

May 2008

The Importance of Social Interaction and Support for Women Learners: Evidence from Family Literacy Programs¹

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Key Findings

Although many women value and benefit from social interaction in adult education and family literacy, these social dimensions are often treated as tangential or inconsequential. Utilizing data from two studies of family literacy programs in Pennsylvania, this study examined how family literacy programs provide a supportive social space for women in poverty. We found that many learners had limited social support and social ties with people outside their program and few opportunities for recreation. As such, family literacy programs fulfilled important social functions by enabling women to leave the house, enjoy social contact and support, engage in informal counseling, pursue self-discovery and development, and establish supportive relationships with teachers. In sum, adult education and family literacy programs play an important role in helping women in poverty receive social support and, in turn, enhance their psychosocial well-being.

Key Implications

While federal and state policies have increasingly focused on instrumental, standardized outcomes such as test scores, we must also acknowledge that adult education and family literacy programs serve important psychosocial needs. Staff members should recognize that participants have multiple purposes for participation, including the desire for friendship, social distraction, and the like. Provision of emotional and mental health support and opportunities for learners to develop friendships and interdependence is also crucial. Although home-based programs provide access to adult education and family literacy, center-based programs appear to provide greater social support. Finally, staff, administrators, and policy makers can advocate for inclusion of outcomes relating to personal development, social support systems, and social networks. Program evaluations could include qualitative and quantitative data about these measures.

Introduction

Research suggests that women—especially women in poverty—value and benefit from social interaction in the workplace (Fenwick, 2008) and in educational and community projects such as adult and family literacy programs (Boshier et al., 2006; Horsman, 1990; Prins, 2006). Literacy programs can provide much-needed opportunities to leave the house, create a supportive social network, exchange advice about personal problems, and pursue personal development. These findings are often noted in academic research as chance outcomes, but are seldom given the space or attention they deserve.

These supportive relationships are crucial to physical, mental, social, and economic well-being, yet they are often considered less important than instrumental outcomes such as increasing children's school readiness or obtaining employment. In particular, the Welfare Reform Act, current welfare policies, and the implementation of the National Reporting System accountability measures for adult education have placed more emphasis on instrumental, standardized outcomes. This shift, in turn, may lead policy makers, researchers, and educators to ignore or dismiss the vital psychosocial functions of adult education programs in the lives of women in poverty.

In this study, we analyzed how family literacy programs provided social support for women in poverty. We argue that adult basic education programs such as family literacy can provide poor women greater access to social support, which in turn enhances their psychosocial well-being.

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Support and Psychosocial Well-being among Women in Poverty

This study focused on women because family literacy programs comprised mainly of mothers and because compared to men, women are more likely to live in circumstances that limit access to social and material support and erode mental health. Among other factors, these conditions include poverty, use of public assistance, having children at home, single parenthood, limited physical autonomy, and stressful caretaking (kin-keeping) responsibilities (e.g., Belle & Doucet, 2003; Lennon et al., 2002).

Social ties may be beneficial and/or detrimental. Research shows that for poor women, social support tends to decrease anxiety and depression and enhance self-esteem, sense of control, and ability to survive with insufficient material resources. Limited or unsupportive ties, however, can restrict access to social services and resources and compound stress, anxiety, and isolation.

Adult education research shows that marginalized women frequently use educational programs to build supportive social networks and to meet psychosocial needs for social stimulation, companionship, recreation, and personal development (e.g., Horsman, 1990). Like Stromquist (1997), we view family literacy programs as a possible “site for social distraction,” a “self-help group,” and an “informal social club” (p. 94). Women’s psychosocial needs are tied to economic conditions and gender relations that limit their physical autonomy and assign them chief responsibility for housework and childrearing—factors that often engender isolation, timidity, and lack of confidence. The need for social support, however, is also profoundly human.

Research Methods

This brief integrates data from two studies with family literacy programs in Pennsylvania. Although the studies examined different topics, the importance of social interaction appeared prominently in both cases. Specifically, the brief includes data pertaining to (a) social interaction, including relationships among learners or between teachers and learners and (b) participants’ social networks and support outside the program.

In 2004-05, the median family income for Pennsylvania family literacy participants was \$7500, 70% had household incomes below the poverty level, and 65% received public assistance. These data suggest family literacy participants live in economically vulnerable circumstances that often destabilize social support and psychosocial well-being.

The first study², led by Kai Schafft and Esther Prins, explored practitioners’ and learners’ perceptions of how poverty and residential mobility shape persistence in family literacy. Twenty programs were selected by stratified random sampling across five geographic regions and the rural-urban continuum. We conducted 21 interviews with 30 professionals and then interviewed 17 family literacy participants (16 women and 1 man aged 21 to 44) in three programs. Professionals and participants in the two center-based programs (but not the home-based program) often noted the social aspects of their programs such as relationships with peers and teachers.

The second study³ consisted of case studies of three Even Start (federally funded) family literacy programs in Pennsylvania, led by Esther Prins in collaboration with Goodling Institute and university colleagues and program coordinators. We used interviews, focus groups, participant-observation, and student writing to examine the programs’ organizational practices. Programs were diverse in geographic region, rural-urban location, and participants’ race/ethnicity, language, and immigration status. This brief incorporates data from four focus groups with 24 learners, including 23 racially and ethnically diverse women. Staff and participants emphasized the value of social interaction and developing a sense of community among learners.

Findings

Limited Social Ties and Social Support

Most women in this study had limited social support and social ties with people outside their program (with the exception of relatives) and few activities that provided them with something to do beyond housework and childrearing. Aside from attending classes, these mothers seldom left the house. For instance, a mother of four stated, “I don’t know anybody. I don’t go anywhere. I don’t socialize. I just stay home and take care of my kids.” Research suggests such situations tend to increase isolation and depression.

In the residential mobility study, many of the women indicated that they had problems with neighbors, rarely interacted with neighbors, or kept to themselves, for instance, to maintain privacy and avoid gossip. Ironically then, certain types of social ties may be anxiety-producing rather than supportive. For example, a young woman related, “I really stayed away from my neighbors ’cause everyone that was there had problems and I didn’t want to get involved. I didn’t want to be the best friend that everyone came knocking on the door.” For women

with few social opportunities, family literacy programs provided a meaningful (and affordable) way to spend time with other adults and children in a peer-based environment considered both safe and supportive.

Adult Education as a Social Space

We found that family literacy programs fulfilled five social functions.

Opportunity to Get out of the House. In four of the six programs, women emphasized why they enjoyed getting out of the house to attend classes. To describe staying at home they used phrases such as “just looking at the walls,” “wasting time,” “thinking about the house,” “doing nothing or being nothing,” and being a “non-person.” In some cases, child rearing responsibilities and limited English language skills restricted women’s physical mobility and social support networks.

By contrast, women learners described how they used their programs to meet not only academic goals, but also social and psychological purposes. By attending adult education classes and program activities, women could communicate with others and enjoy social stimulation—that is, to disrupt the monotony of daily routines and experience a change of scenery, as described in Box 1.

Box 1: Adult Education as a Break from Daily Routines

“Because I am married it is very hard to study at home, and I have a handicapped kid and lots of times I have to do something else. I really want to study but sometimes I’m tired because I have a lot of stuff. But here this is learning and I don’t think about the house or anything. I just think about only me and the studying, so it’s good to get out of the house. That really helps me. I don’t want to always think of the house and cleaning up and everything.” — female adult learner and Korean immigrant

Social Contact and Support. Both teachers and learners observed that women (and their children) enjoyed socializing in family literacy programs, for example, by making friends, meeting new people, and developing camaraderie. A rural program coordinator explained, “I’ve had parents tell me they come for social reasons—to get with other parents for social reasons.... They’re with other people and they’re learning.” Practitioners believed learners who form strong, supportive relationships are more

likely to stay in the program because they develop “a sense of community” and “belong to something.”

In particular, women enjoyed meeting other women and their children in regular classes and special events, which were attended by parents from other classes. As one woman remarked, “It’s not just the same old routine as it would be at home, where you see your own kids, you know, all the same faces day after day.”

Women offered each other encouragement and emotional support through conversations about “daily life” and personal problems. For instance, a Latina woman who recently obtained her GED diploma often returned to the program to have lunch with former classmates and encourage them not to give up. According to several practitioners, program participants created a social support system (e.g., carpooling), sometimes with teachers’ encouragement. These critical forms of social support help women attend classes more regularly while also buffering stress and anxiety. A program coordinator program encapsulated the camaraderie and supportive relationships that often emerge among women learners (see Box 2).

Box 2: Programs Can Become “Like a Family”

“It’s like [my students] all said to me: This is really like a family. And they have birthday parties for one another, which they originated, not me. They bring lunches, and they become a family, and they stay friends that they can confide in. And you see a lot of caring, and especially the Spanish girls [Latina immigrants] who don’t have families. They really become close. This is their family. And then for the others [U.S.-born students], they see they’re not alone in this world. When they can share their problems they feel much closer.” — program coordinator

Informal Counseling. Several women reported sharing advice about personal matters (e.g., parenting) with fellow students. As one young mother related, “We talk about our lives, things in our life. You know, we speak what we are feeling and if anything...is bothering us.” In sum, women were able to talk “mother to mother.”

According to Latina immigrants in one program, family literacy teachers and staff provided useful advice, counsel, and support or put them in touch with people who could help them.

Informal counseling with teachers and peers enabled women to gather new information and to share personal burdens and release pent-up emotions—activities that have important yet often overlooked implications for informal teaching and learning.

Self-Discovery and Development. In many cases the women in this study had made sacrifices or delayed their own education for the sake of their family. As such, they described adult education classes as their time and space and as an opportunity to do something for themselves. In sum, the programs provided a second chance to work toward long-deferred goals. However, some mothers wondered whether their educational pursuits might appear “selfish,” as one woman shared (see Box 3).

Box 3: Pursuing Deferred Educational Goals

“This is something I’m doing for me. You know, I understand I have a family. I don’t mean to sound selfish. I have my husband and I have my kids, but I’ve done everything...that a mother should do as far as with her kids.... I’ve supported them in what they wanted and what they needed. Now it’s my turn to do it for me. And that’s what I’m going to do.” — adult learner and mother of five.

Additionally, several women suggested that family literacy programs enabled them to discover and recreate their identities as educated persons or as a way to “be somebody in the future.” For instance, a single mother of four children told us, “I’m basically learning who I am now for the first time in my life, you know.”

Although a primary goal of family literacy programs is to engage parents in interactive literacy activities *with* their children, a few women appreciated that their adult education classes (within the program) provided time *apart* from their children—something they considered important “for sanity.” For instance, one mother commented that her “quiet” adult education class “gives you a little bit of time away from your kids, and you’re here with them, but you get to be without them for a little bit other than at home.” In short, adult education classes afforded a quiet space in which women could pursue their goals and focus on themselves, while in the company of others.

Supportive Relationships with Teachers. Women’s relationships with teachers and other staff—mostly women—were also an

important source of emotional support. Learners described teachers as encouraging, understanding, caring, helpful, open-minded, and non-judgmental, and described how teachers made themselves available outside the program and shared advice, often based on their own experiences as women and mothers. Notably, ten of the 17 learners in the residential mobility study identified their teachers’ encouragement and support as helping them stay in the family literacy program (see Box 4).

Box 4: Importance of Teacher Support

“[Our teacher is] like that mother, that grandmother, that aunt, you know. I wasn’t raised with my mom. And...she takes that time out, you know, things that a mother would say to a daughter or to a son—that’s how she treats us when we’re here. You know, she makes us feel like we’re important and that makes me feel good. And that’s what keeps me coming back because she takes that time out. She makes us feel that we are somebody, you know, and I like that.” — female adult learner

Other participants also described their teachers as a mother, grandmother, or as one person put it, a “life teacher...[who] give[s] us tools to help us through certain personal problems.” After noting the “personal care” her teacher provided, one woman stated that the program “feels like a little family to me.” As teachers made themselves available and shared from personal experience, they also provided access to a confidant, helped reassure women that others had experienced similar problems, and nurtured a supportive classroom atmosphere.

Conclusion

This study suggests that aside from their programs, women learners in many respects had limited social support, social ties, and opportunities for social interaction and recreation. As such, family literacy programs played important social functions, providing women with opportunities to leave the house, enjoy social contact and support, engage in informal counseling, pursue self-discovery and development, and establish supportive relationships with teachers. Women did much more in their classes than learn academic and vocational skills (although these are undoubtedly important); they also used these programs to meet psychosocial needs for social support, play, and affiliation. Meeting these needs is critical because the poverty, racism, and gender inequality experienced by women exposes them to isolation, depression, stress, and other types of social exclusion.

Adult basic education programs such as family literacy provide women a space to encounter people in similar situations and thus to discover, as one program coordinator put it, “that they’re not alone in this world.” By providing access to resources such as emotional support, expanded social networks, referrals, and information, family literacy programs serve as “resource brokers” (Small, 2006). In conclusion, this study reveals that women with limited educational attainment and economic resources use family literacy programs as a site to enjoy social interaction and access social support.

Recommendations

For practitioners:

- Recognize that participants have multiple purposes for participation, including the desire for friendship, social distraction, and the like.
- Provide emotional and mental health support (e.g., through referrals).
- Provide ample opportunities for learners to develop friendships and interdependence, for instance, through mentoring relationships and support groups. In turn, this can enhance program persistence.

For policy makers and practitioners:

- Although home-based programs provide crucial access to adult education and family literacy, center-based programs appear to provide greater social support.
- Advocate for local, state, and federal policies that include outcomes relating to personal development, social support systems, and social networks. Collect qualitative and quantitative data about these measures in program evaluations.

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¹ This brief is drawn from the authors' forthcoming *Adult Education Quarterly* article, “It feels like a little family to me”: Social interaction and support among women in adult education and family literacy.

² For further information see: http://www.ed.psu.edu/goodlinginstitute/pdf/Research_Brief_FinalC.pdf. This study was funded by a Penn State College of Education Research Initiation Grant.

³ For further information see: http://www.ed.psu.edu/goodlinginstitute/pdf/Even_Start_Case_Studies_final_report_revised_10-20.pdf. This study was funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.