

The Children's Literature Hour: A Social-Constructivist Approach to Family Literacy

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Pursued from a social-constructivist perspective, this study reports the results of a series of peer group discussions with adolescent parents enrolled in a family literacy program. The purpose of these discussions was to provide opportunities for learners to critically reflect on their goals and their literacy strengths and needs, as well as their needs for their children. We engaged a total of 18 adolescent mothers in 1-hour discussion sessions of multicultural children's literature books. Analysis of the conversations indicated that literacy was seen as important because it served as a tool to address economic and social concerns. Parents' goals for themselves focused on independence, being a role model to their children, and self-respect. For their children, they wished to convey a sense of cultural pride, independence from peer pressure, and a "gift of childhood." The social aspects of the discussions seemed to strengthen and expand the possibilities for meaningful interaction between parents, creating a space for discourses which included their shared realities. It is suggested that family literacy programs should build on these issues and be context specific, working collaboratively with participants to create new visions that challenge the status quo.

RESEARCH SUPPORTING THE CRUCIAL ROLE of the family and early literacy experiences on children's later success in reading and writing has led to an increasing number of programs conceptualized around the family as a unit (Connors, 1993; Nickse, 1992; Paratore & Krol-Sinclair, 1994; Quintero & Velarde, 1990; Winter & Rouse, 1990). Known widely as intergenerational or family literacy, these programs have been designed to improve the education of the mother or other caregivers in order to improve the family's quality of life as well as the child's achievement. Though varied in design and form (Nickse, Speicher, & Buchek, 1988), programs focus on training parents in literacy and effective parenting skills, assisting children in reading and writing skills, and providing opportunities for parent-child experiences. Consequently, these programs are meant to build on one another, producing a synergistic effect on adults and children. The basic premise is that deep and lasting change for families occurs only when parents have adequate literacy skills to enable them to support their families and when children's growth and development is sustained (Connors, 1994).

A growing number of critics, however, have challenged many of the assumptions that underlie family literacy programs (Auerbach, 1989; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1993; Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1994). For example, although many program developers support a "family strengths model" (Darling & Hayes, 1989) which recognizes the importance of respecting cultural differences in child-rearing practices, Auerbach (1989) reported that programs continue to perpetuate a "transmission of school practices model." Instructional activities often focus on providing training in effective parenting skills (i.e., Parents as Teachers Program); giving parents recipe books of ideas for shared literacy activities (i.e., Shared Beginnings); providing packets of programmed materials that concentrate on language and problem-solving skills (i.e., HIPPI) (see *First Teachers*, 1989; Morrow, Tracey, & Maxwell, 1995). She suggested that the unifying assumption underlying these programs is school based: Parents are taught to transmit the culture of school literacy through the vehicle of the family. Further, family literacy programs like these tend to subscribe to an "autonomous" model of literacy (Street, 1987), assuming that literacy is a set of neutral and objective skills – independent of any specific social context or ideology – which, once acquired, is contextualized to a progressively wider range of activities.

In contrast, critics (Ferdman, 1990; Reder, 1994) argue that literacy cannot be viewed apart from the social and political context in which it is learned. Rather, literacy is a set of social practices which varies according to contexts, content, purposes, and participants (Auerbach, 1993). A large corpus of ethnographic studies now details the wide range of cultural-specific literacy practices and discourse forms among communities (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Heath, 1983; Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Weinstein-Shr, 1990). Being literate, then, means more than just encoding or decoding technical symbols. It means using knowledge and experience in a culturally organized system to make sense of and to act on the world (Lytle & Schultz, 1990).

Approaching the literacy acquisition process as a “social construction” rather than strictly as a cognitive process (Auerbach, 1993) has a number of instructional implications for family literacy programs. First, this perspective suggests that efforts to impose particular literacy practices on families are bound to be unsuccessful. Instead, instruction needs to begin with the learners’ social realities, providing the context for individuals to engage in activities in which written language is constructed and used. Second, it implies that learners acquire literacy practices in collaborative settings in which the collective knowledge of participants develops through sharing and dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978). And third, it suggests that, as a constructive process, learners actively contribute to their own learning, thus, transforming the traditional transmission-oriented mode of teaching to one that is dialectical and facilitative of learning and literacy acquisition.

A social-constructivist perspective could take advantage of the rich array of experiences that parents may bring to family literacy programs, involving them more integrally in the instructional process. Previous instructional models designed for adult learners have typically relied on replicating the routines of prior schooling (Lytle & Schultz, 1990), focusing on narrowly defined instructional skills such as vocabulary or comprehension training. This approach as reviewed by Connors (1994), however, has shown only modest success in improving either the literacy achievement or job opportunities of participants in these programs.

Rather, from a social-constructivist view, practices and situations that carry meaning to participants could be used to examine how literacy shapes family life, for what purposes it serves, and how new literacy practices may contribute to enhancing their goals. This collaborative process would invite participants to bring their social and cultural worlds into the classroom to critically reflect on their day-to-day lives and their purposes and needs, creating a context for more active participation in their own and their children’s education. Further, a social-constructivist perspective might address a source of continuing controversy in family literacy regarding if and how caregivers’ literacy skills transfer to children. Viewed from a social-constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), learning is seen as internalized through interpersonal interaction, with cultural ways of thinking becoming transformed from social phenomena to one’s own intrapersonal functioning. Thus, given opportunities involving critical dialogue and reflection, parents might “expand their possibilities,” (Horsman, 1990) influencing subsequent modes of thinking and communicating with others (Chang-Wells & Wells, 1993).

Consequently, this study departs from the tradition of defining family literacy as benefiting either the parent’s or the child’s academic achievement (i.e., level of literacy performance) to one that is focused on the parents’ process of critical reflection. Applied to family literacy, it assumes that the first step toward a more collaborative instructional approach is for those who have been historically underrepresented to reflect on their social reality (i.e., their day-to-day

lives) and examine their goals and needs for access to resources (i.e., the culture of power). From a critical perspective (Freire, 1970a), it is only when people become active questioners of the social, economic, and political reality around them that literacy is potentially empowering. Such a process might not only address the social and structural systems that surround the family, but how these factors might influence their educational aspirations for their young children.

This process of self-reflection and goal-setting may be particularly important for the population that is the focus of our research – teenage mothers. Much of the literature (Berlin & Sum, 1988; Landy & Walsh, 1988; Williams, 1991) has highlighted the difficulties these young parents and their children experience throughout their years together, including poverty, low education, and marginal income capacity. A comprehensive study of 300 adolescent mothers, for example, indicated that, on average, they require the help of at least 15 social services simultaneously (Battle, 1987). Children of teen mothers, as well, do not fare well; studies indicate that they are at high risk for school problems, leading Musick (1993) to observe, “When an adolescent is a mother, someone is going to be short-changed; quite often that someone will be her child.” As evidence, Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, and Morgan (1987) in their longitudinal study reported that a large percentage of these children eventually require foster care.

Pursued from a social-constructive perspective, this study contains the voices of urban, teenage mothers who were enrolled in a family literacy program. It was designed to illustrate the potential of collaborative interactions with text for the purpose of self-reflection about families and children. Delgado-Gaitan (1994) has noted that family literacy has power as its basis when it creates access to participation and breaks down patterns of social isolation. Thus, our purpose was to provide opportunities for learners in social exchange with others to investigate and address such critical questions as: What are their goals? What are their literacy strengths and needs? And what do they want for their children? Our goal was to invite learners to become the subjects of their own education, to analyze situations critically, and to generate their own alternatives to address them.

Explorations of meaning construction in collaborative groups have taken a number of instructional forms. Among others, book clubs (Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995), grand conversations (Eeds & Wells, 1989), and text-sets (Short, 1992) have emphasized readers “lived through” aesthetic responses (Rosenblatt, 1978), analyzing readers’ own responses and how they may make connections with others. Other approaches, including instructional conversations (Goldenberg, 1992/93), dialogical-thinking reading lessons (Commeyras, 1993), and collaborative reasoning (Waggoner, Chinn, Yi, & Anderson, 1995) have addressed literacy from a more critical and analytic stance, focusing on reasoning, argumentation, and evidence supported by the text. Although drawing from these stances, our purposes differed from these discussion formats. Here, we sought to use children’s literature as a stimulus to engage parents in exploring texts in relation to their own experience, nurturing different perceptions and

points of view without setting boundaries or providing clues for potential response categories.

Moreover, our project differed from other family literacy projects which have used children's literature in discussion groups. Handel and Goldsmith (1994), for example, developed a family reading workshop model for low-proficiency adult readers, which involves using children's books for instruction in specific reading strategies typically used by good readers. Read-aloud parent clubs (Segel, 1994), highlighting enjoyment of reading children's literature, have provided workshops on models of enriched storybook reading and discussion of topics related to home literacy experiences. Other interventions have focused on training low-income parents in adopting new "scripts" with books (Edwards, 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1988), emphasizing book management, questioning techniques, language proficiency, and affect. Though varying in scope and design, programs like these have attempted to engage parents with limited reading skills in techniques to enhance specific reading-aloud strategies and to encourage regularly reading to their children.

In contrast, our approach centered on the learners' themselves – their aspirations, backgrounds and needs for their children. Thus, rather than seek changes in their attitudes or habits, we attempted to view participants as cultural resource persons, listening to their self-expressions and their "struggle for voice" (McLaren, 1988) as revealed through dialogue and reflection, thereby approaching family literacy as a socially constructed collaborative process.

Method

Participants and Setting

The setting for this research was in a school district-sponsored comprehensive program serving over 200 adolescent parents or pregnant teenagers per year. Housed at a major urban university, the school offered several services: a class for pregnant teens who did not wish to remain in their regular school during pregnancy; a full-day alternative high school program for teen parents (*ELECT*) who had dropped out of school; and an Adult Basic Education (*ABE*) and General Equivalency Diploma (*GED*) program. Students who attended the school, which was located in the most impoverished area of the region, came from high-poverty, high-crime sections of the city. Average daily attendance in the program was 60% to 75%.

Intake interviews by the director and social worker revealed that a majority of the women had dropped out of school in ninth grade, regarding themselves as academic failures. As described by the director of the program, few had future career plans: "When they arrive, the mothers are usually overwhelmed, stressed,

and befuddled. Many are dealing with serious depression, and most can't see much ahead."

Eighteen adolescent mothers from the ELECT and ABE classes participated in the study. All of the women were African American, ranging in age from 14 to 21 years of age ($M = 16.2$). Eleven of the women had one child; 7 had two children. None of the participants lived with the father of their child or children, nor did any receive regular support from them. All were on public assistance. Average grade equivalent score on the Test of Adult Basic Education, administered to each student upon entering the program, was 8.13 ($SD = 1.12$), ranging from 3.0 to 10.6.

Our research team included three women, two of whom were Caucasian, and the other, native African. Each had participated in the family literacy project at the school and child-care sites for over 2 years, and all were frequent visitors at noonday lunches and other special events. All of us (a university professor, a post-doctoral fellow who was pregnant at the time, and a graduate student) were committed to creating collaborative relationships between parents, children, and school personnel in family literacy. In our previous work (Neuman, Hagedorn, Celano, & Daly, 1995), we had begun a process of dialogue between staff and parents, creating greater parental involvement at the school's child-care site. Current efforts were designed to continue this critical dialogue, focusing on developing a more participatory approach to literacy instruction.

Procedures

Materials. We selected 12 children's literature stories to engage adolescent mothers in critical reflection about family and children and their multiple roles (i.e., mother and child). Our choice of using children's literature over more adult fare was guided by two factors: to encourage adolescent parents to read and reflect on issues from a child's point of view, and to engage in these thinking processes using the medium of text that could be both readable and comprehensible through dialogue and accompanying pictures. Further, previous research had indicated that children's literature could be used effectively as a resource for parents in sharing their histories and strengthening community ties (Ada, 1988; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994).

Specific book titles were selected on the basis of the following criteria: (a) a multicultural focus (10 of 12 books); (b) a powerful child-centered theme (e.g., *I Am Not Afraid*, an African folktale about overcoming fears); (c) a focus on various family structures (i.e., single parent; kinship network); (d) an important parenting concern (i.e., sibling rivalry; mother-child bonding); and (e) a book that might be enjoyable to read with their children. The Appendix includes an annotated summary of each story.

Based on scheduling and availability, 6 of the 18 parents attending either ELECT or ABE classes were invited to the weekly book discussion; 18 parents in total participated in four sessions over the 12-week period. Discussions were held

in a quiet room in the school specially equipped with video cameras. All parents agreed to the videotaping procedures. Beginning with refreshments, we attempted to establish a thoughtful but informal atmosphere. After some casual conversation, the facilitator would then begin with an overview statement: "We come here once a week and discuss children's books and general themes that might relate to you and your children. I'm interested in hearing about your ideas. Today the book is [title and author]." Following some comments and predictions about the story, the facilitator would then pass out the books, and parents would read aloud, stopping at various points to discuss aspects of the story.

Our goal was to create a context for dialogue about literacy and related life issues through the medium of text using nondirective procedures (Krueger, 1988). This approach begins with limited assumptions and places considerable emphasis on getting in tune with participants, offering them opportunity to comment, to explain, and to share experiences. To encourage such engagement, following the reading, the facilitator began each book discussion with a general question such as, "What do you think the author is trying to say?" Efforts were made to evoke parents' interpretations of the meaning of the story. Using an open participation structure, we attempted to involve each participant in examining the story's meaning. Unlike other discussion formats, however (i.e., shared books, instructional conversations), we did not determine the thematic focus; rather, our interest was in learning how they interpreted the theme. As facilitators, we sought to acknowledge, clarify, and encourage participation by saying, "Do you agree? What do you think? Any other opinions?" creating an instructional context that might support their sharing of individual perspectives.

These conversations then moved toward personal reflections and connections. We encouraged participants to compare their own experiences with that of the story by raising challenging questions, "Do you think that's true?" or counterexamples, "I understand your point, but I think . . ." or alternative scenarios, "So the father comes back into their lives, and they all seem happy – do we all really believe that?" provoking further thinking and critical reflection among participants. Once involved, the facilitator would then step back, adopting the role of moderator and good listener – clarifying arguments and identifying points of agreement and disagreement when necessary to continue the conversation – rather than an active contributor to the discussion. After about an hour's time, the facilitator ended the session with a brief summation, highlighting points made throughout the discussion.

In this respect, these discussions differed from other formats in several distinctive ways. First, we were less interested in participants' mastery of the story than in their interpretations and representations of the characters, themes, and events. Second, as opposed to constraining conversation or attempting to develop consensus among participants on an interpretation of text, we sought to spark reflection through dialogue and critical thinking about issues and events. And third, in contrast to other discussion frameworks (i.e., grand conversations), we viewed our role not so much as that of a leader or teacher but as

“conversation maintainer,” or occasional “provocateur.” In this respect, instead of positioning ourselves in the transmission mode of imparting information, we hoped to create an ecological setting which would facilitate knowledge generation among participants themselves, using text as Bruner (1990) has suggested, as “a technology for the empowerment of the mind.”

The second author acted as facilitator for all 12 sessions. The mothers knew her well through frequent interactions in the school and would playfully advise her throughout her pregnancy. Discussion time varied from approximately 50 minutes to 80 minutes, depending on interest in the topic, and averaged 59 minutes per week. All of the sessions (with the exception of the session for “Are You My Mother?” because of an equipment malfunction) were transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

The purpose of our analysis was to focus on participants’ critical issues, literacy strengths, and needs for themselves and their children. Data analysis consisted of examining and categorizing interactions across the 11 transcribed sessions using procedures developed through focus-group methodology (Krueger, 1988). First, transcripts were read and reread by each of us independently. Sections that appeared to reflect the gist of a conversation were marked down, and participants’ comments were highlighted. Transcripts were then reviewed, along with videotapes, to ensure that participants were correctly identified, and that the statements were accurate and appropriately contextualized in each discussion. Second, themes were identified across sessions. Under each theme, actual words used by the participants, the tone and intensity of comments, and specific examples from past experiences in participants’ lives were placed in categories. Facilitator questions, the book’s theme, characters, or events – stimuli for comments – were included within the context of these responses. Third, coming together as a group, we first compared categories, providing supporting evidence from transcripts. For example, one category that clearly emerged involved the importance of “a better life for my child.” Comments across sessions were aggregated, enabling us to sort and examine each potential response category.

Two external respondents, who were knowledgeable members of the participant group yet not involved in the data reduction and analysis, were asked to review the credibility of these categories and representations. Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) occurred through a two-phase procedure. In the first phase, we provided an outside respondent with examples of verbal statements in each category and asked whether the statements consistently reflected the perspective or not. Second, we provided a copy of our analytic categories and interpretations to a leader in the community for her reaction. These procedures were designed to refine our category system and helped us to examine whether our reconstructions were adequate representations of these participants’ own realities.

Because the goal of the methodology is to capture the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of the participants, focus-group researchers (Cafferata, 1984; Krueger, 1988) generally agree that the presentation of numbers and percentages are not appropriate in reporting results; numbers tend to convey the impression that the results can be projected to a population and are not within the capabilities of these qualitative research procedures. Instead, focus-group researchers tend to use adjectival phrases reflecting interpretive comments, specifying different points of view and major ideas.

Comments from the facilitator in this study were generally in colloquial English with occasional regional mannerisms and dialect. Comments from the participants were spoken largely in Black English Vernacular. As linguists have powerfully demonstrated (Heath, 1983; Labov, 1970), Black English and its regional and social variants follow rules and are rich in social-communicative properties including unique dialogic and narrative features. Consequently, we present the views of participants in their own words, providing insights and reflections about their goals and needs in a family literacy program.

Results

The following analysis is organized in two sections. First, we provide a brief example from a group discussion to contextualize these conversations, describing their nature and process. Then, we turn to the central questions of the project, focusing specifically on participants' needs for themselves, and their hopes and desires for their children.

Conversations in Context

To provide an example of these conversations in context, we refer to the session in Week 8, which discussed *Papa's Stories* by Delores Johnson (1994, see Appendix for story summary). The session was attended by five women: Chaka, Andrea, Kim, Sidney, and Somalia. With the exception of Somalia, participants had one child and were currently completing their GED. Somalia, incarcerated on and off since she was 13 years old, was now 18 and in the ELECT program and had two children. None of the women were married. Four of the five fathers of their children, however, were in difficulty with the law: one was incarcerated, two had a history of violence, and one was currently wanted for homicide.

Chosen to generate discussion of parents' beliefs about literacy and schooling and its relationship to family, the conversation about *Papa's Stories* illustrates the role of the facilitator, how the women engaged in meaning-making, and how they made personal connections throughout these sessions. The conversation begins after the story is read aloud by one of the participants:

- Donna: (The facilitator.) What do you think the author's trying to say in this book?
- Andrea: You don't have to be ashamed of it. You can't read, you can't read. That's like my grandfather. My grandfather couldn't read, but I didn't know that. Every time he would get mail, he would hand it to my grandmother.
- Somalia: That's like my uncle. He don't even know his address or phone number of anything. 'Cause we had a fire on the third floor a month ago, and my sister was running around the house yelling, "Call the fire department," and he was going, "What's the number? What's the number?" (Everyone laughs.)
- Andrea: But my grandfather, if he wants to get somewhere, he gets somewhere. He figures it out.
- Kim: Don't be ashamed if you can't read.
- Andrea: People should accept you as you are. If you can't read, you just can't read.
- Sidny: In the long run, you're going to have to learn how to read.
- Kim: She wishes just like any person that her father would have told her that he didn't know how to read; but I think she was kind of relieved at the end that her father could read.
- Andrea: I heard that a lot of people go through life not knowing how to read, period. They have kids and some be single parents, but the kids don't know and they go through 16 years not knowing, and then they get shocked and that it gets them upset.
- Donna: (The facilitator.) Well, why didn't the father read?
- Sidny: He was saying that when he was young, nobody encouraged him in school to learn how to read. And then having him grow up with low self-esteem, it didn't bother him until he had a child.
- Donna: (The facilitator.) So do you think it was the child that got him to read?
- Andrea: Yeah, 'cause he wanted to read to his daughter; sometimes that makes a lot of kids feel good that mother or father or guardian read to them. They want to hear a story and enjoy it with their families.
- Somalia: For some reason, fathers mean a lot to kids. Some fathers it makes them want to do more for themselves. If they hustle on the street it makes them want to get a job 'cause hustling leads to death, jail, or something like that, or addiction. It makes them get off the streets and get a job. But I feel he should have told her he couldn't read for me to believe everything you tell me. You lie to me once, I'm through with you.
- Chaka: Like me, I was in ninth grade three times – there was no way that I can tell my kids to go to school if I don't go. I used to go to school and sleep in class – the whole day – the bell would ring and I'd go to another class and sleep.
- Kim: We're in the same boat. And I'm going to tell my daughter my life story because I've been going through hell.
- Chaka: Some women, they just sit on their behinds every morning, collecting their welfare check. They don't do nothing, they don't go to school, and the government – they're going to cut that short.
- Andrea: They're going to pass the law so it's going to be harder for some people to get on – it's important to teach kids to learn and to

go to school, and in the year 2000, there aren't going to be that many people out there – with drugs, AIDS, killings, and all this wild stuff. Something is going to come out and kill all of us Black people. (The conversation continues about the problems of getting to school, getting an education, and family life.)

This excerpt illustrates several important aspects of these discussions. First, it demonstrates the power of a children's story as a stimulus for discussion on issues that critically influence women's day-to-day lives. In this segment alone, for example, parents described their fears and failures in school, their need to find work, the importance of father figures in their children's lives, and the ever-present fear of violence in their lives. Second, it illustrates the social aspects of the discussion as a forum for mothers to discover that their problems are experienced by other women as well, breaking down patterns of social isolation. Chaka, Andrea, and Kim, for example, weave together stories of school experiences, past failures, and challenges for the future. Third, and relatedly, it shows the dominance of participants' social and real-life concerns in their interpretations of literature; *Papa's Stories* was soon transformed in this conversation to a discussion of their life stories. Fourth, it demonstrates the dynamic of group discussion in confronting issues. For example, participants' interactions regarding Papa's dilemma showed evidence of sociocognitive conflict (Almasi, 1995), reflecting differing beliefs from "people should accept you as you are" to "you are going to have to learn how to read." Thus, these discussions provided opportunities for conflicting information and adjusting interpretations among participants with only occasional provocation from the facilitator. Finally, it illustrates that literacy learning is not an isolated goal in these women's lives, but part of a series of actions in their continuing efforts to overcome their difficult and complicated histories.

Challenges and Changes: Goals for Family Literacy

Parents' goals revealed in these discussions reflected the social and personal obstacles in their lives; they lived in dangerous neighborhoods and had access to few basic services and few opportunities for employment. Literacy or education in general for themselves, therefore, was seen as important, because it served as a tool to address these conditions, which were vividly described in their words and stories.

"They're Not Going to Give You But What You Can Get"

Education was seen by most of the women as an alternate route – the single, most potent avenue for extricating themselves from what they regarded as intolerable situations, a life based on dependence (i.e., welfare, other family). Having

experienced welfare first-hand, many spoke of its limitations. “I can’t even buy my child a pair of sneakers with the check they give me,” reported Somalia. Painful past experiences with the fathers of their children further suggested that help was not likely to be forthcoming: “My son – he was born, he was in to him. But then he just stopped; he don’t take care of him, don’t give me any money, and he barely sees my child.”

Feeling alone, many of the women believed that changes in their lives would result only from their own actions, and thus, aggressively sought resources. “I want everything from this school that they can give me,” reported Sidney. Yet, at the same time, some of the women were pessimistic about what resources a school could actually provide. As Andrea described, “I need a diploma and a job.” Replying to her comment, Vera added, “Yeah, but they say now that a GED is not going to get a job, you need a high school education and at least two years in college. My friend has all these degrees, and she ain’t got no job.”

Only one parent saw her way blocked by poor basic skills in reading. Elizabeth described herself as “good at math” and wanted to focus on learning how to read computer manuals and learning specific computer skills at school in order to get a job. In most cases, however, “what they could take out of school” was only a paper of marginal value, with literacy skills necessary in order to “pass the test.” This seemingly contradictory consciousness captured some ambivalence about their current efforts in school: Viewed instrumentally, some of the women argued that “what they could get” out of school – a GED – was not going to provide them with their goal of independence. Rather, it represented only the road to independence, to be followed by further training in trade school, job training programs, or more education. As Chaka said, “I’m not messing around here for the next 2 years. I’m getting my GED, and I’m out of here. I’m going to this trade school down the street, so I can pay my bills. I’m not going to sit and collect my welfare check any more.”

“I Can’t Tell My Son to Go to School If I Didn’t”

Frequently echoed by mothers was the importance of being a role model to their children. “Kids need someone to look up to – how can I tell my kids to go to ninth grade, when I’ve only gone to eighth grade.” Motherhood, for some, seemed to serve as a “psychological wake-up call” (Musick, 1993), an opportunity to change their current lifestyle. Several mothers, like Andrea, specifically wanted something better for their children:

It wasn’t until these kids. But really, I take it seriously now, because I have someone to take care of, and if they grow up like I do; my mom, I don’t even know what grade she finished, and you know they ask you about your parents and stuff, and I want my son to be able to say, my mom finished school. I want him to have something good to answer. My mom finished seventh grade – seventh grade. And I wouldn’t want my son like that. It’s no joke to be clean and with education.

In some cases, like Lakeesha's and Kim's, substantial encouragement from their families to try and "stop the pattern" brought them into the program:

There is a trend in our generation. My grandmother's mother had her at the age of 17. My grandmother had my mom at age 17. My mom had me at the age of 17, and I had my daughter at the age of 17. Ain't none of us ever finish school. Everybody was struggling. So my mom press real hard. She see that I made a mistake, but she said, I don't want you to be like this. I want you to stop it here.

Inherent in many of these comments was the view that to be a role model one had to "stay in school." The action itself, rather than the literacy skills or strategies to be learned, was valued for its own symbolic reward. Being "educated," therefore, was seen as a way to take better care of their children, to avoid the threat of foster care, and to assert their role of parent and some of the functions that accompanied it.

"You Can Be What You Want to Be As Long As You Put Your Mind to It"

As counter-thesis to the "crisis" of teenage pregnancy, a number of women seemed to view motherhood as an opportunity for further personal growth and higher aspirations: "I think it's amazing that I slowed down, and it took a baby to do it." Instead of being resigned to the limitations created by their early motherhood, women like Sidney and Kim saw it as a source of direction in their own lives. "Like the little girl [in *Amazing Grace*], she was giving up and they told her she could do whatever she wanted to do, and that's the way I am – if it takes years, months, days, if I want something, it's going to happen." The more difficult the pressures, as some of these stories indicated, the richer the reward, and the greater personal satisfaction and self-esteem.

For some mothers, a family literacy program served their needs for something to do, a form of social interaction and a challenge. Monica, for example, found, "I was just sitting around the house and I needed something to do. All my girlfriends were in school, and I was alone. I saw my future flash through my eyes, and I said, 'I know I can do better than this.'" Demonstrating their resolve to change, for mothers like Monica and Somalia, attendance was seen as a personal goal in itself: "Next week, I have been in this program for a whole month every day straight. I'm really not joking this year. 'Cause I've been in the ninth grade 2 years, and this here will be my 3rd year. I'm serious." Others, however, sought greater direction from the program as they questioned, "What is the right way?" As Sidney put it, "I have no role model. I've been back and forth and living with this person and that – I mean I didn't live with my mom until I was 14." Rejecting her previous lifestyle, she was striving for new visions: "Maybe I'll start me a new business. Or maybe I'll be like Maya Angelou – I can relate to her a lot."

Ironically, for the most part, however, their dreams of "what you can be," like society at large, focused more on their mistakes than their possibilities.

Striking out at their media image, many mothers sought personal vindication for earlier school failure. In this setting, therefore, a primary goal for “what you can be” was an alternative to a high school dropout. As Somalia emphasized, “You see, you ain’t nothing in society without that piece of paper.”

Goals for Their Children

At the same time, discussions focused on parents’ wishes and needs for their children, as described in their words and stories.

“I Want Him to Be Proud of His Black Culture”

Conveying a sense of cultural pride was seen by many parents as a primary goal for helping children develop educational aspirations and self-esteem. “I want my child to be proud of who he is. I want him to have a sense of his people.” Consequently, although some of the parents believed that it was important for their children to be exposed to many different cultures, they were especially concerned about their children learning the strengths of their own culture. Discussing *Oh Koko! How Could You!*, a West-African tale, Andrea noted, “My child might say, ‘Well my mom read me a book about Africa,’ just like a kid from China or Japan could read about their culture,” placing Black children on equal ground with others from different cultural traditions. Indeed, mothers described the importance of *storying* as a tradition in their own families and upbringing, focusing on the strengths and resilience of Black families. *A Chair for My Mother*, for example, brought descriptions of how family members helped one another through hard times (i.e., cooking, cleaning, getting odd jobs for relatives): “That’s just how we do.”

At the same time, parents were concerned about buffeting children from painful societal issues – violence among their own people and racism in others: “I’m telling you prejudice is alive and kicking, and it’s a shame.”

- Andrea: What do you do when they ask, “Why are there different colors?”
- Elizabeth: I wonder what kids say, like a Chinese kid or a White kid, when they meet someone Black.
- Somalia: You know what they’re saying. (They laugh.)
- Sidny: When I was small, I didn’t pay it no mind. But then we started having corny Black history month, and we would start talking about when we were slaves and stuff. And that started racism inside.
- Elizabeth: Yeah, when you first hear it, you get real upset.
- Sidny: That’s the point I’m trying to get across. When I read a book like this (*I Am Not Afraid*) to my son, it makes him feel good.

And by offering this to him, he'll have a better chance to get along with others.

Thus, for some parents, linkage with African traditions was especially important for conveying a sense of cultural pride to their children. African folktales emphasizing cleverness and fearlessness, in particular, seemed to highlight many of their own personal qualities, as well as their beliefs about child rearing: "Like Anansi, I tell my child you gotta tackle your fears." After reading a folktale, Sidny said, "That's a really nice book. I don't want to come off sounding like I'm prejudice or whatever, but we need more of these books for kids, especially Black kids. Our young Black kids need to be proud of who they are and where they come from."

"Be a Leader, and Not a Follower"

Along with a sense of cultural pride, a prevalent theme throughout discussions was that children needed to be leaders, not followers. They needed to develop qualities of independence that could help them negotiate the powerful forces around them which might cause them to "go the wrong way." Many of these women, for example, attributed their dropout status not only to a lack of interest or futility in their future, but overwhelming social pressure from their peers. "Don't be a follower, 'cause that's what I was. If you want to go to school that day and you see your friends and they say don't go to school that's not cool – don't care what people say." More than any other single factor, keeping their "heads up" and being a leader, according to several parents, would enable them to stay in school.

Some of the mothers sought to isolate their children from what they considered to be bad influences, like neighborhood stores and group hangouts. "I won't let my kid go beyond my porch." In some cases, past experiences also meant isolation from the father: "I don't think it's good for a kid to grow like his father," "Yeah, I don't think you should be like this person, or that person. That's like the wrong way to start. You want them to have their own feelings for themselves. You want them to be their own person."

Yet being "their own person" did not suggest a rejection of all role models for their children. Rather, mothers sought stories of father figures who might lead children in a better way. Frustrated with the lack of attention to fathers in *An Ant-eater Named Arthur*, for example, Elizabeth said, "I'm going to make a story up. It's about a little boy, and he always wanted a father figure, but he never had one. So one day, a man comes along, and the little boy used to always get bad grades and never wanted to go outside and play. This man's like a stepfather and helps the kid shoot basketballs, and now the little boy wants to go to school." In striving to encourage a child "to be a leader, and not a follower," parents sought to instill, through alternative examples, the social and psychological resources to avoid what they considered predatory influences in their day-to-day lives.

“The Problem with These Kids Is They Don’t Have No Childhood”

“I didn’t have a childhood,” Kim responded when asked if she had a dream like the family in *A Chair for My Mother*. “Me neither,” said Audrey. “I was taking care of all my sisters and brothers by the time I was 11.” Parents described childhood as a period of innocence – a time when children could be free from fear and responsibility. Deprived of a childhood, many wished for these moments for themselves and their children:

I dream of a healthy clean atmosphere. So I don’t have to worry about – I got to explain to my mom why this person shot this person, or why the cops is over harassing this person. I know that is the realities of life. And my son’s going to confront that one day soon. But when they see something like that, you know it makes them grow up too fast. Just like us.

Giving the gift of childhood to those who had none, however, was not easy for most young parents. To most, childhood was considered a time removed from the difficulties of the adult world – poverty, violence, family squabbles – not a time to enter a child-oriented world. Consequently, child-like behaviors, like asking questions or pretending, were taken from an adult perspective and treated seriously, as in *An Anteater Named Arthur*:

LaTanya: He’s a hard-headed boy. He don’t understand much.
 Elizabeth: He asks too many questions. I know he don’t know, but every question he asks is another one followed by it, with her answers.
 Lakeesha: He’s crazy. Kids can be a pain in the butt.
 Silena: They just try to test your patience to see how far you can go before you do something. If it were me ... he wouldn’t be coming back through that door.
 Sidney: Kids will be asking questions about things they don’t know. My son do that. Everything you do, he got to ask you why.
 Marguita: But that’s how the only way you learn. When a kid asks questions if you keep saying out of my face, out of my face, they won’t know nothing. And they’ll be real dumb. Every time they ask something you got to tell them, because that’s how they learn.
 Lakeesha: He’s a nuisance. He don’t understand. To me, I think he’s doing it to be smart. Like a pain.
 Elizabeth: One question is enough, not this, this, this.
 LaTanya: ‘Cause you can’t forget that much stuff. He’s a problem.
 Elizabeth: But he’s not a bad kid, because all kids get to that point.
 Donna: (The facilitator.) Well, how much slack do you cut him?
 Sidney: Well, you got to be patient with him, like at the end he was cute ‘cause he gave his mama a kiss. But all that running in and running out, and forgetting this and that – no.

Providing a “childhood,” for many women, therefore, appeared to focus more on helping their children to avoid life’s struggles than on helping to scaffold

learning opportunities. In this light, young mothers' attitudes seemed to reflect the priority that children are lovable and vulnerable little individuals – to be cherished, nurtured, and most of all, protected.

Emerging Discourses in Family Literacy

As parents engaged in actively questioning and critically examining their roles and relationships through the stimulus of text, these conversations began to take on a transformative potential. Discussions increasingly revealed competing discourses (Brodkey, 1992), offering an array of subject positions that rejected “reality” as a single world view. Thus, instead of simply “echoing” a point of view, parents began to struggle with multiple pathways for action, providing an opening for challenging the dominant status quo. Moreover, in contrast to their initial passivity and view of themselves as academic failures, these discussions seemed to reflect a critical spirit, creativity, and increasing power in wanting to participate in their educational program.

In different ways, for example, Andrea, Sidney, LaTanya, and Elizabeth appeared to resist the discourse that defined them as “functionally illiterate.” Sidney was able to use the program to feel strong and smart. She became the “expert” on African folktales, taking on Donna’s initial role of introducing stories to the group. “Anansi is like a storyteller in Africa. He’s usually a trickster, just like Anansi the spider, remember that book? Wasn’t that good? There’s a lot of stories about Anansi for us that we might want to read.” Elizabeth, too, showing signs of strength, seemed to increasingly resist the judgment that she had left school because she was incapable as a learner. In response to *Amazing Grace*: “I’m just amazed at how I do math. I like computers, but what I really like is algebra – there are so many ways to do it – I get so wrapped up, I spend my spare time doing algebra.”

Some mothers also began to reject the label of irresponsibility placed on them by society or by their own families. Although acknowledging the difficulty of their new role, LaTanya and Andrea, for example, would frequently give advice to others on how to resolve various issues like sibling rivalry in *Peter’s Chair*, or fear of the dark in *I Am Not Afraid*, recognizing that their years of child-care made them far more experienced parents than the dominant culture had given them credit for. Responding to Peter’s actions in *Peter’s Chair*, LaTanya asked the others, “What do you do with your daughter when your son wants all of your attention?” Andrea answered, “I’ve learned that the best way to deal with sibling rivalry is to take special time with each of my children. I take Tameika to the library, and Hasaan to the park.” Parents seemed to gain power and self-confidence when seeing that issues could be addressed from multiple perspectives instead of such binary terms as “right” versus “wrong.”

Rather than blaming themselves and viewing their circumstances as indications of their personal failure, together these women began to articulate many

of the social and cultural contradictions in their lives. Strengthened by interaction with others, parents appeared increasingly to challenge the view that they lacked effort or will to change: "You know what I like about this group? We're all at the same level. We all have kids and responsibilities. It's like we have our own clique, our own posse, our own gang." Silenced no longer, what emerged in the children's literature hour for these adolescent mothers, therefore, was a new discourse – a discourse of possibility.

Conclusions

When adolescent mothers told us what matters to them, it was clear that the issues they raised and the questions they asked were dramatically shaped by economic and social factors in their lives. Viewed instrumentally, literacy was seen not as a set of skills to be learned, but as part of a hope for a "better life," – a life that reflected independence, self-respect, respect from others of their culture, and responsible parenting. Thus, although in some ways a very diverse group, in other ways, adolescent mothers were fundamentally similar to one another – family literacy was part of the change process, a dream to create a different and better future for themselves and their children.

The children's literature hour provided the women with opportunities to discover that their problems were experienced by others caught in similar circumstances as their own. In this social interactive context, they discussed and expanded on such critical issues as relationships, violence in their lives, and challenges for the future in a dialectical and generative form. In this respect, they became active participants in their own education, connecting literacy – the discourse practices and ways of using language – with real-life social issues and concerns. It is here – in the real conditions and goals of the learners – where a social-constructivist approach to family literacy can begin. For example, addressing their interest in conveying a sense of pride of their culture to children might become a source of dialogue for selecting books to read to their child, exploring their own history, and social action – helping to link, as Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1987) has argued, the word and the world. From the Freirean perspective (Freire, 1970b), it is in the making of this integral connection between literacy learning, personal empowerment, and broader social change that literacy can potentially have an effect on bettering people's lives.

Such programs that listen to participants' own accounts of their needs can begin to establish a more collaborative approach to instruction. In this approach, the teacher becomes a facilitator, working with learners to shape a program that meets their needs and expands their possibilities. Thus, in this respect, our project represented an important first step, but only one step in the process. The next step is to create alternatives for action. For example, in this study, adolescent mothers needed not only to critically reflect but to explore broader challenges which could empower them to achieve new goals. As Horsman (1990) has sug-

gested, they needed “something in my mind besides the everyday” or new visions of “what could be” to challenge the dominant discourses that preserve the status quo. Looking at the long-term impact of instruction that both engages learners in problematic issues and inspires new approaches and adaptations, therefore, is a critical area for further research.

This learner-centered, social-constructivist perspective contrasts sharply with prevalent family literacy service models (see *First Teachers*, 1989, for review). Widely known and cited programs (reviewed by Connors, 1994; Darling & Hayes, 1989), for example, have often focused on predetermined parenting curriculum, with topics including nutrition, discipline, child development, and parenting “skills” regardless of the particular population the program has been designed to serve. Though well-intended, these programs situate knowledge in the hands of teachers who determine students needs, regardless of the social worlds in which their participants reside. As variable retention records indicate (Connors, 1994), however, this approach often falters by ignoring the rich knowledge base of learners, their speed of learning, and what they may consider to be their essential needs in learning. Further, it has the damaging potential to perpetuate the belief among the participants themselves that they are deficient or incapable of learning.

On the contrary, we would argue for a far different approach, one that is closely tied to the individuals' needs and goals. Rather than importing a service “model,” this approach would suggest that family literacy programs must be context-specific, growing out of a common vision created through interactions between facilitative instructors and participants. Here, specific skills teaching would build on participants' already existing cultural capital (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) and be more reflective of their targeted needs. These issues could be incorporated in the content of instruction, allowing participants' to use literacy as a tool for addressing specific conditions and needs for change.

Family literacy programs like these could be more sensitive to contextual factors that have traditionally plagued recruitment, attendance, and retention in these programs. Unlike some family literacy classes, for example, we found mothers eager to attend the children's literature hour, suggesting that opportunities to share individual perspectives and critically reflect together may have represented a forum, a social network for women, for discussing important family issues more congruent with their learning styles and practices than others.

Such ecological settings, which provide opportunities for participants to display, explore, and extend their understandings, support the development of practices that value and build on parents' prior knowledge and strengths (Gadsden, 1994; Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Neuman et al., 1995; Weinstein-Shr & Quintero, 1995). Previous intervention approaches for adolescent mothers, for example, have often assumed that they were unreflective, life-long welfare dependents, and cared little about their offspring (Berlin & Sum, 1988; de Lissovay, 1973). The very structure of many of these programs seemed to communicate the message: What is wrong with you (Musick, 1993)? Contrary to this view, our children's literature discussions repeatedly revealed the women's resilience in the

face of tremendous obstacles and in responding to the challenges and changes in their lives. As Sidney described:

You're gonna hear about me one day – oh yes you are because I'm not settling for nothing. I want the best for me and mine because if I screw up who's going to take care of my son? His father? I don't think so. I don't know what he wants for his son, but he doesn't want the things that I do. Do you know what I mean? As far as my point of view, he's not going to give my son what I want him to have. I don't want him to have it by the means of drugs, robbery, stealing stuff, and killing; I want him to have it with honesty. If I can do it, I want my son to go in the same direction as I am going. You see, you have to be a little bit stronger with guys, because it's so easy for them to get into the wrong thing and stick with it and it's just a pattern. If I have to drag my baby with me on campus – if I have to strap my baby on my back – I will be here.

Approaches to family literacy should contribute and build on these vital strengths.

Notes

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APPENDIX

Children's Literature Selections

Week 1: *Are You My Mother?* by P.D. Eastman

A baby bird emerges from his egg while the mother is off looking for food. He goes in search of her. "Are you my mother?" he asks a cat, a hen, a dog, and a cow. Finally, a steam shovel accidentally deposits him back in his nest where he is joyfully reunited with his mother.

Week 2: *Tell Me a Story, Mama* by Angela Johnson

A young African American girl and her mother remember together all the girl's favorite stories about her mother's childhood: How the mother was frightened by a scary neighbor, befriended a dog with no tail, and sent to live with a great-aunt in a far-off city when her parents had to work. It explores the mother's relationship with her own loving mother (the girl's grandmother).

Week 3: *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman

Grace, a young Afro-Caribbean girl, loves stories and acts out all the exciting parts – as Hiawatha, Aladdin, or Joan of Arc. Grace tries out for the part of Peter Pan in the school play, despite doubting classmates who say a girl, especially a Black girl, cannot play the lead. With support from her mother and grandmother, Grace keeps in mind that she can be anything she wants to be – and wins the part.

Week 4: *I Am Not Afraid* by Kenny Mann

In this authentic African folktale, Leyo, small and meek, has much to learn from his brave older brother, Tipilit. Despite Tipilet's attempts to show Leyo how to respect – not fear – the mighty river and trees of the forest, Leyo still acts cowardly. One night, a mighty nine-headed demon comes to their camp while they are sleeping. Tipilit rescues his little brother, who from then on, shows no fear of the mighty river and trees of the forest.

Week 5: *An Anteater Named Arthur* by Bernard Waber

Arthur, a lovable anteater boy, has some troubles: Understanding why he is called an anteater, finding friends to play with, keeping his room tidy, and forgetting things for school. Told by his mother, this story shows that although Arthur may have his difficulties, he handles them in a resourceful way.

Week 6: *Peter's Chair* by Ezra Jack Keats

Peter, a young African American boy, is feeling dejected because his parents have painted all his baby furniture pink for his new baby sister. Peter decides to run away, taking all of his favorite possessions. After getting as far as the front door, Peter is lured back by his mother who has made his favorite lunch. With his father, Peter paints his baby chair for his new sister.

Week 7: *Anansi the Spider* by Gerald McDermott

In this West-African tale, Anansi the spider sets out on a long, difficult journey. Threatened by fish and falcon, Anansi is rescued through the efforts of his six sons. At home again, Anansi wonders which of his sons to reward with a beautiful globe of white light. Nyame, the God of All Things, helps Anansi by placing the globe (the moon) in the sky every night for all to enjoy.

Week 8: *Papa's Stories* by Delores Johnson

Kari, a young African American girl, loved when her father would read her stories each night, including her favorite, "Little Miss Too-Big-For-Her-Red-Britches." Kari especially enjoyed how the stories would change each time Papa read them. When a neighbor shows Kari that the words in the story are different than what Papa reads, Kari discovers her father has never

learned to read. Confronting him, he admits the truth, and at the same time, shows off some new reading skills.

Week 9: *What Mary Jo Shared* by Janice May Udry

Mary Jo, a young African American girl, cannot find the perfect thing to talk about during sharing time at school. Each day, she thinks about sharing but cannot find something no one else has brought in. Finally, she discovers the perfect thing to share – her father. When the class reacts enthusiastically to her father's visit, Mary Jo learns that her contributions in class are prized.

Week 10: *A Chair for My Mother* by Vera B. Williams

Rosa's family's possessions are destroyed in a fire. Rosa, her mother, and her grandmother save their coins in a big jar. After a year, the Latina family can afford to buy a big, comfortable chair that all three can enjoy.

Week 11: *Oh Kojo! How Could You!* by Verna Aardema

In this West-African tale, Kojo, a young boy, is tricked by the mischievous Anansi into spending market money for a dog, a cat, and a dove. When the dove turns out to be a Queen, Kojo returns the dove to her native land, where he is rewarded with a magic ring. Kojo becomes a rich chief of the village, but Anansi has the ring stolen. Kojo sends the dog and cat to retrieve it, but only the cat successfully follows his orders. From then on, all cats have received better treatment than dogs in Ashantiland.

Week 12: *Sam* by Ann Herbert Scott

Sam, a young African American boy, tries to play with his mother, brother, sister, and father. All of them, however, are too busy to play with Sam. Feeling rejected by his family, Sam retreats and begins to cry. Realizing they have hurt his feelings, Sam's family reaches out and involves him in a family activity.

J L R

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