrases appear in almost every UNESCO document on literacy in the Third World. As far as I know, it has never, or almost never, appeared in the United States, which is interesting, even though there's adult literacy work in the United States. The idea is still common currency. When I go to an international conference, policy-makers from the international agencies, including the World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, will say that if a person who has attended a literacy campaign, for a period of time, has not gone long enough, they will relapse into a state of illiteracy; they will not retain what they presumably learned. And the same claim, by the way, is made about a primary school dropout. As you know, in many countries of the world, in the Third World in particular, the average length of primary school, in terms of grade level, is three or four years. And then some children don't go at all. Sometimes they are not children anymore because they may have repeated grades many times. They drop out of school. The claim, in the international literature, is if you

don't go for at least five, or maybe six, or maybe eight, years, that you will relapse into a state of illiteracy. It is not the bicycle metaphor, but, like some other ones, like if you don't practice your French, you'll relapse into a state of whatever that is—uncivilized American. There is, as far as I know, only one study that's been done, one empirical study, and that was actually a study that we undertook in Morocco on primary-school dropouts.¹⁸ As a matter of fact, we are about to start, under the auspices of the National Center on Adult Literacy, a major study looking at the issue of literacy retention for adults in the United States who go for short periods of time to literacy programs. The average length of time that adults spend in the average adult literacy program in the United States varies between two and six weeks. How much is retained after two to six weeks of a few hours a week of instruction, at most? We don't know the answer, and the lack of information about such a fundamental question struck us as being rather amazing. But, in fact, as far as we know, there has been as yet no single study of this phenomenon in the United States.

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¹⁸Wagner, Spratt, Klein, and Ezzaki (1989).

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