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AUTHOR Handel, Ruth D.
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the meaning to participating mothers of their involvement in a family literacy program, the Family Reading Program, based in an elementary school in a low-income urban neighborhood. The Family Reading Program is a workshop series for adult family members. In the program, the adults read interesting children's books and learn generic reading, thinking, and discussion strategies, then borrow books from the program to read to their children. The program is targeted to parents of K-3 children. Data for the study were gathered through structured interviews of 50-70 minutes with 7 women engaged in the program. The study found that the mothers attended the program both to learn how to help their children and for the learning experience with other women and the interaction with the teacher. All participants reported learning about books and reading strategies and translating their knowledge into new behaviors with their children. All reported reading the program books to their children. Some parents were stimulated to pick up new reading material for themselves; some reported that they had improved their reading skills. All enjoyed the social aspects of the program. The study concluded that involving women in their children's education was a natural and productive way to foster literacy in their children as well as enhance the mothers' knowledge and skills. (Contains 15 references.) (KC)

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FAMILY LITERACY AND WOMEN'S LIVES

Ruth D. Handel, Ph.D.

Department of Reading and Educational Media
Montclair State University
Upper Montclair, New Jersey 07043

201/655-7190
handelr@saturn.montclair.edu

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In family literacy programs, the well-substantiated finding that children's school achievement is most strongly correlated with mothers' level of education (Sticht & MacDonald, 1993) can operate as a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it has lent urgency to efforts to enhance women's educational levels; on the other, such efforts may involve unrealistic expectations and pressures to perform. As is evident in the current political climate in the United States, social policy affecting poor and minority people often blames the victim, particularly if the targeted population is composed predominantly of women. Family literacy programs, which are proliferating in public schools, may be no exception to this situation.

It is worth noting that the great majority of participants in family literacy programs are women - the mothers, grandmothers, aunts, or other female caretakers of the children involved. Nonetheless, most programs refer to the adult participants as "parents" or "family members" and do not publicly identify their gender. In neglecting to do so, those programs may fail to take account of the distinctive needs, interests, abilities or personal history of the women involved. Family literacy professionals advocate a strengths rather than deficit model. However, schools, which focus on children as the beneficiaries of adult effort, rather than on service to the adults themselves, are likely to overlook the needs, strengths, contributions and perspectives they bring to school programs.

Literacy researchers have advocated the value of a learner-centered approach to program evaluation, administration, teaching and learning. (Auerbach, 1989; Lytle et al. 1992; Wikelund, 1993). Feminist researchers and others describe the interconnectedness of women's lives. Family literacy programs, which seek to enhance the literacy of both generations, are well situated to develop linkages between formal education and home literacy contexts. However, the home context is less well-known to literacy providers or researchers, and the perspective of literacy learners on possible linkages and connections is often not systematically sought.

Focus of the Study

This study investigates the meaning to participating mothers of their involvement in a family literacy program based in an elementary school (called here Central School) in a low income, urban neighborhood. It gives voice to women whose voices are often not heard, and explores the meanings their participation holds for them. In this exploration, the participants' felt experience is considered a source of knowledge. In describing the research process, the paper raises issues of interviewing across class and ethnic boundaries.

Family involvement is particularly difficult in schools in poverty areas where many children are educationally at risk and where school and community resources are limited. Yet there are hopeful stories. In the school-based program attended by the participants in this study, some parents return year after year. The program is efficiently run by an energetic, competent and personable teacher. Surveys have indicated that both adults and children enjoy the program and have improved their literacy skills (Handel, 1992). Yet the question arises - what does participation mean to them? What keeps them coming back? What home environments do they come from and what do they bring back to their home environment?

The Family Reading Program

The Family Reading Program is a workshop series for adult family members. The adults read interesting children's books and learn generic reading, thinking and discussion strategies; afterward, they borrow books from the program and read to their children. The program is targeted to parents of children in kindergarten through grade 3. The aim is literacy development of both generations. Schools hold four or five workshops per year followed by a recognition ceremony.

Family Reading workshops are experiential and participatory, designed for a high degree of engagement with people as well as books. The multicultural, quality children's literature, selected for its interest to adults as well as children, serves as a springboard for

discussion of important issues often related to childrearing and human relations. For many, the workshops are their first experience in sharing books with others in a non-threatening atmosphere in which diversity of opinion is welcome. Enjoyment as well as learning is commonly reported. For a full description see Handel (1992) and Handel and Goldsmith (1994).

The Family Reading facilitator at Central School is an experienced kindergarten teacher who has been with the program since its inception. She has a warm and welcoming manner with parents and is very well liked.

Methodology

A semi-structured interview informed by principles of ethnography was the primary methodology of the study. The interviews were preceded by several years of participant observation of the school program, self-report surveys, and focus group interviewing. The field was familiar to me and access was easy.

It is important to state at the outset that in addition to being researcher/interviewer I am also the developer of the program in which the women were participating. This situation presents the obvious pitfalls of observer bias and self-congratulation. However, I believe that two considerations mitigate the danger. First, the program has been operating in the school in question for seven years; over that period participant surveys and informal interviews have confirmed the value of the program as well as some of its limitations; program evaluation is not the focus of the current study. Second, the program is not mine alone; the original model has been modified and enlarged by the efforts of the teachers with whom I have worked and by the adult participants.

My on-site involvement with the Central School program has evolved from serving as workshop co-facilitator the first two years, to delivering brief remarks during the program year, to guest status now - a progressively more distant relationship reflecting the school's successful institutionalization of the program. I meet with the school's workshop

facilitator and other program teachers for yearly networking sessions. I had no contact with participants in the study prior to the interview.

Participants in the Study

I interviewed seven women engaged in a school-based Family Reading Program. All were mothers of children in kindergarten through grade 3 in the same public school in a low income, urban community. All the women interviewed were African-American, the predominant ethnicity of the school and neighborhood. Ages of participants ranged from 24 to 43. All have lived in the same city since childhood; two are graduates of the school now attended by their children. Five of the women had high school diplomas or the equivalent, one had completed grade 11, and one mother, a contrast case, had an advanced academic degree. Overall, their educational level is higher than average for their community.

Criteria for selection were consistency of program attendance and availability for an hour-long interview. Respondents were identified by the kindergarten teacher who has been Central School's key Family Reading facilitator since the program's inception seven years ago. Four of the mothers selected had children in kindergarten and had attended all five Family Reading workshops during the interview year; one mother had a child in grade 1 and was completing two years of attendance; and two mothers of grade 3 children were completing their fourth year with the program, having attended since their children were in kindergarten. Together, the study participants formed a core of "regulars" attending the Family Reading workshops. Table 1 presents selected demographic information.

Insert Table 1 about here

The Interview Process

Each mother was interviewed separately at Central School in a conference room adjoining the library where Family Reading workshops were held. Interviews ranged from 50 to 70 minutes in length. They were audiotaped and later transcribed. I brought a

display of children's books to the interviews; following each interview, the mothers were invited to choose some as a gift.

The semi-structured interview protocol elicited mothers' views as to what they and their children had learned from the program, their reasons for attending Family Reading workshops, and descriptions of literacy behaviors of both parent and child. Two other lines of inquiry probed deeper meanings: to elicit information on the place of reading in their current family life, respondents were asked to describe a typical day in their household and were also asked to describe literacy events from their own childhood. The latter might cast light on intergenerational experiences that shape their own parental behavior.

All topics were investigated with all respondents, but order of questions and topic duration varied in accordance with its meaningfulness for each individual. Following Spradley (1979) the interview process was recursive, and topics of interest were frequently revisited for additional information. Follow-up questions were also used as needed.

The interview sessions were informal and interactive. Consonant with feminist methodology (Thompson, 1992) and the belief that the interviewing process is most productive when relationships are non-hierarchical and the interviewer invests personal identity in the relationship (Oakley, 1981) the sessions were designed to create connections rather than maintain distance between interviewer and interviewee. For example, during the course of the interview I offered brief comments of encouragement or validation and responded to any questions about reading and books. At the end of the session, I invited any additional questions and replied to queries about the program or my own personal history.

All of the women knew that I had some connection with the program. To lessen the chance of them telling me what they thought I might want to hear, I framed the interview as an occasion for them to give their own experiences and suggestions for the program as a way of contributing to the process.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed inductively; using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) categories and major themes were established for the data. Findings are presented in the form of an analytic narrative.

Summary of Findings

The respondents were well-intentioned, earnest women concerned to do their best for their children. As initial motivation for attending Family Reading workshops, all expressed the desire to "encourage" or "help" their children. In addition, all reported adult-centered reasons for their participation, notably the "enjoyment" and "interest" of the sessions themselves. They liked the participatory, welcoming nature of the workshops, the opportunity to interact with other adults, and the dedication and warmth of the teacher conducting the workshops. The dual aspects of their motivation was often expressed in the same statement. Asked her reasons for attending the workshops, one mother said:

It's interesting to me. Each time is a new experience, not just learning the same thing over and over. It teaches you different ways of reading to your kids. (Ms. Blank)

All respondents, including the highly educated mother, reported learning about books and reading strategies and translating their knowledge into new behaviors with their children. All reported reading the program books to their children; some parents were stimulated to pick up new reading material for themselves; others reported that they had learned to improve their own reading skills.

Home reading environments differed considerably as did the personal styles and family background of the women. The home of the one highly educated mother provided the most literacy-rich environment, but important variations not attributable to social class were seen among the others as well.

Three analytic narratives will be presented here: that of Alicia Trasket, a single mother of two who is determined to be different from her family of origin; Linda Green who has three children and regards the school as a haven; and the contrast case of attorney Mercedes H. Smith, married, with two children, who sees literacy in a larger context.

Alicia Trasket - Determined to be Different

Ms. Trasket is a small, composed woman of 29 who has had secretarial experience, but thinks she might "work with children" sometime in the future. She has two sons, Kasan, age 5 in kindergarten, and Tyrell, 16 months, whom she held on her lap throughout the interview. She lives alone with the children. Her sisters live across town.

Ms. Trasket has attended every Family Reading session during Kasan's year in kindergarten. She walks her son to and from school and often borrows books between scheduled Family Reading sessions.

Reasons for Attending Family Reading

To an initial question of what brought her into the program, Ms. Trasket responded "My child, to learn how to read with them, to encourage them, to be helpful." Another reason she attends is her enjoyment of the workshops and "how well" they go. She liked the fact that she "can express (her) opinion" in the workshops and felt she makes good contributions to the discussion. Continuing she said:

...when we go to the meetings and read through the books and look at the pictures and talk about them, I like that. It's telling me how to improve my reading skills along with my child. I respect myself.

The opportunity to enhance her own self-esteem seem important here. Later in the interview, she expressed a strong wish to raise her children differently from the way she was raised and described how Family Reading helps toward that goal.

The Home Reading Environment

At home with her older son, Ms. Trasket said she employs many ideas about reading that she learned in the Program including the use of interactive strategies. She explained the strategy of predicting saying she asks him to look at the cover and say what the book is about. Previously, she reported, she would read the pages but wouldn't ask the child anything, "just read and let it be."

Ms. Trasket reported that she now also asks Kasan how he feels about a story and encourages his questions. The result is that she gets "more insight" into what the child is thinking. The child has lots of questions and she tries to figure out the answer or tries to have an answer that he can understand. Appearing proud of Kasan's curiosity, Ms. Trasket next picked out an unfamiliar book from the display and proceeded to demonstrate an interactive book-reading episode by generating Kasan's likely questions and her responses.

Ms. Trasket reads regularly to Kasan and has done so for several years. She said the reading sessions were times to get to "know one another better and have mutual respect." Last year she read for 15 minutes every morning; she felt that helped Kasan when he was in preschool.

Ms. Trasket also reads to both her children at bedtime "to get them settled" and help them feel comfortable about going to sleep. She selects "good books, not horror stories that could give them bad dreams."

Ms. Trasket volunteered the information that she was in the habit of ordering books for the children through a mail order service that contacted her soon after Kasan's birth. Other mothers in the sample reported similar purchases. Recently, Kasan recognized words in a Dr. Seuss story that also appear in his school workbook, she said. Books from the service preceded and supplemented books borrowed from Family Reading workshops.

Television is a major interest for Kasan. "It's like that tv is calling his name," his mother said. The kindergartner watches MTV after school and is reluctant to do any homework. Ms. Trasket lets him watch, then insists he do homework.

On weekends, Kasan is permitted to choose his activities. "I give him a decision, what he wants to do, play or read a book for instance; its his decision." Most of the time Kasan decides to play.

Responding to a query, Ms. Trasket said the Program had definitely stimulated her to read for herself as well. She borrows material about parenting and books about reading comprehension and nursery rhymes available in the school.

Past and Present: The Family Literacy Heritage

Ms. Trasket described her own childhood as deficient and very different from the way she is bringing up her family now. She reported that her wish to make things different for her children is the reason she is so interested in Family Reading and another school program that deals with parenting. When asked whether she was read to as a child, she answered "No" saying her parents would have read to her had they known of its importance. Story-telling was not part of family life either. Her mother died when she was five, leaving her father with six children. She says she could not talk to her parents when she was little and that in the family home children were always told what to do.

Ms. Trasket believes she can stop the pattern of behavior she experienced as a child. She reported that when Kasan was born, she did not want to follow her parents' example and sought alternatives. Hoping the child would learn from her behavior, she started business school classes, read to him, and was "more of a Mom than a friend." She feels she can do many things differently for her children including reading at home and allowing her son to make some decisions. She said she wants to have a relationship with her children and be part of their lives.

Somewhat paradoxically, Ms. Trasket said that because behaviors are learned from parents and she recognizes that she and her siblings learned from her father, she knows that she can change and have a different effect on her children. Ms. Trasket said she was the first to break the family pattern; she encourages her sisters to do likewise. They, somewhat skeptical, call her the "preacher" in the family.

Summary

The participatory aspects of Family Reading workshops, particularly the encouragement to express her own opinion, are important to Ms. Trasket. She values autonomy both for herself and her son, as exemplified in giving him a choice of activities on weekends. Ms. Trasket had created a reading environment in her home prior to participating in Family Reading, and added interactive discussion strategies as a result of the program. She uses reading flexibly, to settle the children down at night and to stimulate Kasan and engage in active reading strategies at other times. Her deliberate break with family history and determination to create a different type of family relationship gives urgency to her involvement with school programs. While much is unclear in the report of her decision to change, it is apparent that Family Reading serves to support and validate her goal.

Linda Green - The School as Haven

Ms. Green, age 24, has a six-year old daughter, Courtney in Grade 1 and sons, 4 1/2 and 2 1/2, who are enrolled in a childcare center. She and her ten siblings all attended Central School. Ms. Green and the children live with her mother and two of her sisters.

Ms. Green has worked in a cafeteria in the past, and now volunteers at Central and the childcare center. Ms. Green has attended every Family Reading session for two years, and is in the school on many other occasions. She came to the interview wearing a large button imprinted "BOOK LOVER." Throughout she spoke in a rapid, almost hectic tone.

Reasons for Attending Family Reading

Like the other parents, Ms. Green reported that she stays involved with Family Reading for the sake of her child. However, as reported below, it became clear that a relationship with the school was of over-riding importance in her own life. The Family Reading program was part of that important relationship.

The Home Literacy Environment

While Ms. Green did not report learning reading strategies, she volunteered substantive knowledge about the a book presented in a workshop, paraphrasing the story and offering several generalizations about the content. She borrows books from the school program, but reported no other specific home influences of Family Reading. Rather, she proceeded to described her home literacy environment and her own relationship to the school.

Ms Green reported that she reads several books to all three of her children in the late afternoon. She said they are interested and quiet when she does so, and that Courdney will read by herself as well. Reading and homework precede watching television.

She also subscribes to the same books-by-mail service as Ms.Trasket, and about twice a month, takes the children to the public library to borrow books and tapes and participate in library programs. Ms. Green said she also planned to take them to a museum. She felt her children were sometimes bored because they were "very bright."

Ms. Green appeared sensitive to her children's developmental level. For example, she tried to teach her older boy to write his name when he was three, but quickly saw he was not ready. She tried again a year later and was happy when he could do it. Ms. Green said she praises her children's achievements and, when they bring home papers from school, she posts them on the wall.

School plays a supportive role in Ms. Green's life. She said, "School is like a relative to me." She maintains contact with her high school teachers, especially her typing teacher with whom she's had an eight-year connection. At Central School, Ms. Green is a frequent presence volunteering in Courdney's classroom, in the library and on the playground. Ms. Green reported that she was "depressed a lot," but she talks to many of the teachers, who encourage her and "pick (her) up." She meets with the school counselor and seeks help from Courdney's present and former teachers. She indicated she appreciates their help.

Ms. Green reported a great deal of pleasurable interaction with children in the school. She tells stories to the children and feels they look up to her and become attached to her. She said some of the staff who observe her with children comment on her teaching skill. She reported a wish to become a teacher herself.

When I asked the reason for all the volunteering (she also assists at her sons' childcare center) Ms. Green replied, "I just love getting up in the morning when the kids get up... What else would I be doing, wasting time, when I could be going to the school." School seems to be a place where she is accepted, exercises her abilities, and receives both gratification and help.

Ms. Green has recently begun reading for herself mentioning a book of meditations that helped her think about her goals; on the advice of the school counsellor, she planned to read texts about teaching, also.

Ms. Green said she realized further education was necessary if she was to be a teacher, but her plans were vague. She started a special program at a community college, but lasted only a few days because of disruption to the children's schedule. Disconcertingly, after talking about a teaching career, at the end of the interview Ms. Green said she wanted to "have it all;" she would love to act and be a comedian.

Past and Present: The Family Literacy Heritage

Ms. Green did not remember reading or being read to when she was a child. She could not explain the emphasis on literacy in her own household but merely said that she was "definitely different" from her siblings and that she stayed to herself most of the time. She presented herself as an isolated individual even though there are three other adults in the household.

Summary

Because of Ms. Green's hectic manner of speaking and contradictory statements in the interview, I sought comments from the Family Reading facilitator who had known her for two years. According to this teacher, Ms. Green has been "in and out" of GED testing

at the community college. The teacher believed "something is shooting her down." She said Ms. Green has mood swings and complains that her siblings do not want her to advance herself.

In summary, Ms. Green seems to be a bright, but troubled, individual who relies on the school as a source of support and self-esteem. Involvement for the sake of her child, while sincere, seems secondary. Despite encouragement from teachers, she has been unable to proceed with her own education. However, she is committed to the Family Reading Program and tries to get other parents to attend. She also is conscientious about fostering literacy in her home.

Mercedes Hastings Smith - Literacy in a Larger Context

Ms. Smith, a self-possessed woman of 43, introduced herself using all three names. She has college and law degrees and maintains a half-time law practice as a solo practitioner. Ms. Smith and her husband, a minister, have two children, a daughter Meldon, in kindergarten, and a son, in fifth grade. Ms. Smith has attended every Family Reading session this year, the first year her children have been enrolled in Central School. In addition, Ms. Smith frequently visits her daughter's classroom. The Smiths share a mission of helping their community.

I was not aware of Ms. Smith's background before interviewing her. The information naturally sharpened my curiosity into her reasons for participating in the program and what she got out of it. Fully at ease during the interview, Ms. Smith's articulateness and reflectiveness contrasted sharply with that of the other women.

Reasons for Attending Family Reading

Ms. Smith cited the importance of the community aspect of Family Reading. The sessions helped her get to know people on an informal basis, and she felt that the workshops themselves helped promote the community solidarity toward which she and her husband were working. The workshops had helped her understand the other parents' perspectives, and helped her feel more comfortable communicating with them. She said

she knew relationships could be difficult because of "stereotypes in the back of (her) mind" about the others. Portraying the workshops, Ms. Smith said:

Everyone seems to really come alive during the Family Reading session. There's a lot of participation. We ... talk about the issues generated by the reading ... and we share experiences. It's a good way to get to know the other parents and it gives us a lot of material to talk about when working with our children. . .

Describing the times when children join their parents for reading, she said

I know it's okay to read to my kids because, look, there's the other mother reading, and another mother reading to her children, so this is something we're all doing, so let's keep it up...then we can go back and read in our individual homes.

The Home Literacy Environment

Literacy is fostered in the Smith home. From Family Reading, Ms. Smith reported she had learned the importance of asking questions when reading to children. While she had always self-questioned during her own reading, as a skilled reader the process was automatic and taken for granted. The workshops brought the realization that questioning should be made explicit for children. In common with other mothers, she also acquired cultural knowledge from the workshop books.

Ms. Smith reported that her new use of interactive techniques had influenced her selection of books for her daughter. Realizing that discussion makes advanced book accessible to the child, she now selects longer books knowing she can hold her daughter's attention through initiating discussion and raising questions about the story. She said she

was pleased at exploring books she would not have thought age appropriate. The exposure to interactive strategies has made her daughter more comfortable with reading. Meldon no longer feels bad when encountering words she does not know and is not afraid to take a guess, she said. The daughter was now almost as likely to initiate questions during book reading as the mother.

Ms. Smith said that the program stimulated her to read more for herself and caused her to regard reading as a family and not just an individual activity. Although she appeared knowledgeable about children's literature, she said the program had introduced her to "some marvellous new children's books with phenomenal art work" that she enjoys. She borrows books from the program for home reading.

The Smiths have had a long-standing practice of reading the Bible at home together with their children. Other home activities appear to reinforce and build on school learning. For example, when Meldon delighted her mother by learning to read and spell a number of words through using a school computer, Ms. Smith took her to the library and they found four small books that the child could read by herself. Library visits are frequent.

Ms. Smith usually reads to the children at bedtime, but lately has been trying to read to them in the middle of afternoon. She said she tells the children to shut off the tv and get a book. One reason she prefers books is control of content, especially when compared to television, she said. On occasions when she reads to both children at once the interactive techniques are put in the service of promoting good sibling relationships since the children may have have different reactions to the story. "It's a good time to teach them to respect one another's point of view," she said.

Ms. Smith regarded reading as part of her children's lives, not as a special event. She said she does not dictate when the children must read, but rather suggests that they might like to read as one of the healthy activities that they can choose to do. Sometimes, she said, her son will choose to play basketball.

Ms. Smith expressed strong feelings about transmitting the African-American experience to her children. An incident with her son made her realize the complexity of her efforts. Stimulated by a writing program at a local university, Ms. Smith wrote an African-American version of Goldilocks, which she entitled "Ebony Locks." She shared the story with her children and asked her son to illustrate it. To her dismay he drew a picture of a "nice little white girl" copied from another book. Conventions of the majority culture, rather than attention to his mother's story or observation of people around him including his own sister, had shaped his drawing.

Ms. Smith emphasized the dormant creative potential in the black community, but was not sure of the role of the school in nurturing it. She said that schools may emphasize thinking skills but not provide enough factual information for children to build on. She recognized that wide reading helps children learn to write and speak "standard English," but, since many children do not read a great deal, thought perhaps they should be taught to diagram sentences as she was.

Past and Present: The Family Literacy Heritage

In the past, Ms. Smith has served as a volunteer talking to community groups about the value of reading aloud to children. She found that for many parents the concept of reading to children was a "totally novel idea." As for her own case, she cited three reasons why it appeared natural to her: cultural information as a result of her general educational level; advice in child-rearing books such as Dr. Spock that she read as a new mother; and "family heritage," the example and precept of her mother, who read to her and encouraged her to do so with her own children. Ms. Smith's mother apparently still fosters literacy; she has encouraged Ms. Smith to submit her "Ebony Locks" story for publication.

Summary

Ms. Smith saw Family Reading as a way of bonding with community residents despite age and socioeconomic status differences. The experiences in Family Reading

workshops provided a common experience that helped her "feel a part of the others." She felt that the other parents felt free to communicate with her as well.

Ms. Smith portrayed her various roles and activities as part of an integrated whole. She said she did not separate out her role as a parent from her community work or her involvement in Family Reading from her religious life. She saw interrelationships because of both personal temperament and historical knowledge, pointing out, for example, the origin of the Sunday School movement in the need to teach children to read the Bible. Although a strong supporter of Family Reading, she was uncertain about the effectiveness of schooling today and, unlike the other mothers, offered a critique of educational practice.

For mature, fluent readers the processes of comprehension are so automatic that they are normally inaccessible to conscious awareness (Afflebach & Johnson, 1986; Garner, 1987). In Ms. Smith's case, cognitive strategies were so integrated and automatic that they had dropped below the level of awareness until they were explicitly demonstrated in Family Reading workshops. Her example suggests the utility of such experiences for highly educated individuals as well as those for whom the strategies are novel.

Discussion

This study has portrayed the meaning of participation in Family Reading to three women, and obtained a view of their home environments and the place of family literacy within them. The women shared commonalities as well as differences with one another and with the other respondents not reported in detail. For example, in contrast to Ms. Trasket and Ms. Green, the other low income women described connections with their family literacy heritage in terms of childhood books or family story-telling. Like the middle class families described by Taylor (1983), they wove past and present together in talking about reading and stories. Overall, we see confirmation yet again that parents in poverty are concerned for their children's welfare, engage in literacy practices, and appreciate appropriate help from the school. The fortuitous presence of a highly educated, middle class family permits comparison of literacy practices and perspectives.

Similarities notwithstanding, Family Reading appears to have served the mothers in different ways and elicited the construction of multiple meanings. A first level of analysis was the identification of major themes expressive of this meaning. For Ms. Trasket, determined to be different, Family Reading helped her enlarge upon on-going literacy behaviors and raise her children in a manner much different from that of her parents. For Ms. Green, who said "school is like a relative to me," the school and school programs were a haven where she could contribute and be appreciated. Ms. Smith saw participation in Family Reading workshops as an opportunity to promote her mission of community betterment; she regarded literacy as embedded in the context of wider life experiences, rather than as a special activity. On a second level of analysis, the meanings of the Family Reading experience may be characterized as those expressive of transformation and as those of personal maintenance. Ms. Green appears to fit in the latter category; she was seeking relief from difficulty. For Ms. Trasket and Ms. Smith, however, transformation seemed imperative, personal in the one case, social in the other.

Implications

All of the mothers enjoyed reading and discussing the Family Reading workshop books, finding them sources of new knowledge for child and adult alike. An obvious implication is that decisions as to program content are important in family literacy programs. The mother's ability to engage their children in interactive discussion appeared to be an important source of Program validation; in other words, the Program must be perceived as working for the children as well as the adults. A third implication relates to the sociability of the workshop sessions. Most women enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to be with other adults. While the inter-relationship of personal connection and enjoyment to cognitive learning may be an obvious point, it is often overlooked by educators. In the case of Family Reading, it seems likely that these adult gratifications were a major factor in sustaining the mothers' initial motivation and keeping them coming back to the program.

For voluntary programs like Family Reading in which systematic intake and information about the adults' reading status is not feasible, studies such as this may be useful for program planning, maintenance and recruitment. The experience of a core group of program regulars can be instructive in that regard. In addition, investigating the parents' perspective is important if schools are to work effectively and collaboratively with parents.

Conclusion

Feminist social scientists recognize the subjectivity of both parties to the research process, researchers as well as the individuals being studied (Reinharz, 1992). As Roman and Apple (1990) point out, in naturalistic inquiry the relationship between the researcher and researched affects the account of the particular reality offered. As a white, upper middle class professional interviewing African-Americans in a poverty neighborhood, that injunction was much in my mind. As a mother interviewing mothers, I sought connections that might bridge some of the distance. On other grounds, too, I am aware that this study is partial and limited. While space does not permit a full description of the interpersonal context, I note my distinct impression that the interview with Ms. Smith was more relaxed for both of us; conversation flowed smoothly; the issue of race was discussed, references were shared. Ms. Smith's educational experiences were reminiscent of my own, and her picture of nested worlds was familiar.

The educational and research communities endorse the involvement of parents or other adult family members in the schooling of their children yet seldom investigate the meaning of such involvement to the adults. In particular, variations within minority groups are often overlooked (Scott-Jones, 1993). While the school's traditional focus has been on children as the beneficiaries of adult effort, this study suggests that equity and pragmatics demand attention to the role of literacy in the lives of adults, particularly women, who constitute the great majority of participants in family literacy programs. Hearing women's

voices and involving them in the research process are ways to foster the democratic ethos espoused by family and adult literacy programs.

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TABLE 1
RESPONDENTS - SELECTED DEMOGRAPHICS ¹

Name	Age	Educ.	Occupational History	Others in Household
Marge Burns	24	H.S. grad.	(former) food preparation	son, age 5, Kindergarten son, 17 mos. mother
Alicia Trasket	29	H.S. grad. + business school	(former) secretary	son, age 5, Kindergarten son, age 16 mos.
Ann Powers	38	H.S. grad.	---	daughter, age 5, Kindergarten son, age 14, Grade 8 daughter, age 18, Grade 11 son, age 20, H.S. graduate niece, age 3 nephew, age 11, Grade 5
Mercedes H. Smith	43	J.D.	attorney	daughter, age 5, Kindergarten son, age 10, Grade 5 husband
Linda Green	24	grade 11	(former) cafeteria worker	daughter, age 6, Grade 1 sons, 4 1/2 & 2 1/2 in preschool mother, two sisters
Sue Afton	29	H.S. grad.	aide, institution for mentally retarded	daughter, age 8, Grade 3 husband
Harriet Blank	42	GED	---	daughter, age 8, Grade 3 son, age 8, Grade 3 son, age 24, H.S. graduate children's father

1. Respondents are listed in order of youngest child in school. All are African-American. Names have been changed.