

Systemic Violence

In the field of adult literacy there has been little discussion of how racism and class, the historical legacy of colonialism and slavery have impacted the educational histories of people who find themselves in literacy programs. Nor has there been an analysis of how current educational and economic policies continue to serve both class and race privilege.

*The following pieces were written by members of the writing group at **Parkdale Project Read** in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The pieces discuss poverty and racism as forms of systemic violence that are key barriers not so much to a person's ability to learn, as to equitable opportunities to education and economic security in an economy of privilege. The pieces talk about classism and racism as forms of violence that have deep and abiding impacts on both the psyches and educational histories of the writers.*

The writing began as a response to this website, and is still in its initial stages. We thought that writing for the website would give our ideas more scope and greater impact. Writing about poverty and racial injustice would allow us to explore and analyze these forms of systemic violence, and lead us to look for solutions,

We started out by examining a powerful animation on the website of a woman who falls down as she is attempting to learn. (link to: www.learningandviolence.net/helpself.htm); she falls because she is bombarded with negative ideas about herself that are visually shown with the words stupid, idiot, shame, etc. As she rises the words change into strategies for picking herself up, dealing with negative images and thoughts about herself and learning. We strongly identified with this image and we understood the impact of this negative self-doubt on learning and on our lives. In response to this animation Hewida Abdelmoty wrote the following poem.

Beautiful Lady By Hewida Abdelmoty

My fear I see my fear. My talking about my fear is because I use my fear in a good way. Women with fear they think of nothing else. But women it is beautiful inside them. Who doesn't know about it? Women are life on this earth. Beautiful lady and thinking about birth is life to me. It is beautiful – I have to give. How do you use fear in a good way?

I'm thinking when I fall down I'm never going to get up. But I try again and again to get up. But whatever put me down is not strong enough to make me give up. I never give up on myself. I like who I am. Because if it is nobody else, I have to love myself for who I am and that is why I never give up. Stand on my own feet.

The first step for me is when I look in the mirror. I see a beautiful lady and this is who I am inside and out, and I don't care what anyone thinks other than that. And this is who I am. This is me inside and out. A Beautiful Lady.

*We read and discussed **Beautiful Lady** in the group and noted the powerful idea in this poem of using your fear in a good way. We then discussed the line in the poem "whatever put me down is not strong enough to make me give up," and began to name those things that put us down, in other words, what we saw as the major barriers blocking the way to educational opportunity and what caused negative thoughts about ourselves and our learning. We listed things such as worry over housing, the lack of economic security, and the brutal legacies of colonialism and racism. In our discussion – and I think this is reflected in these pieces – there was an almost unanimous consensus that systemic poverty, class privilege and racial injustice formed the greatest barriers to educational equity and learning opportunities.*

In these pieces we hear the voices of women insisting on bringing issues of social, racial and economic justice to the foreground of any discussion of literacy.

Never Give Up **By I.S.**

Poverty is one of the hardest lives in the world. It is not beautiful. It is not pretty. It is ugly. It makes you sad, when other people are so happy. Poverty causes hunger. Some people look down on you because you don't look like them. But when I stop thinking about myself, I know that I am strong. I can fight against poverty and make my life better.

Get up. Shake yourself off. Think of ways that will make life better, like getting into a women's group. Learn something that makes you feel good about yourself, talk about things like getting a job to earn money.

Because of poverty police abuse you, your children, you can't fight back. You are always wrong even when you are right. But we have to stop and think of ways to stop poverty, beginning in the schools, starting from daycare to college and university. Teachers have to deal with our children to stop poverty-it starts from top to bottom.

Poverty is abuse. God gave us this land for us to make a living, not to take it away and make us suffer. Let us take time out to think of each other and see what we can do to make life easier for our friends, family and neighbours near and far – because poverty is all around the world.

Everyday we see on our TVs or radios people talking about poverty. Mr. Prime Minister, Mr. President, Members of Parliament don't you know all about suffering not for yourselves but you know that people are in the worst condition of their lives because of poverty. So I know with a strong mind and determination that I will help others go on.

In today's world full of problems nobody stops to think about why the world is going the way it is. Why is there so much poverty?

The people who have it all look down on the poor as nothing. They often say that poor people are crazy. But Bob Marley said *emancipate yourself from mental slavery*. No one but yourself can free your mind. So let us stop suffering from poverty. Embrace yourself – walk out in pride – with confidence, knowing that we are strong and that we will be able to make it if we try.

I am a black woman. I stand in my condition of poverty demanding justice in our lives, in spite of all that is against us in the world today.

Standing in My Rightful Place
By N. M. Dixon. Dedicated to Kathleen O'Connell

I have lived in fear all my life and I am wondering why this has happened to me. I wake up everyday saying my prayers and counting my blessings for what little I have. Not knowing what the next day would bring me. Will I be happy today? Or can I expect to be on my guard? Will I have funds to go where I have to? Will I have enough to have a meal to give my family today? Will I see the rainbow in the sky?

Poverty to me is a loss of dignity- a loss of pride to say what you want. Poverty to me is to worry about how I will feed my family. Will I have enough money to get the things I want? Will I be able to smile and say thank you father to be able to face another day in shame and disgrace? Will my children grow up feeling the pain and the shame and will they be in bondage for their legacy as well?

I know I will be in bondage for the rest of my life. We will never be free in the sense of saying we are free since slaves took off the chains and called a new world. But no matter what they say, we as people will never, never be free.

Poverty is like you want to show the world you have a dream to be fulfilled, to show that if they gave us a chance we would burst wide open – and to keep our dream alive for the sake of our children, so that we can keep our people alive. Poverty is a despair to everyone who is in it.

The world sees what is going wrong with our people.

No disrespect – to carry on I had to teach myself how to survive in this world with no guides to help me, to guide me in the right direction.

Poverty is like hunger- you're not full enough to do what is requested of you.

Lord,

Give me the strength to understand the things I cannot change and the courage to know right from wrong – to live in harmony with others. If I don't mean you any good I will do you no harm.

I cry out, my family cries out and my people cry out why are we still in bondage? What did we do to deserve this kind of life? My mother's mother's mother was a slave and so am I. But in a different way. I thought I was free to talk, free to say what was on my mind, to ask for what I want within reason. But that is not the case. From generation to generation we bear our pain in silence. What little dignity we have they are trying to take away from us. As well, we can't raise our children the way we want to. Society has claimed them too. We as a people are enslaved. We cry out why is there no justice for us?

The only justice we have as a people is when we are dead.

We need to help our children climb the ladder of success, to be leaders not followers. Where are our leaders? What happened to our King and Queens? We as a people have lost our pasts, as well as our history. Poverty will never end. It will live in our children. Tell somebody everybody here is crying. We fight and fight and there is still no justice. Why? Will we as a people be able to say we are free from shame, hurt and pain? Will they give us back what is rightfully ours? We lost everything but our spirits, as well as our song. We are free in spirit.

Our heart and soul, tells us of our history-and remember what the old people kept saying-be proud of who you are. Never forget to be proud of where you came from as well as where you are going, and stand in your right full place as a people and as a nation. I would like to lie my head down on my pillow and hear our people cry out: "Don't forget us and what we stand for. We are in this world but not of this world."

Poverty is a form of enslavement – to me as well as our people. Don't let our children be enslaved. They see our shame and they struggle, as we do as a people. "Please break the chain. We want to be free."

I want to say to the world I am here. Let me spread my wings. But the world I guess is not ready for what I have to offer. So I will give my gift to the next generation to love one another to forgive them for what they have done to my mother, my sister, my brother....

My father fought in the Second World War so his people would be free. My father and mother are now free, but I am not. Now my children will see what the world is like. We are the five generations. Will they cry out as well as ask why? Will they be able to reach their goals, and change the world to be a better place for all of us, so that we as a nation feel whole again, to hold up our heads and truly realise the

words of Dr. King “Free at last, Free at last thank God almighty, we as a people are free at last”-standing in our rightful place.

Lack of Opportunity By Christabel

The one and only thing that keeps me from learning is poverty, being poor has kept large numbers of people illiterate.

I was brought up with the scales tipped against me. I was born in the Caribbean in a part of the world that was forgotten by the colonizers, who no longer wanted us to build their cities and work their fields. I was a child worker. I had to work to eat. How could I learn when I was hungry? How hungry was I when I was a child? How could I learn when at the age of eight I had to cook, clean and do my madam’s laundry? And that was not all I had to do. I had to do the gardening as if I were a human donkey.

I don’t think violence kept me from learning. I know many people who have been through hell and they are some of the smartest people of my childhood. But violence did not keep them from learning because they were rich. They had breakfast and clean clothing to wear; all they had to do was learn. They had after school teachers. My mother was one of the mothers that was cleaning and washing their clothes, cooking their food. And for what? Pennies to pay the rent, not enough for food.

Why is it that learning barriers only end up as barriers in poor communities? If my family had money to have paid private tutors, made sure I was not hungry and made sure I was good and ready to learn. I would have been the best reader. I could have been the world’s best learner if I were not born in poverty. I could have been the world’s best writer.

We poor people or the poor children of this world can learn if we are given equal opportunities.

Don’t Give up Hope By Sharina

Thinking about my life: When I was ten years old I was taken away from school. When I heard I was not going to school anymore I cried and cried and was very frustrated and ran away to a cane field and the rain came down and I got very wet. Leaving school was a big thing for me. I was taken away from school to cook and clean, so my mother could go to work, and so we could have some food to eat.

Yet I never gave up hope. I continued to read with my brother, I would lay down to read with a lamp on the floor with my brothers and sisters and then I got the opportunity to come to Canada and the first thing I did when I came was to go to school and learn to read and write. I never gave up on myself. And now I am strong.

Remember you are not alone. Love yourself because nobody can take your education away from you. Never give up. Girl you are beautiful. Don't let anyone put you down. Be strong inside your heart. Hold on sister you are not alone. Have strength and faith and take care of your life for good, girl.

How Poverty Affects Learning **By Aicha**

If I am poor I can't learn because of the clothes, food, rent everything of poverty. For example if I am hungry I can't focus to learn and that is a bad situation. Poverty makes me feel small between the people and the atheist. (This is an expression used in Algeria that it is very difficult to translate).

I want to talk about Africa. They are very poor. They have no living, no schools, no water. They drink from dirty water and small kids are crying because the food is bad. And the whole world looks at them and stays quiet. Also there is violence and many victims. I think that the money that goes to war should be used to help them.

My Problem **By F.H.**

My problem keeping me from school is sickness and housing. Nobody can live without a good place and good health. The problem for people now is the high rent, the poverty. The people don't have enough money for the rent, or enough money for food, especially poor people.

Because I am living in poverty, I can't continue my education; my health is a problem too. I am taking medication for a long time so that is why I can't continue. I wish I could continue my education when I get a chance, and have the money to pay for school and rent.

The way to change poverty is to help people with money and work. It is hard to fix this big problem; the world needs to help find money for education and housing.

I wish the governments would help the people with education and housing and with money to fix the people. This is my wish

Stop Wars
By A.H.

When I look at the world, why is there war, everywhere? When is it going to stop? All my life is like a war and it never ends. My hope is to see war stop and have peace, because our children and brothers and friends are going to war and some may never come back to their families. If there were no wars, everyone would be happy.

There was a war when I lived in Ethiopia. When there were bombs we had to run for shelter.

I lived on a farm, and there were no schools in my area. Some boys went to the church school to become priests. Some people went to live in the city and they went to school. Students went to school until sixth grade, and a few to eighth grade.

Many people could not afford to live in the city or to go to school.

Learning New Things
By Jackie Molinolo

I have trouble learning new things. I have trouble catching on, and then I feel badly about myself. So when I make mistakes I feel like giving up and then I feel anxious and ashamed. I try to learn from my mistakes and I try again. Sometimes I feel like crying and I am depressed and disappointed. But I would tell someone who felt like me to cheer up and learn things in a happy way, don't give up, keep trying and support all the things you do in life.

These pieces represent early beginnings of thinking about the impact of poverty and racial injustice on learning. There are many questions to be considered and many issues that arose during the course of our group discussions. Many ideas were problematized; how can we shift the blame for poverty from the personal so that we can begin to understand the systemic nature of poverty? How do we incorporate social activism into the educational process? What other solutions can we find to mitigate the violences that we have both internalized and confront as social barriers everyday? Who uses our stories, and to what use are our stories put? How can we be sure our voices are not appropriated? How can we ensure racial equity and justice in the classroom?