

What Did They Learn? Legacies of Schooling

by **Jenny Horsman**

How literacy programs can support learners affected by violence

In recent research I sought to understand more about the way violence affects learning by interviewing young people who were struggling with learning, either within or outside the school system. I believed students who had recently experienced violence would be able to describe how their learning had changed and I wanted to explore how institutional responses to trauma supported or limited learning possibilities. I was also curious about the legacy of the school experience adult literacy students carry with them into adult programming, particularly those who turn to literacy programs soon after leaving school. The last issue is what I want to write about here.

Many writers have suggested that, for trauma victims, therapy should be directed at helping the survivor regain a sense of control, connection and meaning in their lives. My latest research led me to see that issues of control, connection and meaning are just as crucial in education. The work also led me to question the paradigms that operate in the school system and to suggest ways they need to be rethought. These issues are discussed in the full report of the research (Horsman 2004a). Here I reflect on the legacy of schooling that students who have experienced violence are likely to bring to literacy programs.

Legacies of violence

The focus on removing students from the violent home leads to silence and few opportunities to explore meanings of violence or its impact on learning.

Silences often continue when youth are long past the age where violence must be reported. The focus on getting children out of violence as the key solution parallels an idea that girls and women are addressing their issues adequately only if they leave abusive partners, and engenders frustration with those

who don't leave, or who return. Negative judgement may make it harder for young people to speak about violence they continue to experience. It contributes to a sense that the experience of violence is private and shameful, not to be spoken about. Instructors are unlikely to feel comfortable asking questions, but without open dialogue, instructors and learners are less likely to make connections between past or present violence and learning difficulties. In this way, silence itself becomes a barrier to learning.

Policies theoretically designed to protect students from bad teachers limit connections and the possibilities for developing trust.

Even in the more informal setting of a literacy program, the legacy of limited connections and distrust of adults is likely present, limiting new learning relationships. Many students may have developed a sense that adults don't want to know and don't care. Recognizing this fact may make it easier to respond to those students who repeatedly test whether they can trust the teachers in the program. When teachers understand these tests as a legacy of past experience, they may be less likely to take such testing personally. Building in proactive approaches that develop connection and build trust may make an enormous difference to students' ability to learn.

Removing violent students from school excludes students from the learning community.

Misbehaviour is one way that students in school, who have limited routes to speak directly and maintain control, break silence about violence being done to them. When nobody asks why they are misbehaving, students may have an added sense of injustice: others who hurt them get away with violence, but when they are violent, they immediately



This photograph was taken by a young person attending a photojournalism program offered by Leave Out Violence (LOVE). LOVE reduces violence in the lives of youth and in our communities by building teams of youth who communicate a message of non-violence. For more information, visit www.leaveoutviolence.com.

get into trouble. When these students arrive in literacy programs they will likely have the legacy of suspensions and expulsions, which may include: a well of anger, lack of faith that they can learn, and fear that they will be further shamed or rejected.

Demanding attendance does not support learning.

Students will have experienced consequences for absences and lateness in school. Rather than this approach, students need support to reduce interruptions in their learning. Programs can be most successful when they allow educators to show that they notice and care, and help the student re-engage with learning wherever possible. A student might be more able to stay in class and focus on learning if she knew that her teachers were familiar with the effects of violence and understood the difficulties she was having, she had access to retreat spaces where she could go when she needed to be alone or to feel safe, she could get support to fill in the gaps in her knowledge caused when she was unable to pay attention, and she was offered help to see that her reactions were ordinary responses to violence. If she was unable to stay in the class, an approach focused on how to help her catch up when she returned—whether two days or two years later—

would be crucial to avoid shaming her for failure and to support her future learning.

Labelling students may have limited their learning.

Many students come to literacy programs having been diagnosed with learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), mental illness or even Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These labels may have been of value if they had helped students recognize the difficulties they were having and believe

that, with supports, they would be able to learn. When these supports are not available, diagnoses may contribute to a belief in stupidity and divert learners from assigning meanings to the difficulties associated with the violence they experienced.

The Toronto District School Board offers an innovative language laboratory program with computers equipped with a wide range of interconnected software along with specially equipped laptop computers. Students with learning disabilities can take these to class so they can complete work unhampered by difficulties with reading and writing. This approach requires a combination of computer resources, trained resource people and teachers. If similar facilities were available to all literacy students with language-based learning disabilities or difficulties, their success at learning might substantially improve. Their frustration, and the violence and low self-esteem that easily result from failing, might decrease.

Being accountable for teaching does not support learning.

With cutbacks prevalent in all areas of education and social services, it is more than likely that students will have experienced everyone as too busy

to build trust, support reflection and strengthen understanding. Students need these connections in order to rebuild self-esteem and self-worth damaged by violence and to achieve success in learning. The processes of accountability tie up many professionals with paperwork. When educators were unable to respond to students' needs, many students concluded that nobody cared. Many students will continue to test educators to see if they can afford to trust them. Educators need the resources which allow them to respond positively and provide long-lasting support.

Where literacy programs acknowledge the presence of violence and its impact on learning they can create programming to support learning.

Literacy programs will create safer environments where this learning can take place if they acknowledge the widespread presence of violence, make it possible for students to move away from believing they are bad, and support students to create connections with trustworthy adults. Programs will also be safer places if they support students to take control of their own learning and whether or not to disclose the violence they experience. If programs offer a wide range of accessible supports, collaborate with students to design programs where students want to spend time, use holistic approaches that help students feel valued and respected—that they are a resource rather than a problem—they will create learning environments where students can discover their own brilliance and learn that they can learn.

What will they learn in the literacy program?

Students who appear not to be learning are still learning something. Are they going to confirm what they have learnt far too well in school, that they are stupid, bad, a problem, that they don't belong in education and can't ever learn? Or can literacy programs support teachers in a clear teaching task? My research clearly indicated that instead of a downward spiral of failure and confrontation, students who have experienced violence can learn that their learning difficulties are normal reactions to violence and that they are struggling normally to survive violence. They can learn approaches and build connections that help them learn, they can learn about themselves as learners and what works for them, and they can learn to trust that they can learn when the time and approach are right. ■

Acknowledgement:

Although I do not have the space to name and acknowledge the tremendous contributions of everyone who helped me in this research, it could not have happened without the generosity of all those who agreed to spend time in interviews and focus groups and the many more who provided some form of support. This article was written with Nicole Ysabet's assistance throughout.

Notes:

1. This research was funded by the National Literacy Secretariat of Human Resources and Skills Development and sponsored by Parkdale Project Read, Toronto to give them guidance in how to support youth more effectively in their literacy program. Full reports from this research (Horsman, 2004a and b, Ysabet, 2004) are on-line at www.jennyhorsman.com.
2. This study built on my earlier research exploring how violence affects learning (e.g. 1999/2000), my practice changing adult education programs to better support learning for those who have experienced violence (e.g. Horsman, 2001a, Morrish, Horsman Hofer, 2002) and research questioning discourses which help and hinder making changes (e.g. in press). Further publications are available at www.jennyhorsman.com.

Jenny Horsman is a community-based theorist and educator who has taught literacy students, developed curriculum, conducted training and carried out research rethinking literacy and pedagogy. Her book *Too Scared to Learn* – along with further research, writing, and workshops – encourage educators to better serve women and girls who have experienced violence.

SOURCES:

- Horsman, Jenny (1999/2000). *Too Scared to Learn: Women, violence and education*. Toronto: McGilligan Books, 1999/New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000.
- Horsman, Jenny (2001a). "Why would they listen to me?" Reflections on learner leadership activities. In Barbara Burnaby and Pat Campbell, (Eds.) *Participatory Approaches in Adult Education*, Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Horsman, Jenny (in press). Creating change in literacy programs: Taking account of violence. In J. Anderson, M. Kendrick, and T. Rogers *Critical Issues in Family, Community and School Literacies: Intersections and tensions* (working title) New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Horsman, Jenny (2004a). *The challenge to create safe learning environments for youth*. Toronto: www.jennyhorsman.com
- Horsman, Jenny (2004b). *The Impact of Violence on Learning for Youth: What can we do?* Toronto: www.jennyhorsman.com
- Morrish, Elizabeth, Jenny Horsman, and Judy Hofer (2002). *Take on the challenge: A sourcebook from the women, violence, and adult education project*. Boston: World Education. Also available online at <http://www.worlded.org/docs/TakeOnTheChallenge.pdf>
- Ysabet, Nicole (2004) *You Have to Believe it to See it: Safer learning in dangerous times*. Toronto: www.jennyhorsman.com