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OF LITERACY/ILLITERACY
FOR WOMEN AT MBOZA —
A RURAL COMMUNITY

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The paper describes a group of women literacy learners' conceptualizations about their lives in a rural community and their perceptions of the worth of literacy in this context. Central to their reflections about their lives, and their decision to attend literacy classes, was their desire for independence and control in a context where they feel resourceless; and where literacy, as an aspect of formal education, holds the latent promise of improved life chances.

The research which informs the paper was recently undertaken in a remote rural area known as Mboza in north-eastern Natal/KwaZulu, and is intended to supplement an ongoing, more extensive, research and development initiative. Research undertaken in this community is directed through a community-based development programme, known as The Mboza Village Project, which evolved out of a partnership between the community and researchers; and the aim of both research and development activities is to address the ever-deepening crisis of poverty and powerlessness in rural areas such as Mboza.¹ Any research undertaken in the community should therefore, in principle, have direct bearing on development activities where the focus remains on the development of human potential, as opposed to the usual top-down approach to 'fact-finding' research which characterizes so many rural development strategies.²

This study focussed specifically on the social meaning of literacy/illiteracy for rural women, as revealed through the personal knowledge of a group of literacy learners at Mboza. The methodological framework which informed the process of data gathering and analysis, as well as the reconstruction of the participants' viewpoints here, is outlined elsewhere.³ Suffice it to point out that it followed a rationalist as opposed to an empiricist methodology, because the emphasis was on the meaning of the experiences and beliefs of the literacy learners, not on a quantification of these.⁴

The fact that the women and young girls who participated in the research had chosen to attend literacy classes made them a group highly suited to a preliminary investigation of the importance of literacy in a rural context; and also of the intrinsic motivation people like them seem to have to start the invariably long process of becoming 'literate'.⁵ None of the participants had had any formal schooling, and they ranged in age from young girls in their teens to older women in their late fifties and sixties. Information was gathered from 43 literacy learners, both in interviews and in focus group discussions. Learners of a similar age status grouped together for the discussions, and they broadly divided into groups of older women, young women, and teenage girls.⁶

In the reconstruction of data gathered, the focus is intentionally on the ordinary language and lay explanations of the literacy learners themselves. Direct quotes are used from the transcriptions of the various discussions held, as well as paraphrases and summaries of their viewpoints. The choice is based simply on what captures the essence of their views best. In the first section, a description is given of the literacy learners' perceptions of life chances and the worth of literacy as reflected through their conceptualizations about life experiences. This is followed by a brief discussion of some controversies in the literacy debate, specifically about the consequences of literacy, which is then related to the perceptions of the women. Both 'indigenous' and 'expert' knowledge are therefore presented here. The paper concludes with some comments about the centrality of 'indigenous' knowledge in enquiries into the social consequences of literacy, and hence also in development decisions related to literacy education.

2.0 LIFE CHANCES AND THE WORTH OF LITERACY

The context in which literacy learners expressed their views on life chances and the worth of literacy is crucial to an understanding of the

meaning of literacy/illiteracy for women in a rural area such as Mboza. This, in essence, is the context of poverty and powerlessness in black rural areas in South Africa. Their experiences therefore capture the harsh realities within which they live, and underscore the dominant theme which emerged in their conceptualizations -- the need for independence and control. They frequently talked about:

- their dependency on a cash economy;
- the inadequacy of subsistence farming;
- poverty, poor health and famine;
- the effects of the migrant labour system;
- the degeneration of traditional values;
- the problem of alcoholism;
- illiteracy and restricted access to formal schooling; and
- the restricted mobility of women in particular.

It also became clear that the decision to become literate is, for most women, inextricably tied to what they perceive to be the value of education. The viewpoints of the older women were generally more conservative, the younger women were blatantly outspoken about their oppression as illiterate, 'uneducated' women. Illiteracy for the young girls is perhaps, in an overt sense, the most severe. They compare their lives to those of their peers who attend formal schooling, and literacy classes are then inevitably perceived as a second-best opportunity in the light of the opportunities formal schooling is believed to offer.

In addition, the single most important direct benefit for them is that literacy classes provide a forum where similar experiences can be shared by women. In the words of an older woman: "Women can be free together here ... husbands inhibit our conversation." The younger women also echoed the feeling that women are similar and therefore they can think together: "We can think nothing with men." Another added, "Men think nothing of what women say, they just ignore what we say." For the younger girls, too, this bond of togetherness means, "We can laugh and argue together with women ... we are free to talk."

The varying emphases which emerged in the different age groups' discussions of the importance of literacy as a resource in the context of their daily lives were to be expected. Different generations clearly have differing life experiences which affect their perceptions. And it is in an analysis of these varying perceptions, and of the contradictions in such perceptions, that we come closer to an understanding of the relationships between changing life experiences and perceptions of life chances. The data gathered from the literacy learners are thus presented below according to the one outstanding difference in the group, i.e. their age.⁷

2.1 Literacy for Older Women

The older women agreed that literacy is important to them as older people in their community because it means, "You don't have to ask another to read for you." Many of the reasons they gave for their wanting to become literate underscored the practical value literacy can have in the context of their daily lives. For example, it means they will be able to:

- read labels on medicine they get from the clinic;
- read prices at the store;
- read and write their own messages and letters;
- read a passage from the Bible when asked to do so;
- help their memory (e.g., about medicine intake and about information given at community meetings); and
- be able to read road and other signs if they have to leave Mboza.

But there were also strong indications that the value of literacy for older people in this community runs deeper than its practical value alone. Very few older people at Mboza are literate, but literacy is becoming the norm for the younger generation and for those who have status and power in the community.⁸ Traditionally age was a key

determiner of status and control, but this has been threatened by institutions like literacy. Literacy in a community where an oral tradition largely prevails has, therefore, taken on its own specific social identity.

For example, literacy for those who have become Christians symbolises something far more powerful than direct access to the main written text of Christianity. Individuals are asked to read passages from the Bible during the Sunday services, and hymn books are also used to guide singing during services. The ability to read a passage in front of the congregation and to follow the words in a hymn book clearly symbolizes more than a simple practical advantage of an individual who is literate in such a context. Those who assume leading positions in church also often have prominent positions outside their church roles. It is not coincidental that at Mboza the most prominent positions on local committees, such as the school committee, are held by literate church leaders.

Literacy has also become a necessary resource with which to protect the private affairs of a homestead. Migrant labour is a reality that was not part of the traditional fabric of the lifeworlds of older people at Mboza. The ability to deal personally with correspondence to and from cities (instead of asking a school-going child in the homestead) clearly means for older people a modicum of individual control over a new reality. It is therefore not surprising that older women say that they are learning to read and write "just for tomorrow", a tomorrow for which they feel ill-equipped.

They say that there is a big difference between those who "were lucky enough" to go to school and them. They say they would not have all the problems they have identified in their lives (see p. 3) if they could read and write, but would have tried by themselves to overcome "these problems". Yet the older women also realise that some people in the community, especially their peers, do not value literacy. They say, "Some look at us like foolish people who leave their homesteads

just to come here and play." Apparently some of their peers comment, "Your men do not think. How can they allow you to come to classes?" The older women, in their quiet and determined way, believe that they are mocked by those who "don't see the light", and by those who believe that literacy is useless at Mboza because, "There is no work here for those who can read and write." The older women believe it is best to keep quiet and to remember that, "Tomorrow we are going to reap a good thing."

The Older Women's Perceptions of Life Chances ...

The older women clearly regard education as a powerful resource with which to secure better life chances. Because they did not have the opportunity to attend school, they predictably see literacy as a means to make some reparation for this lost opportunity. The need for independence and control over their own lives was alluded to throughout their discussions. One woman, for example, said that if she were educated, she would not have married, but would have found a job and worked for herself. Another added that even if women get married, they can still go and look for a job if there are problems with the marriage. These are powerful statements in the light of the generally more traditional life contexts of the older women.

Furthermore, they believe that the future will be different for women at Mboza, because they will have to take over the role of providers in their homesteads. In the words of one of the older women: "The mother in the homestead will have to go and look for a job to give her money just to buy some mealie meal for the children." Subsistence farming no longer meets the requirements of a community locked into a cash economy.⁹ The older women clearly believe that women cannot (and many do not want to) rely on the men in the homesteads alone to provide the cash income they need for their own and their family's existence.

Alcoholism has also become a real problem in the community. The reason why men (and women) drink is captured in the words of an older woman: "It is just to dim their minds, just to kill their sorrows and their responsibilities." They say that part of the problem is that people have been unable to make a living off the land: "Even if they go to the fields, what are they going to get?" Another reason, in their view, is that people have forgotten their traditions. They say, "It is the times." Their explanation is that people's customs were directive before and that the bad habits come from the city. They also say, however, "People drink more now because the situation is worse now, things are destroyed." And another adds, "Those who are Christians and who do not drink can support their families, but those who sit under the trees and drink do not care about their families."

They say that problems at Mboza will only be solved if employment is available there. In reference to people who have to migrate, one woman says, "It is good and bad, because they get money from the cities because the work is in the cities. If I cut down this tree (referring to the tree under which we were sitting) I will cut down this tree for nothing." The others agree, "Because this tree can't give us any money." That the consequences of leaving Mboza are negative, is obvious: people are forced to leave their families (and too often, because of circumstances, also their responsibilities) behind.

But in order to get jobs, the older women believe people need to be 'educated' or at least literate. Reflecting upon their lives, they believe that literacy will help them to find jobs at Mboza, because they are too old to work away. When asked what types of jobs they think they will get if jobs are created at Mboza, they mention jobs like washing, ironing and sweeping. This is a strong indication of the older women's perceptions of their life chances in a market economy, and it seems to underscore a vague and ill-defined hope for future betterment, whatever the conditions and opportunities may turn out to be.

2.2 Literacy for the Younger Women

The younger women who attend literacy classes are generally mothers with young children.¹⁰ The essence of their apprehensions about their lives at Mboza is the need for a stronger bargaining position as young 'uneducated', illiterate women who invariably have husbands away in the cities.¹¹ Of real concern to them is that they may lose their husbands (and their emotional and financial support) once their husbands have built up new contacts in the cities. One woman summed up their fears as follows: "What is bad to us is that when a man leaves Mboza to go and look for a job, he forgets about his family and finds another." The women's anger and frustration about a situation of powerlessness is understandably expressed in their reaction to certain people, and to rural life in general. For them, literacy is a means of liberating themselves from the bondage of tradition, symbolised by what they perceive to be their domination by older women in the community and by their husbands. The worth of literacy is, in addition, closely tied to the possibility of escape from their inability to compete effectively with city folk, 'educated' people, working women and men; and in the process to gain independence and control over their lives.

Similar to the older women, the one major consequence of having neither formal schooling nor literacy is the lack of individual control over their day-to-day practical realities. For example, they cannot read prices at the store or scales at the clinic. If they were to leave Mboza (and the reason, by implication, would be to visit their husbands in the city), they would not be able to read road signs. At a more personal level, illiteracy means that they are not able to correspond with their husbands or sign for the money they send to the local Post Office. But for them, as for the older women, the worth of literacy does not rest primarily on its practical value.

When they reflect on their experiences in a community which is no longer what they remember it to be, they seem to respond to the changes differently from the older women. They realize that the inadequacy of subsistence farming has forced people to migrate to the cities, but they do not believe that people behave differently now because they have forgotten their traditions, or because of the bad influences of the city. They say this is the way the old people think, but "they don't know what they are talking about". And their frustrations about their inability to cope with changing circumstances are expressed in their resentment at what they believe to be their oppression by older women, specifically their mothers-in-law. Because they are not educated, they say, "Those older women make us slaves."¹² Another added, "They are too old and are waiting to die. We are still young ... The old people cannot see through the eyes of the young women."

The women also expressed strong resentment towards their husbands who they believe have forgotten their responsibilities. They say that men are "headstrong" and "don't see the light". They believe that men's lives at Mboza are bad, because they either migrate to the cities or, if they can't find work, they just stay at Mboza. Here their lives become "a life of beer". They resent the fact that men have freedom of movement to look for work or "to go and drink or do whatever they like" - a luxury they don't have. They believe that men have shifted their responsibilities onto their wives. On the one hand, they choose to forget about their wives once they have built up new contacts in the city. On the other hand, those who remain at Mboza "just enjoy themselves at the joint¹³ where they can't hear the children crying at the homestead".

They are also unable to understand the lot of those who have to work away from Mboza because of a real concern that their migrant husbands may fall in love with women in the city and forget them. "The problem is that when a man finds a job in the city, he also finds a girl and falls in love with her. Then that girl and he are working, and he will forget about his woman in the homestead because she is not working ...

Now he will love the one who is working." The implication is that in order to compete with city women for the affection of their husbands, they have to earn money. And in their view they have to be 'educated' in order to find jobs either at Mboza or in the cities.¹⁴ The decision to become literate thus clearly symbolizes far more than the acquisition of a simple technical skill. For the young women it also carries the symbols associated with being 'educated' and 'modern'.

It is, therefore, because of the lack of feelings of self-worth or of experience of control over their own lives that they hope literacy will have some impact on their lives. This is illustrated, for example, by their resentment of the fact that, according to them, their wage-earning husbands don't send enough money home. In the words of one young woman: "What is the worth of R40, especially for me who is becoming educated now?" This statement implies a double irony. The men who find employment away from Mboza invariably end up with unskilled labour jobs like cutting sugar cane, or carrying logs at the timber yards. Forty rand is, therefore, in relation to what they earn, a considerable amount. But clearly, this is not considered adequate recognition for what is perceived to be a newly acquired status.¹⁵

The Young Women's Perceptions of Life Chances ...

It is evident from the above that the younger women's perceptions of their life chances in a rural community will be clouded by the ambiguous relationships they have with their husbands, and also by their consequent need for independence and control. They realize that times have changed and that both women and men are forced to work because they depend on each other financially. This is, according to them, the main reason why they are so keen to get jobs for themselves. They are aware of the need to contribute to the family earnings, and they need to prove that they, too, can find employment and earn money.

Furthermore, they do not see themselves as following in the footsteps of the older women. They have predominantly negative views about life at Mboza and believe it is hard to live in rural areas. Children struggle with ill-health and often have to go hungry because of the food scarcity. One woman summed it up as follows: "If it rains we don't have to buy food, but it is hard to live in rural areas. We have to fetch water and plant food and struggle with health." Another added, "We need rain to plant food, and we need factories where we can work to help our children." For them, the future will only be better if there is change.

But in order to get jobs, they believe that they need to be 'educated', or at least literate. They clearly feel the burden of illiteracy and a lack of formal schooling, which leaves them very little room for alternative choices. One woman said, "If we were educated we would have left our homesteads when the floods came."¹⁶ Others commented, "I'm sick of this ploughing business," and, "I'm finished with ploughing." For them, jobs clearly do not mean work in the traditional agricultural sector.

The young women hope that in future both their husbands and they themselves will find jobs at Mboza. As one woman said, "If men work here, then I will just work alongside my husband and then we can see each other ... then both of us can have jobs." Another added, "I'm prepared to sweep floors in the factories to earn money to buy food and help my children." In the words of the women is captured the ambiguity of their struggle for control and independence, and their need to maintain their place in a familiar social network.

If there is no change at Mboza, they will be forced to find jobs in the cities. They say this will most probably mean working for whites, because it is usually the case that whites give the jobs. The tenuous worth of literacy (and for that matter education) is demonstrated in one woman's reflection on the type of jobs they are likely to get in the cities: "Education helps even to get a kitchen job." Another

commented that if they are patient and wait until the area develops, they will be in a better position to get jobs, and that they hope they will get jobs at the community hall at Mboza.¹⁷ Another added that when she is "well-educated" she can create her own work and work for herself. This idea, in particular, illustrates the poignancy of their hope that somewhere between the ability to read and write and being well-educated lie better life chances and a better future.

2.3 Literacy for the Young Girls¹⁸

As was mentioned earlier, the consequences of illiteracy are perhaps the most severe for the young people at Mboza. They compare their lives to those who attend formal schooling, and then the benefits literacy classes can offer are limited. Although they believe that literacy will help in some general ways, they feel that being literate in Zulu is not sufficient, because "it doesn't help to get a job". Furthermore, formal schooling is to them a sign of "good knowledge" and in this regard literacy "is not the same as education at the Mboza school".

However, the young girls also believe that literacy is an indispensable skill in their lives in a rural area, even if it is an inadequate substitute for formal schooling. Their parents couldn't send them to school because they are too poor, and literacy classes (which are free) offer them the only chance to secure a better future. The tangible benefits of literacy are, however, largely ill-defined, except insofar as they know that their futures are "bad" because they are not educated, and that "uneducated people have no place today ... they have no future". In reflecting on how their lives would have been different if they had gone to school, one said, "if my parents had the money, I would be finishing school now and get ready to find a good job." Another added, "I'll be complete now. I'll get a good job, earn money and buy nice clothes." And a "good job" in their lifeworlds means being a clerk, a teacher, a nurse or a doctor; a job where they can work

"nicely" and earn "good money". In the light of what could have been, they still hope that by becoming literate, they will improve their life chances.¹⁹

The Young Girls' Perceptions of Life Chances ...

As regards the future of young people at Mboza, the young girls clearly believe that education is a powerful resource with which to secure employment and hence a 'good' future. They also believe, however, that the future at Mboza will be better for everybody, because "there are now schools for children and adults"; and a community hall which symbolizes more jobs, because it is "a sign of civilization". And it is here where they have pitched their hopes.

They say, "Those who are educated use the community hall better than those who are uneducated," and explain that people can only join the sewing and knitting groups if they are literate. They also believe that when there are jobs at the community hall it will be those who are 'educated' who get these jobs.²⁰ These impressions the young people have of opportunities which surround the hub of development activities in the community clearly underscore the perceived importance of literacy for them. They realize that without formal schooling their chances of securing jobs outside Mboza are limited, and it is therefore understandable that their aspirations are levelled at what they regard as being within their reach. The challenge for community development, however, remains whether wider options can be provided for people like the young literacy learners; options which will set out to develop the human potential of young girls with no formal schooling beyond the limitations of sewing groups; and which can serve as a viable alternative to the much believed-in formal schooling.

3.0 THE CONSEQUENCES OF LITERACY : 'EXPERT' AND 'INDIGENOUS' KNOWLEDGE²¹

The subjective experiences of the women literacy learners presented above provide a valuable, first-hand data base from which to interpret the social meaning of literacy. Another data base is obviously the literature on literacy education where the debate on the consequences of 'literacy for development' has remained central and controversial. Both data bases are necessary in order to qualify the general belief that the persistence of widespread illiteracy is a major impediment to development and change, and consequently that literacy is a potentially powerful tool for change.

'Expert' Knowledge ...

Illiteracy is often equated with underdevelopment in general, an equation which is not surprising when an estimated 800 million of the more than 824 million illiterates live in so-called 'developing' countries (cf. latest Unesco estimates). Many literacy programmes and campaigns have therefore in the past two to three decades been based on mainstream development strategies aimed at economic and social development.²² However, in spite of intensive efforts and great material costs world-wide, many of those involved in the field are now in agreement that literacy has failed to contribute effectively to development. The reality is that the number of illiterates is increasing and that literacy programmes have not effectively contributed to either economic development or changes in individual behaviour.²³

Critical challenges to conventional thinking about the effects of literacy have been pitched mainly at an explicitly ideological level. The ideology behind the belief that literacy will facilitate increased productivity and improved living standards for new literates, for example, is regarded as an attempt to make people "efficient cogs in

the technological wheel of development" (Berggren and Berggren, 1975:28). Although illiteracy is closely associated with poverty, hunger and underdevelopment, it cannot be assumed that literacy programmes coupled to basic development concerns will contribute to the eradication of these (cf. for example Mackie, 1980; Musgrove, 1982; Coombs, 1985; Street, 1984). Instead, it is proposed that a 'mentality' or 'ideology' about the worth of literacy is socially constructed and is not something imposed by the form of literacy itself (Street, 1984).

Much of the debate about the value of literacy for development also relates to the claims made about the cognitive consequences inherent in a shift from an oral to a literate tradition. It is maintained that an examination of such claims reveals much about the particular conceptions and practices associated with literacy work which is linked to mainstream development strategies (Street, 1984). Here, literacy is typically isolated as an independent and determining factor in the belief that it will facilitate certain social and cognitive changes in individuals which include mental qualities such as 'empathy', 'abstract context-free thought', 'rationality', 'critical thought', 'detachment' and so forth.

Scribner and Cole (1978; 1981) offer one of the few substantial challenges to the more grandiose claims made by some writers about the cognitive consequences of literacy. They question the dominant belief that literacy leads to 'higher' (abstract) forms of thought, the implication of which seems to be that illiterates are incapable of participating in modern society because they are limited to the particularistic and the concrete. The distinction made between oral and literate thought is, according to them, "a modern version of the old dichotomy of primitive and civilized thought" (1978:448).

From their work with the Vai people of Liberia, who developed their own system of writing, they conclude that specific uses of literacy have specific implications, and that literacy only produces generalized

changes in the way people think. The mental derivatives of literacy are therefore not automatic. They maintain that much depends upon the purposes for which literacy is used, and that a great deal more needs to be known about what people in various situations do with literacy before generalisations can be made about the effects of literacy.

Graff also believes that the tendency to overstate the differences between literacy and orality hides the fact that in most societies there is an overlap or a 'mix' of oral and literate modes of communication. He points out that a question which is hardly ever asked is, "How important and in what ways is literacy related, or central to, different aspects of life and culture?" (1979: 303). He observes that a much closer analysis should be made of 'non-literate' aspects of 'literate' society and vice versa, as well as the way non-literates actually manage in a literate society.

At a more explicitly political level, the promotion of literacy (and the concomitant conceptions about its worth) is regarded as potentially oppressive.²⁴ Illiteracy is a result of inequality and social stratification,²⁵ and the concept of an 'illiterate' person is therefore not neutral and independent. Graff in this regard states that literacy "can only be understood in the specific context of social structural processes" (1979: 52). Isolated from its social relations, it takes on a reified and symbolic significance unwarranted by its own, more restricted influences. In reference to nineteenth century Canada, he demonstrates the myth that literacy leads to economic betterment and/or social mobility, and states that, if anything, deprived classes were further oppressed through it. This was so because literacy was bound up with the ideology of the educators, who maintained the interests of the ruling group. He believes that this may be the case more generally too. Instead of literacy acting as a determining factor, it may in fact interact with primary social forces and serve to mediate them. He therefore argues that an analysis of the consequences of literacy should entail a politically sensitive analysis of the social structures within which it is embedded.²⁶

Controversies in the 'literacy for development' debate have thus firmly shifted the focus from the cognitive consequences of literacy to its ideological bases, where the emphasis is on social explanations of its uses and consequences. Although this is useful in as much as it provides new insights and challenging alternatives for research, it does not solve the problem for those who are illiterate in a world where the symbolic and material significance of literacy is firmly established. The scepticism which is increasingly expressed by many writers about the potential of literacy to serve as a 'change agent' is a luxury only the literate can afford. This adds to the existing hegemony of control which the literate maintains over an institution like literacy, and which will remain unchallenged unless there can be a fusion between what the 'experts' know and write about, and what the 'illiterates' experience.

'Indigenous' Knowledge ...

For the women literacy learners at Mboza, the belief in the worth of literacy is rooted in the need for independence and control. As was seen in the information gleaned from the learners, this need is directly related to the symbolic significance of a resource like literacy for black women in a rural community. It is therefore to be expected that the decision to become literate will involve what may be termed 'extra-literate' goals:

For the older women, even very limited reading and writing could mean the elevation of their social standing in the community. For example, if they are in a position to read a passage from the Bible, to take notes at community meetings, or to send their child to the store with a note, they may immediately be regarded as 'more important' by the local people in the community. They may even secure themselves a place on one of the number of committees which exist in the community. Therefore, although the older women may need basic, practical literacy skills, they need these precisely because being literate is not neutral, but has become a powerful symbol in the community. If they

are able to read and write, they may be in a position to reinstate their seniority and status in a community where changing 'traditions' and concomitant changing power relations are a reality.

For the younger women, the process of becoming literate needs to provide the opportunity to strengthen their bargaining powers and feelings of self-worth, and hence to bring the goal of personal liberation within their reach. They want to be literate in order to feel better about themselves in relation to their husbands, the older women in the community and the 'educated' women in the cities. They are threatened by women in the cities with whom their husbands may fall in love. These women are believed to be wage earners and therefore are assumed to be 'educated'. They are threatened by the older women in the community who, to them, represent the older and traditional values of a world that is changing. And they are threatened by their husbands who, they believe, have the mobility to change their lives. They need to construct a basis from which to challenge a reality which leaves them powerless and vulnerable, and literacy in this regard is perceived to be a potential resource which may enable them to confront those worlds inimical to their own.

Literacy programmes for the young girls present the biggest challenge. The young girls' perceptions of life chances in a rural community clearly underscore the importance they attach to 'being literate', 'being educated' and having a future to look forward to. For them "uneducated people have no place today", "they have no future". They want to become literate not as an end in itself, but as a means towards a place in the present and the future. Although their goals may be unclear at times, the reality remains that education provides tools, and the symbols of access, for engaging in the 'modern world'. Literacy programmes 'in the bush' therefore will always be measured against the lost opportunities of high-quality formal schooling (or adequate alternatives); and as such will remain a symbol of their disadvantage, not only in their community, but also in the broader context of South Africa.

There is a danger in viewing these groupings as somewhat separate in the total process of participating in their community and also in the wider society. It is therefore not the intention here to emphasize differences in a reductionist sense, but rather to focus on the heterogeneity of a group of women literacy learners in terms of their experiences of the structural constraints within which they live, and the worth of literacy to them in this regard. It is clear, from the data presented here, that much more needs to be known about the specific uses and consequences of literacy in a community like Mboza, in order adequately to describe and interpret the power-base of literacy in that context.

Street (1984:1) observes, "Faith in the power and qualities of literacy is itself socially learnt and is not an adequate tool with which to embark on a description of its practices." It is also plausible, however, to suggest that it is essential to address such "socially learnt" aspects of literacy in research and practice if the aim is to empower people to become 'change agents' in their own contexts.²⁷ The concept of literacy clearly does not exist in an ideological vacuum, and therefore the construction and perpetuation of its worth need to be addressed.

The women's belief in the power of literacy is clearly influenced by the imposed structural realities of being black and illiterate in South Africa where rural underdevelopment and Bantu education are tools of oppression. These structural realities are furthermore compounded by the fact that as 'uneducated' and 'illiterate' women they are the least mobile and most oppressed sector of the community.²⁸ And in this regard, it can be suggested that as long as the ideology of the 'ruling class' (in this context, the 'educated', the 'literate', those from the cities, and the men) permeates and shapes the understanding the women have of their realities, individual action will correspond to what they believe to be the symbolic power-base of those in positions of status, control and power.

4.0 CONCLUDING COMMENT: THE CENTRALITY OF 'INDIGENOUS' KNOWLEDGE

The aim of this paper was to reconstruct the views of a group of women literacy learners about the worth of literacy in the context of their lives. This should be understood as an attempt to counterbalance the existing body of knowledge on literacy and literacy education where the focus is typically on experts' interpretations of the consequences of literacy/illiteracy. In this regard, the dearth of information available about the viewpoints of those who experience the consequences of illiteracy themselves is surprising.

There is, in a polemical sense, general agreement among the 'experts' that literacy is not only a necessary part of development, but is central in bringing about change in existing social, economic and political structures.²⁹ Reflected in a number of investigations, on the other hand, are:

- A concern with the developmental (cognitive) consequences of literacy;
- In a functionalistic sense, a focus on the uses and consequences of literacy and its interrelationship with development and change; and
- Radical critiques of the ideology of literacy, and consequently also the ideological bases of different approaches to literacy education.³⁰

Although such intellectual pursuits may be useful, in as much as they provide new insights and challenges to existing theories about literacy and literacy education, they are of little direct consequence to those who want to become literate. Conversely, the body of 'expert' knowledge remains limited and distorted if the authentic viewpoints and experiences of those who are not literate are minimized or excluded.

The literacy tradition and literacy education are inextricably bound-up with the material and symbolic importance of formal education. We are reminded, "In any given social formation, the pedagogical actions correspond to the objective interests (material and symbolic) of the dominant groups or classes" (Bourdieu, quoted in Ergas, 1982: 586).³¹ This notion is central to the emphasis the new sociologists of education place on the role of ideological (or cultural) factors in the reproduction and legitimation of a social order. Both 'indigenous' and 'expert' conceptualizations about the value of education or literacy (and about their social consequences) therefore have to be interpreted in terms of the 'cultural capital' these two institutions represent.

The experiences of the women reported on here provide some insight into aspects of the social construction (and perpetuation) of the worth of literacy for women in rural areas. They hope that literacy will be a means through which to gain independence and control. They want to be literate, not only because of what they can do with literacy, but, much more importantly, because of what 'being literate' says about them to others. Much more needs to be known about the specific ways in which literacy is regarded as central to different aspects of community life. Also, much more needs to be known about women in relation to primary social forces, and the consequences of literacy/illiteracy in this regard.

The above are important issues which need attention if the aim of development initiatives is the development of human potential. The information from the women literacy learners at Mboza should be regarded as a contribution to socially responsible research and development, where the challenge remains the counterbalancing of 'indigenous' and 'expert' knowledge. Without 'indigenous' knowledge, development decisions and intervention strategies may unwittingly perpetuate the 'hegemony' of the dominant or ruling classes, and, in the process, prevent all people from having access to the 'tools' for change.

NOTES

1. Poultney (Human Sciences Research Council) started with ethnographic research in the area in 1978. He was later joined by Derman (University of Natal-Durban) and subsequent research has focussed mainly on development issues. Numerous reports have been written, see, for example, Derman and Poultney 1984, 1985 and 1986. Both are social anthropologists and the shift from pure research to its application has resulted in an expansion of the research team to include economists and educationalists as well.
2. Too often research in rural areas is conducted in a typical positivist mode in which the emphasis is on so-called 'neutral' and 'objective' research where the researchers remain separate and distant from the 'researched'. In recent years this approach has been challenged by many, see, for example, Chambers (1983).
3. See Griesel, Ordinary Knowledge and Literacy (forthcoming)
4. An attempt was made to follow explicitly in the direction of what may be termed an interpretative (hermeneutical) constitution of meaning units. The methodology therefore may be regarded as following in the rational tradition, in that categories of understanding are invented and negotiated by the researcher and the researched (i.e. the participants) alike before they are used for explanation and/or further elaboration (cf. Harré and Secord, 1972; Geertz, 1973).
5. Although the illiterate, non-learners could undoubtedly also contribute valuable information about the consequences of literacy/illiteracy in a rural community, it was decided to focus on those who could readily be identified as women who consider literacy to be important. Furthermore, there is no universally agreed upon definition or description of the notion 'literacy'. In fact, as Street (1984) points out, there are many types of literacies. In this report being literate is taken to mean the basic skills of reading and writing, as defined by the women literacy learners.

6. The literacy programme at Mboza started in July 1985 under the auspices of the Ulundi Bureau of Community Development. Approximately 100 people were attending classes every afternoon when the research started in 1985. As is often the case with adult education programmes, this number has fluctuated considerably over the past year.
7. There is always a danger in treating groups as homogenous. We often, for example, hear reference being made to 'women' as if they were the same or similar because they are of the same gender. Chantal Mouffe (1983: 142) states that "Every individual, male or female, is inscribed in a variety of social relations other than those which determine its gender, and is a locus of a plurality of discourses constructing specific positionalities, i.e. class, race, generation, nationality, etc." The research reported on here focussed on generation differences in conceptualizations of life chances, although it is realized that other aspects of their lives in a rural community could have been pursued as well.
8. I am not referring to the traditional structures of authority here. It is noteworthy, however, that new development leadership positions are held by those who are literate. For example, most of the members of the democratically elected development committee and sub-committees are literate.
9. The practical day-to-day realities of people in a rural area such as Mboza dictate their dependency on a cash economy where they are disadvantaged consumers, not merely people who farm for a livelihood. See Derman and Poultney, 1985.
10. Typically they attend classes with the youngest offspring who is too small to be left at home.
11. The current migrancy rate for men at Mboza is in the region of 80%.

12. Many of the young women whose husbands work away, live in their in-law's homestead. Derman and Poultney (1985: 6) found in their research that education has become a bargaining resource for better marriages. The 'uneducated' young girls they interviewed mentioned that they have no future outside of marriage; and that they do not anticipate 'good' marriages. The information gathered from the young 'uneducated' mothers here seems to confirm the apprehensions of young women, because in their perceptions they are treated like "slaves" by their mothers-in-law, and they have very little bargaining power with their husbands because of their position of powerlessness which they largely attribute to their lack of education.
13. A 'joint' is a drinking place where illegal brew is often sold.
14. In their perceptions, city folk are mostly 'educated', therefore in order to find jobs and compete with women in the cities, they also have to be educated or at least literate. In their perceptions, also, development opportunities created by the Mboza Village Project are for the literate and the educated.
15. Cf., for example, also Derman and Poultney (1984). Their research highlights the vague notions women have of opportunities in a market economy, which is of course largely related to their lack of mobility in comparison to men in the community.
16. In the past four years, yields have been extremely low due to two years of drought followed by two years of crop loss, the result of the Demoina cyclone and subsequent untimely flood releases from the Jozini dam (cf. Derman and Poultney, 1985).
17. As was mentioned in note 14 above, their impressions are that only those who are literate can get 'jobs' at the community learning centre, the hub of the Mboza Village Project. The intention of the development programmes is, however, not to favour those who are

- literate. As is often the case with development undertakings, those who are more resourceful are also often those who are educated and in a position to take advantage of development inputs. A causal relationship is not implied here, rather an interrelationship between resourcefulness, education, status, etc.
18. Discussions with the young girls were not as successful as those with the younger and older women. They were on the whole reticent about contributing to the discussions which often lapsed into their responding to the detailed questioning of the researcher. This is probably due to their age status in a community where children traditionally do not form part of adult discussion groups. A focus group discussion guided by an adult (the researcher) was therefore perhaps not the most appropriate method for gathering information from this group. This also in part explains their preoccupation with the importance of education. The researcher could not effectively relate to them as one woman to other women (as was the case with the older literacy learners) and they most probably responded in a manner they thought was appropriate when talking to a visitor to the community.
 19. Cf. also Derman and Poultney, 1985; 1986.
 20. Cf. notes 14 and 17 above.
 21. The term 'indigenous' is meant to convey ordinary or everyday common sense about matters. 'Expert', on the other hand, is meant to convey formalized knowledge. These terms do not indicate an evaluation of the respective bodies of knowledge. Cf. Helaas and Locke in Craig, 1985; and Geertz, 1973.
 22. Unesco's support of 'functional' literacy is the best known example of literacy work linked to social and economic development.

23. See, for example, the various evaluations and critiques of Unesco's Experimental World Literacy Programmes.
24. Freire and his followers juxtapose literacy work which results in 'domestication' as opposed to 'liberation'.
25. Cf., for example, Gough (quoted in Musgrove 1982: 20) who writes, "I would agree that classes, whether modern or ancient, are based primarily on division of labour and means of production, and that differences in levels of literacy and reading habits tend to spring from these arrangements rather than giving rise to them." See also Mackie (1980); Berggren and Berggren (1975).
26. Cf., also, the discussion of Craff by Street (1984: 104-110).
27. This is, of course, in part based on the belief that all people should have access to the 'tools' for change.
28. Cf. Derman and Poultney, 1985.
29. In the Declaration of Persepolis (which culminated from the International Symposium for Literacy in Iran in 1975), it is unequivocally stated that literacy is not only a necessary part of development, but is pivotal in bringing about change in the existing social, economic and political structures at national and international levels. It is stressed that literacy, although not a driving force of historical change, is essential for liberation. (See International Institute for Adult Literacy Methods, 1977).
30. Street (1984) provides a useful overview of the major theoretical trends in literacy and literacy education.
31. Cf. also for example, Sulkunen, 1982; and Musgrove 1982. Literacy is part of the 'cultural capital' used by the dominant classes to legitimize and maintain their positions of control; and to 'reproduce' themselves.

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