

Literacy, Knowledge and Worldview Transformation, A Pivotal Link and Primary Preventative Instrument to Combat the HIV/AIDS Crisis: the Woman

By Fenna E. Bacchus♦

Abstract: This paper attempts to do four things: first, to provide an argument for acknowledging that the functionality of literacy is most critical to women's development; second, to argue that worldview transformation is the missing link to the functionality of (female) adult literacy; third, to emphasize the interconnectedness between literacy becoming education that translates into knowledge which transforms the worldview with subsequent changes in attitudes, behaviors and practice; and fourthly, to proffer a multi-sectoral model to serve developing economies. Grounding her arguments on the relevance of functional literacy in developing nations, she argues that the current approach in determining the functionality of literacy, prose literacy, needs to be utilized as a secondary criteria, whereas changes resulting from education as evidenced in behavioral outcomes should become the primary criteria. There is a cohesive relationship between the woman and her community. She is also at the hub of communication in her community, and the backbone of the economy. Therefore, changes in behaviors, attitudes and practice will be reflected on an aggregate level rather than an individual level, and may be most noticeable by decreases in the prevalence and communicability of infections through changes in community attitudes, behavior and practices over time. Should it be expected of education to play the lead role in community development and improved health outcomes, it is suggested that the primary criteria for measuring the effectiveness and efficiency of educational interventions be evaluated from a community perspective.

Introduction and Background

In September of 1990, the Director General of the World Health Organization, in a meeting with the regional European committee, portrayed the 1980s as the lost decade. Stromquist (1992) predicated that in one decade world illiteracy will stand at one billion, of which 98% will be in developing countries. Five decades of UNESCO literacy

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initiatives have yielded a more “literate” world, and a growing concern for increasing functional illiteracy. It has been 32 years since “functional literacy” came into official use for designation as the second form of literacy at the 1965 UNESCO Ministers Education Conference in Tehran. Individuals and communities may have acquired literacy, but not necessarily developed “functional literacy.”

Furthermore, in the 15-49 years age group, the highest HIV/AIDS statistics exist among female adults (HDR 2001). Five decades of WHO initiatives have gone by, and in the 1990s HIV/AIDS had become a major concern. However, the incidence, prevalence, communicability and case fatality rate has been steadily increasing in Southern Sub-Saharan Africa more so than any other region in the world. Two decades of HIV/AIDS research have produced state-of-the-art therapeutic modalities, improved quality of life, better counseling techniques, support groups, and more acceptance. The prognosis for the rich in developed countries looks very promising; however, the destitute in underdeveloped nations are dying at the rate of 3,000 or more a day.

There is need for immediate action to save Africa from a certain human and socio-economic catastrophe. Measures instituted have revealed an increase in knowledge and awareness of HIV/AIDS, but has not affected a change in attitudes and behaviors as evidenced by the alarming infection and death rates among infants, children and adults. Data from HDR (2000) indicate that female adult literacy rates have increased in all but one of the Southern Sub-Saharan African countries. As the HIV/AIDS canvas is painted, many images of despair and gloom are falling by the wayside. Many burial grounds are filled beyond capacity, using the land that is needed to grow crops, and build new schools and housing. Villages are visible images of the elderly and frail tending to young and

abandoned orphans, while dying mothers are holding their children to their bosom for a bit of breast milk. Amidst it all, many in the big cities are boarding the trains for their daily work routine, as infants are wrapped in a kente and laid to rest. Is literacy functional in such an environment? If not, how can literacy become functional in a society plagued by suspicion, disease, poverty, inequalities and subordination?

This paper sets out to first define literacy and illiteracy; second, define functional literacy and illiteracy; third, describe a worldview and delineate the scientific and ascientific worldviews; fourthly, address the relevance of functional literacy; and lastly, demonstrate the cohesive link between the woman and her community, the lack of functionality of literacy and HIV/AIDS, and that the functionality of literacy should be evaluated from a community learning perspective. In response to the urgent need to identify an approach to address this pressing issue, and the deficits observed in the implementation of functional literacy initiatives in multi-sectoral development models, this paper will proffer a multi-sectoral approach to functional literacy, worldview transformation and economic development in a non-formal setting.

Definitions

1. (Female) Adult literacy is defined as the acquisition of skills to learn the written and spoken form of one's mother tongue and/or national/official (colonial) language, and the attainment of a measure of proficiency in communicating and integrating language into the home, farm, village, clinic and formal settings, thereby expanding the worldview.

2. Illiteracy is defined as a person's inability to acquire the written form of the mother's tongue and/or the written and/or spoken national/official (colonial) language; the person is subsequently incapable of fully manipulating the environment. However, the person is capable of communicating in the oral language.

3. Bacchus (2001) defines the functionality of female adult literacy as the interconnectedness between a person's (woman's) worldview, literacy, and knowledge with emphasis on the relevancy of literacy to one's social reality. This commences with preparation from within the cultural context, facilitates a sequence that uses the formal and/or non-formal setting (the farm), and climaxes with the acquisition of advanced skills to interact with the global village. This is a dynamic process that advances gradually to transcend community boundaries and prepares the person (woman) for emerging global trends that include the dissemination of information, accessing the global village, global communicative technologies, and micro-credit schemes. The objective is the integration and application of this new knowledge in all aspects of daily life and at both the global and local level.

4. A woman is functionally illiterate when she has acquired the mother's tongue and/or the written and/or spoken national/official (colonial) language literacy or is schooled without the ability to translate education into information that transforms her worldview, attitudes, behaviors and practices.

5. Prose literacy is defined as the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts, including, editorials, news stories, poems, and fiction (HDR, 2001)

6. Bacchus (2001) defines Oral Tradition as a means by which people's history and cultural content is passed on from one generation to another.

7. Bacchus (2001) defines a worldview as a framework created by competing endogenous and exogenous forces that shape the way a person perceives reality, the framework within which a person accepts sudden change and new knowledge.

8. Bacchus (2001) defines an ascientific worldview as a belief in dramatic events and development of spirit origination, for example, the American Indian believes that mountains and rivers have spirits.

9. Bacchus (2001) defines a scientific worldview as a culture that sees the world as cause and effect, and whose development is mechanic.

The Relevance of Functional Literacy

Why women's literacy has remained one of Africa's greatest challenges since the onset of literacy activities in Africa appears to lie within the inability of literacy facilitators to hone in on the transformation of the woman's worldview during the initial

phases of literacy acquisition. Another reason why women or adults do not acquire literacy is due to the existing language policy in the country. Adults are instructed in the national language, a language they may have been exposed to, but do not understand. It is different from their mother tongue; however, this is designated majority language, which happens not to be their first language, and, therefore, they are excluded from participation in political life. It is also very problematic when many ethnic minorities are unable to understand the national official language of the country (Meisenhelder,1992). The root cause inherent to women's development is attributed to their perennial inability to assimilate and fully utilize this "foreign body" of information within their own societal context, business transactions and the globalized world. Literacy remains for many a "foreign body" -- a new culture, and therefore, a major obstacle to women's advancement. Street (1995) points out that

Literacy needs to be distinguished from education in terms of its supposed 'consequences'. Some kinds of education (though by no means all) may well inculcate critical awareness and facility with abstract concepts of kinds claimed for literacy, but has less to do with inherent characteristics of literacy than with the character of the program. (p. 22)

In view of the fact that these constraints have been recognized and researched through the lens of Western orientation, an even greater obstacle was created. Hence, the acquisition of literacy in later life stages and the necessity of daily practice and integration becomes a much greater challenge because this "foreign content" has been present and may have perpetuated a negative image over generations of illiterate women for what literacy is perceived to be. Thompson (1969) makes the observation that "European languages still remain foreign to the African masses." (p. 361).

Is the lack of employment a reason for functional illiteracy? This researcher argues that when literacy is acquired and becomes education, in order for this to be fully used in the work force, it becomes imperative that the neo-literate be exposed to an environment that will sustain her new language skills, thereby fully transforming the worldview. This demonstrates that education has become knowledge that the individual can utilize to change behaviors, attitudes and practices, and also transfer these skills in all other areas of life. Education is a process of continuity that transforms the worldview.

Hammad and Mullholland (1992) argue that many functional illiterate children become dropouts in search for more satisfying experiences. They raise the issue as to what extent educational programs effectively prepare individuals to become functional and productive members of society. The authors state that relevant and functional education prepares an individual to make her needs known, which leads to better health and improved outcomes. This researcher concurs with the authors, since literacy is not functional unless it is relevant to one's social reality; however, they do not explain the intricate processes of literacy becoming functional.

Weber (1999) notes that participants may not be motivated to literacy activities within the adult education setting because of heredity, political or religious affiliation. She states that the rationale for this is likely work related-advancement, the fulfillment of personal goals such as their children's education. She comments that such values can enhance the adult even when instruction quality can be marginal. Literacy becomes a competing interest when the adult is burdened with family responsibilities in the home. Therefore, this can directly interfere with her social mobility, and subsequently the

literacy may not become functional. If literacy has not been functional how would the woman comprehend health literacy?

Mother's Functional Illiteracy and HIV/AIDS

This researcher argues that despite the many advances in literacy, many adult females have remained functionally illiterate in Africa and other developing countries. In an earlier study, Bacchus (2001) stated that bivariate correlations revealed that the human development index was significantly related to female adult literacy in continental Africa, including Franco- as well as Anglophone Africa. In populations where Islam was practiced, female adult literacy was inversely related to Islam. Islam was also a significant predictor for female adult literacy in both Anglophone Sub-Saharan African countries and continental Africa.

Western thought measures the functionality of literacy through prose literacy (HDI 2001). By definition, prose literacy refers to the knowledge and skills needed to understand and 'use' information from texts, including editorials, news stories, poems and fiction. Of major interest is the Western Scientific approach of prose literacy measurement that may not be the most efficient instrument to evaluate the functionality of literacy among ascientific peoples. In the context of ascientific cultures the 'use' referred to in prose literacy is vague and falls short of application in real life, while theoretical knowledge is mastered and replicated in pre- and post testing. Therefore, the 'use' of prose literacy must be defined as real life applications and outcomes within the community, since individual learning is ingrained in the societal fabric. The woman is at the hub of communication in her community. For literacy to be functional, it is pivotal

that the acquisition of new knowledge be organized and assimilated within the woman's cultural context and community ties. Achebe (1996) articulates the way ascientific peoples gain knowledge awareness. He refers to the interconnectedness between oral tradition, their environment, their community, interaction and experiences with each other and other ethnic groups, age group associations, title associations, secret societies, rote learning, and they also are schooled to various levels to understand and explicate knowledge in their mother tongue, and some in a national and/or official language.

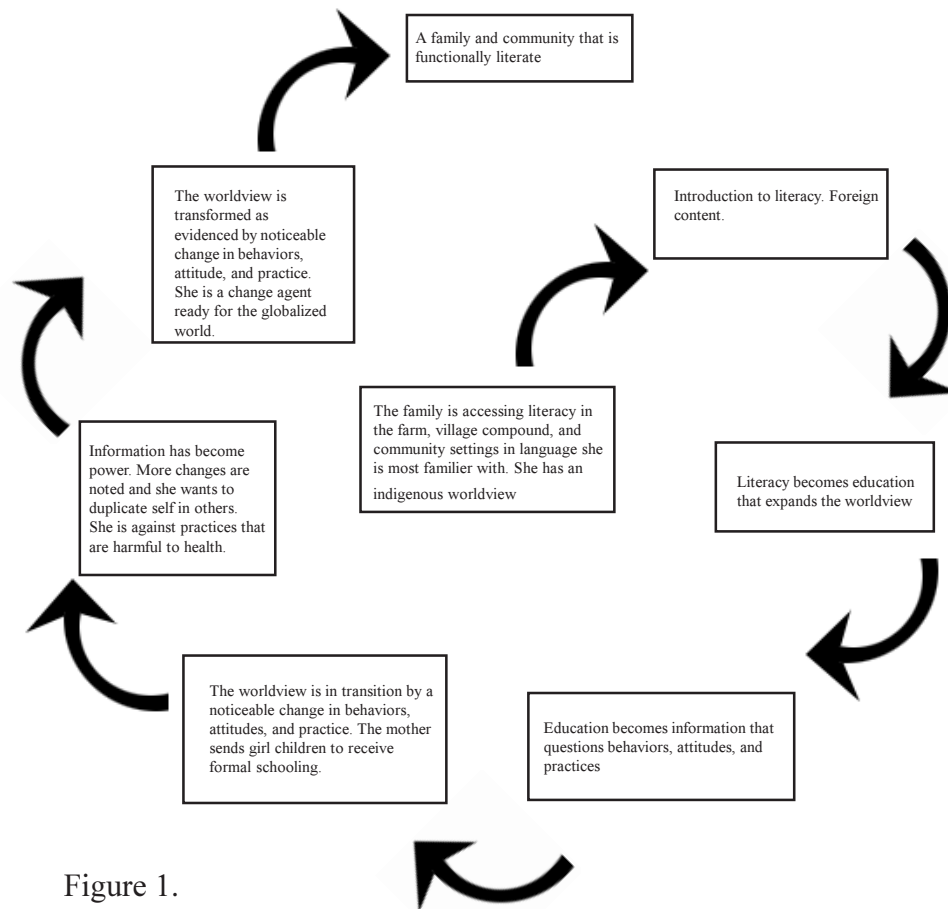


Figure 1.

The Bacchus Model I

An indigenous and/or ascientific worldview that is introduced to literacy. The individual/community may have been exposed to literacy but may not be functionally literate

Hence, one concludes that a very cohesive relationship exists between the woman and her community (Tedla, 1995, Teboh, 1994, Kalu,1996). Bacchus (2001) states that the acquisition and skills associated with literacy are imposed foreign content on an indigenous people's ascientific worldview.

However, if a transmission interruption occurs during the process of literacy becoming education, education cannot become knowledge, and information will not translate into power and action. Similarly, if the transmission interruption occurs at the phase where education becomes knowledge, information will not translate into power. Likewise, if knowledge does not become information that the woman can use, it will not translate into power. It is assumed that the Western approach to the measurement of knowledge is observed when the comparison of results of the pre- and post-testing is completed. For this newly acquired information to be integrated—in the home, school environment, community, business and government—it cannot be obstructed by cultural ethos and/or religion. The possible breakdown of information processing can occur at various levels and inhibit knowledge from becoming power that transforms the woman's worldview. Maclachan, Chimombo and Npemba (1997) quote the *Malawi News* on a report of a survey of knowledge, attitudes, behaviors and practices, which found the presence of “substantial knowledge on HIV and AIDS, but no significant change in people's moral and social behavior” (p.43).

Bacchus (2001) addressed cultural and religious constraints as the barrier to the utilization and implementation of knowledge. If cultural dictates are enforced upon the woman, she remains a target to be infected by the HIV/AIDS virus. Longwe (1998) argues that women have been schooled not to question the patriarchal system, but to be

The Bacchus Model II

A concise depiction of some competencies to be achieved in a multi-sectoral development program that features the integration of the worldview transformation paradigm. See notes.

Hence it is critical to measure the outcomes of women's awareness and knowledge gained from information obtained by a change in their behaviors, attitudes and practices. See Figure 2. Thus, the functionality of literacy is evidenced by a transformed worldview, which has become her first line of defense, whereas the prevention of STDs or HIV/AIDS with condoms and other precautions become the second line of defense.

In conclusion, for literacy to become functional, worldview transformation is conceptualized as 'I am, we are' (woman, individual, family, community) taking something from 'outside' and making it real to 'me, us'. Figure 2 demonstrates how 'foreign content'-- literacy is introduced and progressively integrated in a multi-sectoral development model utilizing the master learning tool, the mother tongue/ local language and concrete tasks. This is followed by the gradual advancement, introduction and amalgamation of more abstract and technological skill development. At the successful completion of the modules 'I, we' (woman, family, individual, community) would become the vital link and the hub of communication in the local and global context.

End Notes

1. Prose Literacy is defined by the International Adult literacy Survey as the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts, including editorials, news stories, poems and fiction (HDR 2001, p. 137).
2. Bacchus (2001) defines Indigenous Religion as any one of the numerous animistic religions or beliefs considered outside of mainstream religions such as

Christianity and Islam. In the 2001 study another interesting relationship was found between the practice of Indigenous Religion and Islam: found to be statistically significant, the intercorrelation between the religions ($r = -.51$, $p = .03$) suggested that as the practice of one religion increases, the practice of the other decreases in Anglophone countries. Furthermore, in Anglophone populations Islam contributed to the second largest variance (19%) accounted for in female adult literacy. These findings were significant at the 0.5 level of significance. Also significant for Anglophone populations was the large inverse correlation between the female adult literacy rate and Islam suggesting that as literacy levels increase, the practice of Islam decreases ($r = -.82$; $p < .0001$).

3. Bacchus (2001) features the comprehensive models on pages 15-25. Supplements on Program Development, Implementation and Evaluation of Participants, Facilitators and Administrative Staff are found on pages 124 – 149.

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