

“It Feels Like a Little Family to Me”

Social Interaction and Support Among Women in Adult Education and Family Literacy

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Supportive social relationships are an important dimension of marginalized women's participation in community-based adult education programs. However, policy makers and researchers often consider these social dimensions to be tangential or secondary to instrumental outcomes such as obtaining employment or increasing standardized test scores. Drawing on two qualitative studies of family literacy programs in the Northeastern United States, this article examines the importance of social interaction and support for women in poverty. The study reveals that, for women with limited social support and social ties, family literacy programs afforded a social space that enabled them to leave the house, enjoy social contact and mutual support with peers, establish supportive relationships with teachers, and pursue self-discovery and development. The article concludes that nonformal adult education and family literacy programs play an important role in helping women in poverty receive social support and in turn enhancing their psychosocial well-being.

Keywords: *family literacy; women; social support; social networks; poverty*

A growing body of evidence reveals that marginalized women value and benefit from social interaction with peers and teachers in educational and community projects such as adult and family literacy programs (Boshier, Huang, Song, & Song, 2006; Horsman, 1990; Prins, 2006) as well as in the workplace (Fenwick, 2008). Literacy programs have been shown to provide women with opportunities to leave

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the house, create a supportive social network with learners and teachers, engage in informal counseling, and pursue personal development (Khandekar, 2004; Robinson-Pant, 2000). Often noted in passing as serendipitous outcomes, these findings are seldom given the space or attention they deserve.

Although supportive social relationships are vital to physical, mental, social, and economic well-being, the social dimensions of women's educational experiences are often treated by policy makers and scholars as secondary to instrumental outcomes such as increasing children's school readiness, obtaining employment, or increasing test scores. In particular, welfare policies requiring women to find employment and the implementation of the National Reporting System accountability measures for adult education have diverted attention to instrumental, standardized outcomes. As such, policy makers, researchers, and educators risk ignoring the multifaceted meanings adult learners attach to participation in nonformal education programs and the multiple functions such programs play in the lives of women in poverty.

This article seeks to expand our understandings of the gendered social functions and dimensions of adult education, specifically family literacy. Utilizing data from two qualitative studies in Pennsylvania, we analyze how family literacy programs provide a supportive social space for women in poverty. We conclude that adult basic education programs such as family literacy, in spite of their often regulatory nature (Sparks, 2001), play a vital role in enhancing poor women's access to social support and in turn their psychosocial well-being.

Social Support and Psychosocial Well-Being Among Women in Poverty

In this article, we draw on research on social networks and support among women in poverty, and studies examining women and social interaction in adult education.

We focus on women because family literacy programs are directed toward mothers (Smythe & Isserlis, 2004) and because women are more likely than men to face conditions that restrict access to social and material support and harm mental health, including poverty, single parenthood, use of public assistance, having children at home, limited physical autonomy, and stressful caretaking (kin-keeping) responsibilities (Belle & Doucet, 2003; Ensel, 1986a, 1986b; Fischer, 1982; Lennon, Blome, & English, 2002; Weiss et al., 2003). Although adults with low literacy may belong to supportive networks (Fingeret, 1983), social stratification nevertheless structures individuals' social ties and their ability to access critical resources (Campbell & Lee, 1992).

Social ties may be beneficial or detrimental, sometimes simultaneously. Among poor women, social support, or "emotional and instrumental assistance from others" (Belle, 1982, p. 133), is associated with decreased anxiety and depression and

greater self-esteem, sense of control, and ability to survive with scarce material resources (Belle, 1982; Edin, 1991; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Edin & Lein, 1997). In addition, friendships and social support reduce parents' stress and social isolation (key risk factors for child maltreatment, Fantuzzo, Stevenson, Kabir, & Perry, 2007) and mitigate the effects of stress arising from daily parenting hassles (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990). Emotional support and less homogeneous social networks are associated with greater parental warmth, responsiveness, and feelings of efficacy, which in turn reduce children's behavior problems (Marshall, Noonan, McCartney, Marx, & Keefe, 2001). Weak, unsupportive, or insular social ties, however, obstruct access to social services and resources (Edin & Lein, 1997; Smith-Doerr & Powell, 2005) and exacerbate stress, anxiety, and isolation (Belle, 1982; Belle & Doucet, 2003; Edin, 1991; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Lin, 1986). In sum, prior research suggests that low income women who establish friendships, find confidants, and exchange emotional and material support through nonformal education programs are more likely to experience multiple psychosocial and material benefits.

Research conducted in diverse global settings reveals that marginalized women often use educational programs to construct supportive social networks and to meet psychosocial needs for companionship, social distraction, recreation, and personal development (Clegg & McNulty, 2002; Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Galván, 2001; Horsman, 1990; Khandekar, 2004; Stromquist, 1997). Social stimulation and social contact are two of the seven "motivational orientations" for participation in adult education identified by Boshier, Huang, Song, and Song (2006). Social stimulation encompasses relief from boredom, breaking routines, doing something, overcoming frustration, relieving loneliness, and escaping a relationship, whereas social contact entails making friends, meeting new or different people, having a good time, and interacting with friendly people. In their survey of Shanghai adult learners, Boshier et al. (2006) found that women were significantly more likely than men to enroll in adult education courses for social stimulation and social contact.

Qualitative studies further illuminate how women in literacy programs, across markedly diverse settings, use educational and community groups as a social space for creating friendships, sharing advice, releasing emotions, and disrupting monotonous housework (Galván, 2001; Horsman, 1990; Khandekar, 2004; Prins, 2006; Rodríguez-Brown & Meehan, 1998; Stromquist, 1997). We follow Stromquist (1997) in viewing family literacy as a potential "site for social distraction," a "self-help group," and an "informal social club" (p. 94). Through family literacy, as women share ideas for solving personal problems and establish friendships outside their usual networks, they access and exchange new forms of social support, including emotional and material resources.

Women's need for social contact and support are rooted not in innate psychological attributes but rather in economic conditions and gender hierarchies that shape what they do, where they go, and with whom they interact (Boshier et al., 2006).

Across the globe, poor women face a shared constellation of problems, including confinement to the domestic sphere, male control of their physical autonomy and mobility, and chief responsibility for housework and childrearing (Stromquist, 1990; Thompson, 1997), often coupled with paid work. For women in poverty, the consequences of gender subordination include isolation, sadness, boredom, lack of self-confidence (Galván, 2001; Stromquist, 1997), and a desire to think about something “besides the everyday” (Horsman, 1990). Thompson (1997) attributes women’s perceived lack of confidence not to innate personal qualities, but to *structural constraints*, namely, their limited opportunities and experiences “of participating in social interaction outside the home which is not predetermined by domestic responsibilities and relationships” (p. 36). From this perspective, timidity and lack of confidence signal women’s social exclusion.

In sum, women learners’ desires, needs, and psychosocial well-being are produced by asymmetrical gender relations, poverty, racism, geographic location, and other vectors of social inequality. Although identifying how gender hierarchies produce isolation and loneliness, we also contend that the need for social support is profoundly human. In other words, as human beings, we need to know that we are not alone, that we have someone to turn to. As we will see, the family literacy programs in this study helped fulfill this and other social purposes for women.

Participants, Data, and Method

This article integrates data from two studies with family literacy programs in Pennsylvania. Although the studies examined distinct topics, in both cases the importance of social interaction was an emergent finding. The focus of family literacy programs and the demographic characteristics of typical participants make these programs an ideal site to learn how women in poverty—specifically, mothers with young children—access social support and how they perceive the social dimensions of adult education. State and federally funded family literacy programs are intended for parents who do not have a high school diploma (or equivalent) or do not speak English as a first language and who have a child aged 8 or under. Programs typically integrate adult education, including General Educational Development (GED; high school equivalency), adult basic and literacy education, vocational education, and/or English as a Second Language classes, as well as parent education, early childhood education, and interactive parent-child literacy activities. Although some learners are mandated to attend (e.g., by Child Protective Services), most are voluntary. Both types of participants were included in our study’s programs. In 2004-2005, 89% of family literacy participants in Pennsylvania were women. Participants’ median annual income was US\$7,500, 70% had household incomes below the federal poverty level for a family of two, and two thirds (65%) received public assistance (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2006). Three fourths of native English

speakers did not have a high school diploma or equivalent. In short, these family literacy participants live in economically and socially precarious situations that tend to undermine access to social support and psychosocial well-being.

Residential Mobility and Persistence

The first study, conducted by the first and third authors, examined how poverty and residential mobility shape persistence in family literacy programs. Because most Pennsylvania family literacy participants are poor, they are likely to encounter the social and economic stressors that often lead to or result from residential instability. Through a stratified random sample, we selected 20 family literacy programs representing one third of the state's family literacy programs. Sites were also chosen to achieve maximum variation (Patton, 1990) across five geographic regions and the rural-urban continuum. The 20 family literacy programs were contracted to serve between 10 and 100 families, with an average of approximately 23. Few men participated in these programs.

We conducted 21 semistructured interviews, 11 by phone and 10 on site, with 30 personnel, including directors, coordinators, educators, and case managers, 28 women and two men. In the interviews, we explored professionals' perceptions of how poverty and residential instability affect adults' ability to remain in family literacy programs. In discussing what helps or hinders adult learners' persistence, practitioners often mentioned such topics as the importance of supportive relationships with teachers and with fellow students, the ways adult learners help each other with personal problems, camaraderie among learners, and other social dimensions of participation in family literacy.

We purposefully selected three program sites to conduct interviews with adult learners. The sites were located in a metropolitan, a micropolitan, and a nonmetropolitan area¹, respectively, and in each site, program directors reported that high mobility among participants negatively affected learner persistence. In total, we interviewed 17 participants, all who were willing to be interviewed. Family literacy participants received US\$50 for completing the interview. Following the protocol used with the program personnel, interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coupled with field note summaries.

Participants varied in age from 20 to 44 (average = 30) and had between one and five children (average = 2.8). The sex distribution, 16 women and 1 man, reflects the feminization of family literacy programs nationally. Twelve learners were White, two were Black, one was Latina, one was an Eastern European immigrant, and one was of unknown, non-White, racial/ethnic background. Participants had completed between 8th and 11th grade (average = 10th grade); three students obtained their GED through their respective family literacy programs. Participants estimated their monthly household income, excluding nonwage benefits, to be US\$80 for a single mother of three to US\$6,500 for a married couple with four children at home,² with a median of US\$1,300, placing most participants well below the poverty level.

Even Start Case Studies

Data for this article are also drawn from a study of three federally funded Even Start family literacy programs in Pennsylvania, led by the first author in collaboration with university colleagues and program coordinators. Intended to supplement quantitative data for the annual statewide evaluation, the study utilized focus groups with students and staff at each site, interviews with program coordinators, student writing, and participant observation in classrooms to examine the programs' organizational practices (e.g., recruitment, instruction, program planning, evaluation) and the ways these programs related and responded to their institutional environments, such as in a community context. We used a qualitative case study approach because it "permit[s] documentation of program differences, idiosyncrasies, and uniqueness" and illuminates "variations in program implementation and outcomes" (Patton, 1990, p. 104). Programs were chosen to achieve maximum variation across geographic region, rural-urban location, and participants' race/ethnicity, language, and immigration status. The urban program worked with teenage mothers, most of whom were Black. Participants in the rural program were predominantly White and lived throughout a sparsely populated county. Located in a town of 40,000 in a metropolitan county, the third program was comprised mainly of Latina and Asian immigrants. As previously indicated, few men participated in these programs.

For this article we use data from four focus groups with a total of 24 learners, including 23 women and 1 man of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds (7 White and 17 Latina/o, Black, or Asian); their ages ranged from 18 to early 40s. Two focus groups were held at the immigrant program: one in English with women in higher level English as a Second Language (ESL) or GED classes, and one in Spanish with Spanish speaking adults, including one man. Learners received a children's book for participating in the focus group, which lasted 60 to 90 minutes. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Among other topics, they explored learners' experiences in adult education classes, what kept them coming back to their program, and ways teachers helped them work toward their goals. Learners in each site emphasized their supportive relationships with staff and the value of social interaction with classmates and psychosocial benefits of attending classes. During a discussion of the preliminary findings, the four program administrators and coordinators involved in the study validated this finding, underscoring the value of developing a sense of community among adult learners.

Data Analysis

To examine how family literacy programs provide a supportive social space for women in poverty, we used content analysis (Patton, 1990) to code the interview and focus group transcripts from both studies. Sentences and paragraphs were included in the analysis if they pertained to (a) social interaction, including relationships

among learners or between teachers and learners, or (b) participants' social networks and support outside the program, including relationships with neighbors described in the residential mobility study. For example, statements regarding feelings of isolation and appreciation of new friendships were included, among other topics. Coding was conducted by grouping similar excerpts and assigning a label that captured the phenomenon. This enabled us to identify features of women's social support outside the program and five social dimensions of their participation in family literacy programs. In this article, the informal counseling category has been integrated into social contact and support and supportive relationships with teachers, depending on whether the advice came from peers or teachers. The two male participants did not mention social aspects of their programs and were therefore excluded from analysis for this article. Although men can also appreciate and benefit from social interaction and support in adult education (Prins, 2006), we have insufficient data to explore this topic. Rather, we draw on women learners' perspectives supplemented by practitioners' insights into social interaction and support in their respective programs.

Findings

The following sections describe participants' social support and social ties outside of their family literacy programs and the social functions of these programs, respectively.

Limited Social Support and Social Ties

Our data indicate that, with the exception of relatives, most women in this study had limited social support and social ties with people outside their program and few opportunities for "social distraction" (Stromquist, 1997, p. 94). In the residential mobility study, we asked learners to describe their relationships with neighbors in each residence during the previous 5 years. Collectively, the 16 women had lived in 93 residences, averaging slightly more than one move per year. In nearly one half of these residences, women reported that they hardly interacted with neighbors, had problems with neighbors, or kept to themselves (Belle & Doucet, 2003; Edin & Lein, 1997; McLanahan & Booth, 1989). For instance, a 25-year-old woman stated, "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." Family literacy participants often identified significant costs potentially associated with developing closer ties with neighbors, including loss of privacy and security, especially in neighborhood contexts, both urban and rural, they experienced as dangerous.

Data from both studies suggest that aside from attending classes, mothers, particularly those without paid employment, seldom left the house, factors that tend to

increase isolation and depression (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). As a mother of four put it, “I don’t know anybody. I don’t go anywhere. I don’t socialize. I just stay home and take care of my kids.” Women in a rural county stated, “Where we live there’s not a whole lot of excitement; there’s not much to do,” whereas the family literacy program provided “a little bit of something to do than just sit around and just look at the walls.” In light of their limited opportunities for socializing and recreation, family literacy programs provided low income women an affordable, meaningful way to spend time with other women and children, offering a “neutral ground” and a safe space to interact with empathetic and supportive peers.

Adult Education as a Social Space

Below, we discuss five social dimensions of women’s participation in family literacy programs, findings that underscore the multifaceted roles such programs play in women’s lives.

Opportunity to get out of the house. Women in four out of the six programs emphasized the benefits of getting out of the house to attend classes, while suggesting that they associated staying at home with “wasting time,” “doing nothing or being nothing,” “just looking at the walls,” and being a “nonperson.” For instance, a Korean immigrant stated she joined the program in part because “I don’t want to stay home, just a waste of time. Even you[r] house work and just the every day thing over and over.” Similarly, Paulina, an immigrant mother of two young children, related:

It’s very nice being here just to be around people, you know, not just sitting home with the kids and—[Interviewer: And what do you enjoy about that?] I mean, everything. Just, I mean, speaking English, because there was a time I was just home alone with no English and I really forgot how to speak English, because I speak Polish at home to my kids because . . . I want them to know Polish. So being home alone speaking Polish I forgot about English and I couldn’t communicate with other people, you know. I was like a nonperson. So I mean I’d rather be here [in class].

In her remarks, Paulina links personhood and communication, reminding us of our human need to talk, to commune, to be understood, to be with others—or what Nussbaum (1999) called the need for affiliation. Paulina’s experience shows how raising young children, coupled with limited ability in the dominant language, can circumscribe women’s physical mobility and social support networks.

Contrasting the boredom and isolation of being “stuck in the house” with meeting people through their program, women described how they used their programs to accomplish social and psychological as well as academic purposes. Attending adult education classes and program activities enabled them to communicate with others

and enjoy social stimulation (Boshier et al., 2006)—to disrupt the monotony of daily routines and experience a change of scenery. A Korean immigrant described these psychosocial benefits:

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.

A young, first-time mother expressed a similar sentiment:

I think it feels good leaving the house. There's something unique about not just being here, but packing my bag this morning and dress[ing] my daughter and we get up and come in and we are ready to go, ready to roll. And it's like, something's coming, something good, and knowing that you didn't just drop your kids elsewhere and you go different places . . . I do, I look forward to coming here.

This woman's comments reveal how rituals, such as packing her bag, dressing her daughter, and getting ready in the morning, create meaningful routines that help organize her family's daily life and focus her mental energy. In sum, the act of leaving the house served important psychosocial purposes for women and their children helping them to concentrate on their studies, forget about housework and other sources of stress, and have something meaningful to look forward to.

Social contact and support. Educators and learners alike noted that women and their children enjoyed meeting new people, making friends, and socializing in family literacy programs. Program personnel believed the formation of strong, supportive relationships helped women stay in the program because they develop "a sense of community" and "belong to something." A rural educator told us:

I think personal socialization, too, is an important factor for them. A lot of them enjoy meeting other families. Any chance to bond with the other moms and dads, seeing what they're going through . . . If they make strong bonds, I'd venture to say that that's another large reason why they keep coming, because it's an attraction.

The following exchange among women in a rural program illustrates the value they placed on making social contacts. When asked why getting out of the house was important, one woman responded

Well, meeting new people, for one. I think I'm more outgoing now than what I was before. It's just, you know, meeting people, talk[ing] to them, and interact[ing] with

them. [. . .] You get to interact with other people's kids, too. 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. It's different when you come here. You get to see new faces.

Similarly, women in other programs reiterated how much they enjoyed meeting other women and their children both in classes and special events attended by parents from other classes, highlighting women's circumscribed social networks and opportunities for social interaction outside their programs.

As women talked about "daily life" and personal problems, they provided each other with encouragement and emotional support. For example, a 38-year-old woman who recently passed the GED regularly returned to the program to have lunch with former classmates:

I give them a pep talk, you know, like "Don't give up. It always seems hard and, oh, I'm never going to finish. But don't give up because it's the best feeling in the world when you get that [GED], you know." So I try to encourage them. And I stay in touch with some of the people that have left from here.

Such interactions are crucial because, as prior research has shown, having friends, confidants, and access to emotional support mitigates stress, anxiety, and depression for poor women in poverty (Lever, Piñol, & Uralde, 2005).

Informal counseling was one of the primary ways women exchanged support. Echoing Stromquist's (1997) description of Brazilian literacy classes as a "self-help group," several women reported sharing advice about personal and parenting matters. A mother in an urban program who was older than other participants commented:

We give each other advice. They take my advice [because I'm senior] . . . Sometimes I'll go home and say, "Oh my, maybe . . . God put me here for a reason." I'm here in this class. If I could contribute and use what I have—not always perfect—but we all can give each other advice on so many things.

Later, a younger 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." Another mother in the same program noted, "We can talk, like, mother to mother. This is my first child I ever had and I always ask, what should I do with her?"

Some participants developed a social support system, sometimes with teachers' encouragement. For example, practitioners noted that some learners carpooled to class or gave each other a ride when someone's car broke down. Especially in rural areas with limited public transportation, material assistance such as giving rides is a critical form of social support, one that also helps women attend classes more regularly and, in turn, avoid disrupting their studies. This program coordinator aptly summarized the supportive relationships that adult learners often develop:

It's like they 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.

This excerpt highlights concrete ways low income women can access social support through adult education programs, whether celebrating birthdays, forgetting about one's problems, or sharing the burden of personal struggles, all practices that can make these programs feel "like a family."

Supportive relationships with teachers. In addition to their relationships with peers, women identified their relationships with teachers and other staff, nearly all women, as an important source of emotional support. Overall, they described teachers as encouraging, caring, open minded, understanding, and nonjudgmental. As one learner put it, "if you have a problem they're right there to help." A young single mother especially appreciated her teacher's advice—and was also "most apt to listen to" her—because she was also a single mother and gave advice based on personal experience instead of "book answer[s]." Several immigrant women described how staff members provided guidance, informal counseling, and advice and made themselves available outside the program, for instance, by telling learners they could call at home any time. A Latina woman remarked:

They orient [guide] us. We have wonderful help with them. I've gone through some very difficult experiences and they've helped me get through what has happened to me. [Interviewer: In what way do they help you? . . .] They counsel us [*Nos aconsejan*].

Another woman added that teachers "connect us to some people who can help us, in case they [staff] can't." This type of informal counseling, both with peers and teachers, allowed women to gain new information, share burdens, and release emotions, activities with important yet often overlooked pedagogical implications (Galván, 2001). Teachers complemented students' perspectives, describing how they tried to provide support. One educator remarked, "I think just they know that they can call us, and the encouragement that they get from us," whereas another encouraged students by sharing openly about how she had resolved past family problems.

Notably, 10 of the 17 learners in the residential mobility study, like the learner quoted here, attributed their program persistence in part to their teachers' encouragement and 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.

The other women in this program echoed this sentiment, describing their teacher as a “life teacher . . . [who] give[s] us tools to help us through certain personal problems.” Noting the “personal care” this teacher provided, one woman commented that the program “feels like a little family to me.” These family metaphors were reiterated by several women in the other programs. In short, some teachers played a motherly or grandmotherly role by offering emotional support during academic, personal, or economic difficulties. Interestingly, one woman suggested she could talk to her teacher precisely because she was *not* a relative:

Sometimes . . . it’s not somebody in your family you would want to go to, you know. Sometimes it has to be an outsider to where you can go ask things a little better and they can help you understand it or help you take care of it a little better than a person that’s related to you.

By making themselves available and sharing from personal experience, teachers provided access to a confidant, helped reassure women that they were not “the only one who has that problem,” and fostered a supportive classroom atmosphere.

Self-discovery and development. Because many of the women had made sacrifices or put off their own education for the sake of their family, they tended to view adult education classes as their time and space, as an opportunity to do something, finally, *for themselves*. For instance, a 36-year-old mother reflected on her decision to return to school to earn her GED:

Sometimes I’ll think of it as, okay, for years and years and years I worked and took care of my kids and worked two jobs and my husband worked really, really hard or whatever. And we did that when the children were little. But now that the boys are getting older [18, 16, and 8] it’s time for me to do something for myself. There was never really any time before for me to do anything else but work and, you know, rob Peter to pay Paul because you’ve got bills and you just can’t sit around and wait . . . But now it’s like, I know that I want to go . . . to college . . . But I feel like this is something that I’ve been putting off for so long that I should have done years and years ago. And that’s my biggest regret.

Economic circumstances, coupled with caretaking responsibilities, curtailed women’s ability to return to school earlier. As such, family literacy programs provided women with a second chance to pursue long-deferred goals.

A few mothers worried that their educational pursuits might appear “selfish,” even though they had delayed their education to work and raise their families. A

38-year-old woman with five children enrolled in the family literacy program to "make myself proud" and to be able to "fill that spot in" on job applications, indicating she had earned a GED:

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.

These remarks underscore the extent to which many poor and working-class women have been socialized to consider education their responsibility but not their right (Luttrell, 1996).

In this light, family literacy participants described their programs as a space to focus on themselves. As the woman quoted above explained, "It just makes me feel good knowing when I come here every day this is my space . . . And I don't let nobody invade it 'cause this is what I want for me . . . This is my time." She also felt "really good" when she realized that she had knowledge "in the back of my mind back there somewhere just waiting to be brought to the front." Several other women echoed these comments, suggesting that family literacy programs afforded possibilities for discovering and recreating their identities as *educated persons* (Bartlett, 2007; Robinson-Pant, 2000), as a way to "be somebody in the future." For instance, a 31-year-old single mother with four children related, "I'm basically learning who I am now for the first time in my life, you know."

Family literacy programs emphasize interactive literacy activities for parents and children *together*, but, paradoxically, one mother, Ana, stated that adult education classes provided much-needed time *apart* from her children. When asked how they would describe a typical day in their program to a friend, Ana responded, "peaceful" and then elaborated:

You get to work at your own pace, work on what you want. It's quiet. It 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.

Other women in this program later explained that spending time apart from children in adult education classes was important "for sanity," further underscoring the importance of a quiet space to pursue their goals and focus on themselves, accompanied by others.

Conclusion

Supporting prior research on women and poverty (Millar, 2003), these studies suggest that outside their respective programs, poor and working-class women in many

ways had limited social support, social ties, and opportunities for social interaction and recreation. Given these circumstances, family literacy programs fulfilled vital social functions, enabling women to leave the house, establish supportive social relationships with teachers and peers, and pursue self-discovery and development. To be clear, we are not suggesting that women are inherently nurturing and automatically become good friends, that conflicts never emerge (Prins, 2009), or that women or people in poverty share some innate solidarity.

This study does reveal, however, that women did much more in family literacy programs and adult education classes than learn academic and vocational skills, as important as these may be. They also used these venues to meet psychosocial needs for social support, play, and affiliation (Nussbaum, 1999). Poverty, racism, and gender inequality erode women's social support, while increasing the likelihood of isolation, depression, and other manifestations of social exclusion (Lever et al., 2005; Millar, 2003). For example, by associating staying at home with boredom, isolation, and stress, women in this study signaled the psychosocial costs often borne by stay-at-home mothers, especially those in precarious economic situations. Hence, these mothers appreciated having a place to forget their problems at home and "just focus on me." Similarly, women's comments about their need for social stimulation and self-discovery reflect the desire to have "something in my mind besides the everyday" (Horsman, 1990).

Family literacy and adult basic education programs more broadly play a crucial social function, providing low income women and men with a space to encounter others in similar situations and, in turn, to discover, as one practitioner put it, "that they're not alone in this world." In this way, community based adult education organizations serve as a "resource broker" (Small, 2006, p. 274), an institution that facilitates access to such resources as emotional support, expanded social networks, and relief from loneliness and emotional distress. As "passive brokers" (Small, 2006, p. 278), family literacy programs provide a site for social interaction where individuals can exchange advice, information, encouragement, and other resources, in much the same way that child care centers (Small, 2006) and houses of worship do. In many cases, practitioners also provide access to material resources through referrals to social service agencies, information about employment and children's schooling, or provision of free child care, for example.

Our research contributes to growing evidence that marginalized women accomplish important, yet often discounted, social purposes in nonformal education and community projects (Clegg & McNulty, 2002; Galván, 2001; Horsman, 1990; Rowlands, 1997; Stromquist, 1997) and in the workplace (Fenwick, 2008). Although parent education and family literacy programs have been criticized for regulating women's lives and promoting dominant ideologies of mothering (Smythe & Isserlis, 2004; Sparks, 2001), they also afford a social space that women can use for their own purposes, ones which may not match those intended by policy makers or educators. These findings challenge the dominant, instrumental rationality that reduces

adult education to training for economic productivity and that positions women's education not as a tool for their own development but as a means to improve children's cognitive development (Luttrell, 1996) or national development indicators (King & Hill, 1993). As such, this work highlights the multiple functions of family literacy programs for economically disadvantaged women, and the ways academic and psychosocial outcomes are shaped by the formal and informal features of both family literacy programs and the lives of adult learners.

Unfortunately, conventional program evaluation methods and federal and state accountability measures seldom recognize the social functions described in this study. Consequently, they provide only a partial assessment of what family literacy and ABE programs offer low income participants. The inclusion of quantitative and qualitative measures of social support and psychosocial well-being in evaluations would present a more multifaceted picture of how these programs shape learners' lives, and provide fruitful opportunities to explore how these factors are related to parental efficacy and other outcomes. Although this study did not examine whether social benefits enhanced outcomes valued by policy makers (e.g., retention, goal attainment), program personnel certainly believed they did. Furthermore, as discussed in the literature review, supportive networks enhance parenting practices and increase access to information and material resources, which could lead to job placement, for example. Although increased social contact and support was an unintended consequence of participation for mandated and voluntary learners, mandating participation also heightens state regulation over poor women's already highly regulated lives. Instead, policy makers can mitigate the psychosocial consequences of poverty by strengthening the social safety net through public policy and by providing more supports for learners to attend adult education voluntarily.

The findings suggest that practitioners should recognize participants' multiple social purposes for participation instead of viewing socializing as a distraction from learning. Provision of emotional and mental health support may entail sharing advice and offering encouragement, as described in this study, using curricula focused on fostering social support (Fantuzzo et al., 2007), or making referrals to mental health professionals. These type of support are especially important for women who have experienced emotional and physical abuse (Horsman, 2000). Educators can also create opportunities to develop friendships, an overlooked site of informal learning (Galván, 2001). In addition, encouraging greater interdependence, for example, through mentoring relationships and support groups, can enhance adult learner persistence (Quigley, 2006).

Future research should examine the informal teaching and learning that take place through social interactions such as the sharing of advice, similar to Galván's (2001) research with women in Mexico, and explore whether the degree of perceived social support enhances academic outcomes and indicators of psychosocial well-being such as anxiety and depression. We need to understand the mechanisms by which family literacy and adult basic education programs may buffer the psychosocial

consequences of poverty and equip learners to exercise more control over their lives, the types of emotional and material resources learners exchange, and the conditions that encourage or thwart the creation of these social support systems. These supports offer opportunities to build confidence and to transcend localized networks, thereby expanding access to social and material goods (Lin, 1986; Smith-Doerr & Powell, 2005). Following research on the roles of nonprofit organizations in poor neighborhoods (Small, 2006), future studies should investigate how nonformal education institutions operate as resource brokers for poor and working-class women, men, youth, and families. This study provides promising evidence that women with limited educational attainment and economic resources can and do use family literacy programs as a site for social interaction and social support.

Notes

1. Metropolitan counties have at least one urbanized area of 50,000 or more inhabitants. Micropolitan counties have an urbanized area of 10,000 to 50,000 inhabitants. All other counties are nonmetropolitan.

2. Every other adult learner reported a substantially lower monthly household income. This family's income level was a recent development, due to a growing home-operated business. The family had, however, received food stamps and WIC in the previous 5 years, signaling a recent history of economic insecurity typical of the way many Americans move in and out of poverty.

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