

The Other Hidden Curriculum: On Losing *Pena* and Becoming *Educado* in a Salvadoran Adult Literacy Program

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Abstract: This paper examines how participation in a literacy program in El Salvador helped participants learn new social behaviors (to speak out and to become more well-mannered), and identifies which aspects of the program contributed to these benefits. The study suggests that educators must consider the social dimensions of adult education.

From an instrumentalist perspective, adult education is chiefly a means to increase economic productivity. However, learners in this study identified psycho-social benefits the most meaningful. They learned social skills that equipped them to communicate and interact with others—even though these skills were not an explicit part of the program. This paper explains how participating in an adult literacy program helped participants lose their *pena* (shame, timidity, embarrassment) and learn respectful social behaviors—that is, to become *educado*.

Setting and Research Methods

This case study is based on ethnographic, participatory research in El Salvador (June 2001 to January 2002). I conducted the research with Alfalit, a Salvadoran non-governmental organization (NGO), and the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC), the North American partner agency that funded the literacy program. The study examined how literacy education enables and/or constrains women's and men's personal, relational, and collective empowerment (see Rowlands, 1997). This paper focuses on two of these outcomes.

Alfalit sponsored literacy classes in two rural villages. Approximately 695 and 65 families lived in Colima and the outskirts of Rosario de Mora, respectively. Volunteer facilitators (aged 16 to 37, with a third grade through high school education) formed 10 classes and recruited 53 men and women to participate in the 4-month program. The program used a Freirean-inspired curriculum to develop literacy skills and to discuss social problems (albeit superficially). Literacy participants had studied, on average, through second grade, and worked in subsistence agriculture, the informal economy, or unpaid domestic labor. Like other *campesinos* (peasants), they found creative ways to survive in the mist of unemployment, socio-economic and gender inequality, social and domestic violence, and the traumatic legacy of the Salvadoran civil war.

The study focused on one class (9 women, 2 men) in Colima, where I lived with a facilitator's family. I also conducted research with 4 classes in both villages. Methods included participant-observation, interviews, focus groups using gender analysis and participatory rural appraisal, photography, and document analysis. I analyzed the data inductively and deductively by recording insights about unanticipated themes; identifying patterns in fieldnotes, interviews, and focus groups; and asking participants to interpret data they created. I used the measures Guba and Lincoln (1989) propose to ensure data quality and trustworthiness (prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, member checks, and thick description).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework integrates critical and sociocultural approaches to adult education. Critical educators' assertion that education is never neutral (Youngman, 2000). However, I use the term in the positive sense, to show how the program provided a social space and transmitted norms that helped adults diminish their shame and learn respectful social behaviors. Several scholars draw my attention to the social aspects and outcomes of literacy education. Research on gender and literacy shows that adult education provides a valuable social space and yields psycho-social benefits, especially for women (Horsman, 1990; Stomquist, 1997).

Applying Mezirow's (1997) definition of communicative learning to this case suggests that literacy education equips people not only to perform instrumental tasks, but also to communicate and interact with others in more satisfying ways. This helps explain why learners in this study associated literacy with the ability to express themselves and treat others respectfully.

Sociocultural theory asserts that education and learning are entwined with the contexts in which they occur (Alfred, 2002). The concept of *educación* shaped Salvadoran learners' reasons for attending literacy classes and the ways they benefited from the program. In contrast to the North American notion of education as the acquisition of academic knowledge, *educación* is a Latin American cultural concept meaning proper, respectful social behavior (Linhardt, 1997; Reese et al., 1995; Valdés, 1996). *Educación* includes manners and moral values, not just book learning (Valdés, 1996). It entails a set of social skills and guidelines for proper conduct.

Findings

Illiteracy: A Source of Shame and Sign of Not Being Educado

During fieldwork and previous visits to El Salvador, I often heard *campesinos* and adult learners use the word *pena* to describe their sense of shame, embarrassment, and timidity, especially regarding social interaction and public speaking. Antonio, for example, described *pena* as a fear and a "sickness that doesn't let you talk or participate in anything." Most learners, especially women, were visibly timid and afraid of speaking to, or in front of, others. *Pena* stems from the intersection of poverty, the devaluation of *campesinos*, gender inequality, political repression during the civil war, geographical and social isolation, lack of education, and the culture of silence (Freire 1973). Illiteracy also contributes to *pena*. Learners feared others would ridicule them for being illiterate or uneducated. Many of them wanted to learn to sign their name because they felt ashamed when they used their fingerprints or paid someone to sign documents for them. For instance, a male teenager stated, "I felt really bad because I said to myself, 'If I could read and write, I'd sign my name, not use my fingerprint.' That's why it's very important to be able to read and write." Learners believed that acquiring literacy and math skills would prevent others from deceiving them (e.g., overcharging). Finally, *campesinos* often blamed themselves for illiteracy rather than seeing it as a violated right. Their reasons for attending classes (helping children and family, obtaining a better job, avoiding deception, learning to communicate, etc.) suggest that they perceived literacy as a way to "defend themselves." Learners associated literacy with dignity, independence, and efficacy—the essence of empowerment and illiteracy with uselessness, powerlessness, dependence.

Illiteracy also contributed to *pena* because it symbolized a lack of *educación*—not knowing how to express or conduct oneself appropriately. Consequently, learners saw literacy as the gateway to becoming *educado*. Epolonía explained the link between literacy and *educación*:

If we know how to read, we know how to get along with others. If we aren't learned, we act like animals....So if someone comes and says, "Good morning, Nía Fulana. Look, I've come to ask you a favor. Your pigs have been disturbing my yard."...And since I'm not learned, I don't have wisdom. I tell her [*nasty, angry tone*], "And what are you doing at my house? Get out of here!!" And I sic the dogs on her. You treat people with ordinary words because you don't understand learning. You haven't even seen the doorway of a school....But when we understand *educación*, that's why it says "*educación*." It means that we're going to be *educados* in the way we conduct ourselves with other people.

Other learners echoed these ideas. For example, Karla decided to attend classes because "I didn't know how to *comportarme* [behave, conduct myself] and sometimes you don't even know how to attend to [treat] people, since you don't understand what they're saying to you." Juana

explained that sometimes you don't know how to express yourself in a conversation or meeting, but knowing how to read and write, you change your way of *talking* to people—you speak *properly*. Learners expected that developing literacy skills would not only help them achieve instrumental purposes, but also *social* ones, such as learning how to express themselves and treat others respectfully. Literacy signified more than technical skills; it entailed communicative, social learning. Learners' views of the social purposes of literacy were grounded in the concept of *educación*.

Losing Pena and Becoming Educado

Participation in the program yielded important psycho-social benefits for adult learners.

Loss of Pena. Men and women in both villages (13 of 20 interviewees) stated that after attending classes, "*Se me quitó la pena*" [my shame/embarrassment left me]. Learners felt more confident reading, speaking, and talking to others in social settings such as classes, meetings, or church. To represent this change in her life, Rachel asked a friend to photograph her reading in front of the class. She explained, "Before I didn't go to class. It gave me *pena*. And now I can go to the front to read. I don't feel anything." Flor explained, "The *pena* has also left me because before I was very shy; I was even ashamed to talk in front of a bunch of people." She also began leading devotionals in her church. "[*Before*] when I was reading or giving a reflection on a biblical text, I felt like crying and I felt that icky-ness in my chest and afterwards I couldn't even talk; my chest and throat trembled. But not anymore—no *pena* at all. I have more desire to talk about the Bible when we do a devotional." Antonio, Flor's brother, shared that he was no longer timid or afraid to speak. He showed me how he used to stand—hunched over, eyes and head down—and asked a relative to photograph how he stands now—shoulders straight and head held high. He explained the meaning of this photo to me and a group of learners: "Before, I was afraid of Esther because I saw her as really big. Through studying, now I'm not afraid and now I can talk with her. I'm not afraid of her anymore."

The loss of *pena* generated a sense of confidence and psychological well-being. For instance, when I asked Karla how she felt about herself before attending classes, she responded: Ay, I'll tell you that I felt like I was useless for society and much less for my family. [*And now?*] Well, now I believe that yes, I am very useful....Before I had a lot of *pena* and I felt very *apagada* [muted, extinguished], but now I don't. But that's a thing of the past, now it's behind me. Now is the present and I have to continue forward, I have to struggle for myself and everything that comes my way.

Karla's comments exemplify how attending classes reduced learners' feelings of shame.

Becoming Educado. As learners lost their *pena*, they also learned to communicate and interact in more appropriate ways—to become *educado*. Learners (mostly women) reported that they got along better with people because they had learned how to *express* themselves and *treat* people respectfully. (Participants in both villages had identified conflicts among neighbors or families as key community problems.) Becoming *educado* entailed replacing some behaviors (e.g., lying, anger, gossip, rudeness) with others (e.g., friendliness, respect, understanding). For example, women commented, "I'm more friendly with people," "I have more respect for people," "Before I was more *malcriada* [ill-mannered, rude]," "I'm no longer as angry," and "We talk about the class instead of things that are improper" [i.e., gossiping]. Flor explained:

I've changed in that I shouldn't say things that aren't true, nor talk about others. For example, if a friend tells me something about someone else, I'm not going to say, "So and so told me—" I shouldn't do that anymore....Before, I could hardly stand myself, because I sometimes said things [about others] that weren't true....But later, when I

reflected and we counseled each other [in the class], I asked God for forgiveness, because God doesn't want that—for you to act like that with your neighbors and everyone. You've got to love each other, like you love your own body.

Juan and Esmeralda also described the social behaviors they learned:

[I'm learning] how to be understanding with people, to make myself understood, to know how to learn to read and write.

Here in the class they taught me...how we could be united...and how we could act with people. They talked to us about *educación*...how to be *educados*.... I've learned more, to be *educado*, to be friendlier with people. Yes, this experience has served me well

Esmeralda went on to describe how she “treated her husband better” and explained to him “what they teach us” in literacy classes:

I don't talk back to him because...in the classes they've taught you to talk, how to act with people. So I [tell him], “Look, such and such. Look, it's like this. Is that right?...Look,” I tell him, “when you talk to someone and that person talks to you very harshly...talk to them with a soft voice so that they say, ‘Oh, [he] knows how to speak. I wonder how he learned to act.’” So I've told him all of that, because here I've learned to be *educado*...[and] amiable with people, not to talk back to them or to offend them. I've learned all of that here, and partly from the fear of God that I have....The things of God [i.e., religious matters or teachings] and what you've been teaching me in class have been very useful to learn to be able talk to people, not to offend them in anything.

This example shows how learners modeled for others the social behaviors they learned in class. The program's goals were to reduce illiteracy and foster community development; teaching social skills was not an explicit part of the program. What, then, explains these changes?

Factors Contributing to Psycho-Social Benefits

Literacy classes provided a venue for social interaction. Learners claimed they lost their *pena* by *meeting and talking with people* in their classes. Rachel explained, “Sometimes you talk at home, but among family. But here, with all of us talking, we lost our *pena*.” Getting to know people made learners less timid, as a 14-year old girl noted: “Before, Rachel and Ana didn't know me and now they do. Also Mayra and Esperanza—now they know me and they're good friends of mine. They also got rid of my *pena*, because before I was very *penosa* [timid, shy].”

Facilitators' actions also helped diminish learners' shame:

Tatiana [the facilitator] made us go to the front to read parts of the lessons....That's how the *pena* left us, because the first day that I came here, when they were going to go to the front [to read], I didn't want to...until I went. And from then on the *pena* has left me, but when you get to know people better, the *pena* leaves you.

Unlike elementary school, learners practiced speaking and reading in an atmosphere free of ridicule. The facilitators were patient and friendly, encouraged learners, and reassured them that no one would laugh. Learners also encouraged and helped each other, creating a spirit of mutuality. Finally, some classes self-segregated by sex, which decreased women's shyness:

Now our group is almost all women. And that way it doesn't give you much *pena*....It's not the same as when there are men. You feel more *pena* [with men]. But [with other women], as a woman you feel that it's equal because we women get along better.

In a culture where women speak less than men in public and people suspect infidelity if a woman talks to a man, sex-segregation helped women have more confidence and “courage” to speak.

Regular social interaction with facilitators and learners also helped participants to become more *educado*. Facilitators both encouraged and *modeled* respectful social behavior, which helped participants learn to express themselves and get along better. For example, one facilitator did not let interpersonal problems between her family and some of the learners prevent her from inviting them to class, while facilitators in Rosario did not criticize people of other faiths (a common practice). Although many learners did not see the point of the discussion of the generative theme, this ritual helped them practice civil discourse (expressing ideas, listening, taking turns, etc.). Learners and facilitators imparted wisdom regarding respectable, moral behavior through *consejos*—“spontaneous homilies designed to influence behaviors and attitudes”. Facilitators occasionally gave *consejos* during class (e.g., about the importance of working together or respecting others); learners also counseled each other about personal problems and how to treat others. As Flor said, “Meeting together in a group I see that one counsels the other and gains more experience, and you live well.”

Finally, learners described how the participatory research activities I designed helped them express themselves and treat others differently. Esperanza explained:

It’s helped us a lot in [knowing] how to conduct ourselves with other people, how to be more attentive to others, to be a better friend. Because before maybe there was a friend who wanted to talk to you and when we talked to them, [they’d say], “Ay, vos! [Oh, you!] You sure do bother me! Don’t talk to me!” And maybe that person wanted to talk to you.

There are times when you want to talk and you can’t find anyone to talk to.

I intentionally planned activities to help learners gain confidence and interact respectfully. For example, I planned team building exercises, introduced the “talking stick” concept, urged learners to listen to each other, and provided opportunities to practice public speaking.

Discussion and Implications

Attending classes and developing literacy skills gave learners a sense of efficacy, dignity, and self-confidence, and helped them overcome their shame. They felt more able to defend themselves, help their families, speak with confidently, and interact socially. Although learners gained some literacy skills, the study revealed that they most valued the psycho-social benefits of participation. The program helped learners overcome *pena* and become *educados* chiefly because classes provided a space for social interaction and communication. The program’s content was secondary to the social space it provided. In this venue, adults practiced new social behaviors that facilitators and other participants implicitly or explicitly encouraged through modeling, *consejos*, class discussions, and other means—that is, the hidden curriculum.

These findings confirm previous research underscoring the importance of adult education as a social space where learners—especially women—share advice, solve personal problems, and gain confidence (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000) which also involves technical skills. Instrumentalist approaches that view adult education as a means to increase economic productivity overlook the social meanings and benefits that learners most appreciated. For example, participants associated literacy with *educación*, which entailed a repertoire of proper social behaviors. The similarity to Mexican immigrants’ views of *educación* (Linhardt 1997; Reese et al. 1995; Valdés 1996) indicates that this concept applies more broadly to Central Americans. Cultural values like *educación* frame why people pursue adult education, and what they believe they gain from it.

Adult education programs tend to prioritize—and are evaluated by—the attainment of technical or practical goals. However, educators should examine carefully what kinds of *social* behaviors their programs instill. For instance, how does a program implicitly encourage or discourage adults from speaking out or interacting respectfully with others? If learners value developing social and communicative abilities, then adult educators should make these explicit goals. (Specifically, educators working with Central Americans or Mexicans should recognize the value they place on *educación*—proper social conduct.) For example, educators could provide opportunities to socialize in and outside of class, to practice oral communication and public speaking, to exchange ideas, or to learn how to resolve disputes—not to teach other to “act right,” but rather to give them the tools they need to succeed in the culture of power (Delpit 1995). Educators should also identify which factors may increase or decrease learners’ reticence, such as cultural norms regarding male-female interaction. To accomplish these goals, the training of paid and volunteer educators should equip them to foster social and communicative abilities.

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