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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study examined the past and present participation in education of 34 parents enrolled in 5 model family literacy programs in North Carolina and Kentucky. All respondents were high school dropouts. Over half had dropped out of adult basic education classes before completing a high school equivalency certificate. The study focused on respondents' stated reasons for dropping out of high school and for entering educational programs as adults. The following data were collected: (1) descriptive information collected by teachers at the family literacy sites, including demographic descriptions and respondents' stated reasons for entering the programs; (2) field notes generated during investigators' site visits; and (3) in-depth interviews with respondents. Study results showed that school dropout was not simply a function of low attendance, low grades, poor peer relations, substance abuse, and delinquent behavior, although all factors were present. Underlying causes were traced to a process of disengagement from schooling that began at the transition from elementary to middle school. The sense of alienation from schooling persisted through young adulthood and was an important factor in decisions to drop out of adult basic education programs. Parents persisted in family literacy programs because programs addressed that sense of alienation. Parents and children developed not only literacy skills but also an identification with schooling. (80 references) (YLB)

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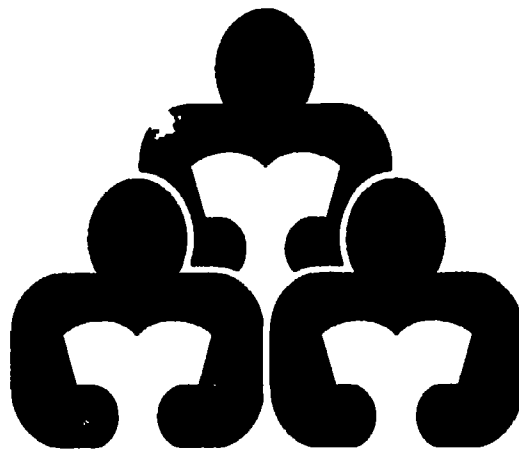
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Past and Present Educational Experiences of Parents Who Enrolled in Kenan Trust Family Literacy Programs

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Abstract

This exploratory study examined the past and present participation in education of 34 parents who were enrolled in five model family literacy programs. All of the respondents were high school dropouts. Over half had subsequently enrolled in adult basic education classes but dropped out before completing a high school equivalency certificate. At the time of the study, the respondents and their preschool children were enrolled in family literacy programs in North Carolina and Kentucky. The study's main questions focused on the respondents' stated reasons for dropping out of high school and for entering educational programs as adults.

A case study database was established for the storage and retrieval of three types of data collected in this study: (1) descriptive information collected by teachers at the family literacy sites, including demographic descriptions of the respondents and their families and the respondents' stated reasons for entering the family literacy programs; (2) field notes generated during investigators' visits to the five sites included in the study; (3) transcripts of interviews with the 34 respondents. A constant-comparative approach was used in the content analysis of field notes and interview transcripts.

Results of the study showed that dropping out of high school was not simply a function of low attendance, low grades, poor peer relations, substance abuse, and delinquent behavior, although all of these factors were present. The underlying causes of school dropout can be traced to a process of disengagement from schooling that began at the transition from elementary to middle school or soon thereafter. The sense of alienation from schooling persisted through young adulthood and was an important factor in decisions to drop out of adult basic education programs. Parents persisted in family literacy programs because the programs addressed that sense of alienation. Parents and children not only developed literacy skills in family literacy programs, they also develop an identification with schooling.

**PAST AND PRESENT EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES
OF PARENTS WHO ENROLLED IN
KENAN TRUST FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS**

Literacy is currently being discussed and debated on a nationwide scale. There is a growing concern that literacy levels in the United States are too low. International comparisons of middle and high school students show that those in the United States rank lower than students in many other industrialized countries (An International Assessment of Educational Progress, 1989). Studies of young adults in the United States show that many lack complex skills in prose, document, and quantitative literacy (Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986).

At the same time, there is growing concern with the numbers of American youth who drop out of high school each year. While the dropout rate has remained relatively constant for the last several years, increasingly complex job demands in the workplace require workers with increasing levels of skills (Carnevale, Gainer, & Meltzer, 1990).

One answer to these concerns has been the development of preschool programs for children at risk of school failure. Federally funded Head Start Programs are one example of this approach which seeks to prepare children for later success in school.

Another approach has been the development of educational programs for low literate adults. These programs have typically taken the form of day and evening classes that prepare adults to take the General Education Development (GED) certification tests, the most common form of high school equivalency certificate. Programs may be located in public school buildings, community centers, churches, and in the workplace.

Literacy programs that address the needs of families, rather than individual members, are a recent innovation. In typical family literacy programs, parent and their preschool children attend school together. Parents receive instruction in basic academic skills while children attend a developmentally appropriate preschool. Such programs also include components where parents and children come together for joint activities.

A common problem in adult and family literacy programs has been the recruitment and retention of participants. Eligible adults and families may choose not to participate. Others may enter the programs for a time and then drop out.

The research literature in adult education has taken two approaches to explaining participation in literacy programs. One has been to focus on deterrents like lack of daycare and transportation (Scanlon, 1986; Hayes, 1988). The other has been to examine motivational orientations of those who enroll in literacy programs (Houle, 1963; Tough, 1982; Hayes & Valentine, 1989; Beder & Valentine, 1990).

The adult education literature has not examined the broader context for participation decisions. Simply removing deterrents does not ensure that low literate adults will enter adult basic education programs. Do they feel the need to improve their literacy levels? If they in fact do, do they want to attend schools in order to accomplish that goal?

Finn's (1989) participation-identification model provides a framework for examining underlying causes for levels of participation in schooling. While the model was proposed as a way to understand decisions to drop out of high school, it can be extended to explain later reentry into adult education as well.

According to Finn, successful students develop a greater sense of identification with school than unsuccessful students. This sense of identification is alternately described in the research literature as affiliation, involvement, attachment, commitment, and bonding. Students who develop this bond with school early, during the preschool years, continue to do better throughout school than those who don't (Berruta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein, & Weikart, 1984). Students who do not develop an identification with school become alienated and withdraw from active participation.

Finn describes two aspects of identification: belonging and valuing. Students who identify with school have a sense of belonging. School is an important place for them. These students also value the types of success that are available at school. They commit themselves to school-related goals in order to achieve that success.

In addition to the psychological state of identification, there is a behavioral component of the model, participation. Successful students actively participate in schooling. Active participation leads to success in school-related goals, which strengthens an identification with school.

These concepts of identification and participation were used in this study to examine past and present participation in education by 34 low literate adults. All of the adults dropped out of high school as adolescents. Many subsequently enrolled in adult basic education classes and dropped out of those, too. At the time of the study, all were enrolled in family literacy programs with their preschool children.

The study focused on respondents' stated reasons for participation in educational programs. Reasons related to decisions at four points were examined:

1. Reasons for dropping out of high school.
2. Reasons for entering adult basic education programs.
3. Reasons for dropping out of adult basic education programs.
4. Reasons for entering family literacy programs.
5. Reasons for persisting in family literacy programs.

Method

Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used to select 34 respondents from the group of parents participating in Kenan Trust Family Literacy Programs. The goal of the sampling process was to achieve maximum variation within the sample group. Two issues were addressed during this process, selection of sites and selection of respondents within sites.

The Kenan Trust model was being implemented in seven sites. It was known that structural conditions varied among the communities in which the sites were located. Participants in urban areas had access to public transportation and subsidized daycare, for example, while those in rural areas did not. To ensure that the sample contained maximum contrast, thus providing the widest amount of information, five of the seven sites were included in this study.

Prior to making visits to the sites, a tentative plan was formed for selecting respondents within each site. This plan called for selecting two of the most successful respondents, two of the least successful, and two respondents who had an average level of success in meeting program goals. Success was defined as progress toward personal and program goals.

Final decisions about selection of respondents were made in conjunction with the program staff during the site visits. The sampling plan was refined to reflect conditions found at the sites. It became apparent, for example, that not all successful students were alike, even at the same site. The same was true of marginally successful and average respondents. In these cases, attempts were made to interview respondents who represented variation within each of the three categories.

Of the 34 respondents selected for the study, 32 were women and two were men. They ranged in age from 20 to 43 years. Nineteen respondents described their racial and ethnic background as Black, Black American, or African American. Thirteen described themselves as White Americans, and two respondents identified themselves as Native Americans.

Data Collection and Analysis

Three types of data were collected and stored in a case study database. First, intake interviews were conducted by teachers at the time when respondents entered the family literacy programs. During the interviews, teachers asked for a standard set of demographic information which included age, race, sex, income level, and level of educational attainment. In addition, participants' reasons for dropping out of high school and for entering the family literacy programs were recorded during the intake interview.

The information gathered during intake interviews was supplemented by periodic site visits by the two investigators for this study. During these site visits, participant observation and informal interviews with staff and respondents were conducted. Respondents' reasons for dropping out of high school and for entering the family literacy programs were elaborated.

In-depth interviews with the 34 respondents were the third type of data collected. Interviews were conducted at the respondents' schools during the regular school day. All of the respondents agreed to the request to record the interviews on audio tape. Prior to each interview, the respondent received a full description of the purpose of the study, of how the results would be used, and assurance that their identity would not be revealed. Before beginning an interview, both the investigator and the respondent signed a written agreement that outlined these conditions.

An interview guide was developed prior to conducting interviews at the sites. The guide was written in terms of questions posed to the investigator, rather than the actual questions that were asked during the interviews. The purpose of the guide was to give the investigator a systematic way to organize the information gained from interviews, and to link this information to the study's research questions.

Once the interviews had been recorded on audio tape, the next concern was to create an accurate transcript of each interview. A professional typist, experienced in the transcription of audio-recorded interviews, was hired. She used WordPerfect software and an IBM-compatible microcomputer to transcribe each interview onto a separate floppy disk. These floppy disk files were formatted so that they could be accessed later, during data analysis, by another software program, The Ethnograph. The transcript of each interview was compared to the audio version for accuracy. Corrections were noted on the printed copy of the transcripts and edits were made in the computer-based files.

A fieldwork journal was maintained during the periodic site visits and while conducting interviews with the respondents. Included in the journal were notes and reflections about the respondents' decisions to drop out of high school and their subsequent decisions to enter an adult

education program. Additional notes were generated during the process of editing the interview tapes.

As observations and reflections were added to the fieldwork journal, a set of themes began to emerge. These themes were organized into a system of codes that were used to analyze the interview transcripts. Codes were mapped onto the printed transcripts, then transferred to the computer-based versions of the transcripts. A computer software package, The Ethnograph, was used to sort the text by codes. Results of this sorting process were printed out. For each theme there was a corresponding file of excerpts from the interviews illustrating the theme. Each excerpt was cross-referenced with the original interview transcript.

As a way to ensure the credibility of the study's results, investigators conducted member checks with respondents at two of the sites. The purpose was to check not only the accuracy of the information gained during the interviews but to check the accuracy of the investigators' interpretations of those interviews. This process continued until respondents confirmed that the investigators' interpretations were accurate.

A second form of member check was conducted with all respondents by the teachers at the sites. A rating scale was developed from themes identified during the analysis of interview transcripts. Rating scale items were developed for two areas:

1. reasons for not completing a GED prior to entering the family literacy programs;
2. reasons for entering the family literacy programs.

Teachers completed the scales based on follow-up interviews and participant observation with respondents. Three additional respondents enrolled at this time at one of the sites and were included in this phase of the study.

Results and Discussion

Reasons for Dropping Out of High School

By the time they reached high school, only 3 of the respondents described themselves as being actively engaged in school. One of the respondents enjoyed going to classes and reported getting good grades. She became pregnant and quit school and stayed home with her son after he was born. He had hemophilia and she was not comfortable leaving him in someone else's care while she returned to school.

The second respondent also liked high school and reported getting good grades. She also became pregnant and quit school after her son was born. She made it clear that she didn't want to quit school, and would have returned to school at that time if daycare had been available:

I just hated that I had to quit. I had no choice at the time that I did it because I had to raise my son. But I didn't quit school while I was pregnant.

The third respondent reported being engaged in a variety of extracurricular activities in high school:

I was on drill team, I was captain of the drill team. I was a cheerleader. I was on the newspaper.

She became pregnant and quit during her senior year when her child was born. She said that a lack of structure and support at home were reasons for her not taking the academic part of high school seriously, and for not finishing high school:

I feel if my mom and dad were home together I would have been more disciplined. I wouldn't have been pregnant at 17. If I wouldn't have been able to run around and do what I wanted and stayed out all night....I would have graduated from high school and I would have went on, went on to college.

Of the remaining 31 respondents, none described themselves as being actively involved in academics or extracurricular activities by the time they reached high school. The process of disengagement from school, which had begun in the late elementary and middle school grades for many respondents, resulted in low levels of participation in high school. With low levels of

participation, there were few opportunities to experience success in school. A cyclical process developed, with lack of success causing a sense of alienation from school, which in turn precluded further participation.

Various reasons were given for dropping out of high school, including pregnancy, conflicts with teachers and peers, and involvement with drugs and alcohol. As respondents described the contexts for these decisions, it became apparent that the decisions were part of a longer chain of experience. Dropping out of school was the culminating event of a process of disengagement that began years earlier (Finn, 1989).

A sense of alienation from school was common among the respondents in this study. Except for the 3 respondents described above, all said that by the time they were in high school, school "just wasn't that important," that they were "fed up with school," "tired of school," or "just didn't want to be there." Respondents reacted to this sense of alienation from school in various ways, described below.

Dropped out because of pregnancy

Thirty-two of the 34 respondents in this study were women. Thirteen of these women, or 41%, said that pregnancy was a reason why they dropped out of high school. This compares with a nationwide figure of 23% of female dropouts who cite pregnancy as a factor in the decision to leave school (Elkstrom et al., 1986).

Dropped out to get married

Thirteen of the respondents, all of them women, cited getting married as a reason why they dropped out of school. This proportion, 19%, compares with a nationwide figure of 31% of female dropouts who cite marriage as a reason for dropping out (Elkstrom et al., 1986).

Two of the respondents said that getting married allowed them to escape bad home situations. One said:

It was hard. I had a lot of things going on at home with my family life. I couldn't concentrate on my studies, so that was due to my quitting. So I got married and moved out of town.

Others said that getting married was "what you were supposed to do" and what they really wanted to do at the time.

Dropped out because of family responsibilities

Three of the respondents cited family responsibilities as a reason for dropping out of high school. One said that her mother got sick and she had to stay home to take care of her:

After she got out of the hospital the doctors came out and said someone needed to be there 24 hours a day. At the time we couldn't afford to have a nurse come in so I took over.

Later in the same interview, however, this respondent provided more information about the decision to drop out. She had already become disengaged from school and was missing classes at the time of her mother's illness:

I was the type of person, I hated most of my classes in high school....I just didn't like being there....I'm also the type of person, I didn't want to be around too many people so that kept me out of school quite awhile. In other words, I just didn't like school.

Dropped out because of involvement with alcohol and drugs

Two of the respondents said that their level of participation in school began to drop after they became involved with alcohol and drugs. Both described high school as a time when they were more concerned with having fun than with being successful students. One woman said:

I started out in about 10th grade, did a lot of drugs through my high school years. lots of drugs. And I really had no interest in high school to be honest with you.

The other respondent, one of the two males in the study, said:

I had a good time. High school, anyway, that's when I really started drinking and using drugs and I never paid no attention to school work. I was getting by.

The use of drugs and alcohol is a symptom, not the underlying cause, of dropping out of school.

Both outcomes, substance abuse and dropping out of school, share similar antecedents: less

commitment to conventional values and to institutions like schools and families (Mensch & Kandel, 1988).

Dropped out because of conflicts with teachers and/or peers

Eleven of the respondents said that they dropped out of high school because of conflicts with teachers and/or peers. One reported being expelled after having a physical confrontation with a teacher. Others described disagreements with teachers about completion of assignments and grades. A common theme was the feeling that teachers and principals did not care about them and did not understand them while they were in school.

Many of the respondents reported that they enjoyed school up to the time when they completed the elementary years. They described how social relations with peers changed as they moved to middle and high school:

I didn't like school too much. It was a lot of peer pressure. That's why I really quit. You know, you always had to fight and argue, just different stuff. I don't think I could have went through school. Wasn't that I didn't learn, but I just didn't enjoy it.

Dropped out because of busing

Twenty-two of the respondents went to high school in Metro City when busing was instituted to achieve racial integration of the schools. One student commented on the school environment during the time when busing first began:

My senior year was during busing, when busing started here and I got tired of fighting so I dropped out. I had only three months left of school. I just got tired of fighting. Wasn't any discipline in the schools that year.

Other students said that they dropped out of school because they couldn't go to the school where their parents and older siblings had gone, or to the school that was closest to their homes:

All of my family went to Central High...they [school system's busing plan] made me go to Eastern High. I said, OK, I'll go. Then after I got up there I said I don't like this. I want to go back to Central. Since I couldn't go back to Central I just said well, hey, what the heck, I quit.

Other reasons for dropping out

Two of the respondents left school to pursue a job. One man had been working as a mechanic while in school and eventually decided to drop out at age 14:

I worked a lot as a young teenager and probably worked late at night when I shouldn't have. That could have affected my school. I'd go in tired a lot....I had some 9th grade math and then I just went straight into the work force.

One woman also reported working after school and in the evenings, as a musician, and eventually left school to pursue a career in music:

...my trade was being a musician. That's what I did as a profession. That's what I knew I would always do and that's what I concentrated my life on. So my studies in high school were somewhat scattered. I quit two weeks before graduation. I had an opportunity to go to Minnesota to play so that's what I took.

Other respondents reported leaving school because they felt they could get along without a high school education. One woman, who had good grades in high school, said:

But I think, in a way, I looked at my sister. She dropped out and she's got a job and she's OK.

For the majority of respondents, then, disengagement from school began during the transition from elementary to middle school or shortly thereafter. Thirty-one of 34 respondents reported a sense of alienation from school prior to entering high school. Their stated reasons for dropping out of high school--pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse, conflicts with teachers and peers, and family responsibilities--are symptomatic of the underlying causes of dropping out. The underlying causes stemmed from a lack of identification with school, which led to low levels of participation and low commitment to the goals and values of schooling.

Reasons for Entering Educational Programs in Adulthood

Only one of the respondents in this study had been out of high school for less than five years before entering the Family Literacy Programs. Thirteen of the respondents had been out of school from 5 to 9 years. Twenty of the participants had been out of school for 10 or more years. All but three expressed negative feelings about high school and negative expectations about their experiences upon entry into educational programs as adults..

After dropping out of high school, the respondents began the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. They moved away from home. Some got married or developed relationships with significant others, but most remained single. All were raising young children. Some worked off and on at minimum wage jobs but the majority relied on public assistance for family support. They all wrestled with the complex demands of becoming a young adult and a parent.

During this time, seven of the respondents were clearly successful in meeting those complex demands. They established stable homes for their children and began setting goals for themselves and their children. They accommodated to the increasingly complex demands of the roles of young adult and parent. One respondent compared the way her views of self changed during that transition:

You know, it kicks my rear end for quitting [high school], but I quit for a good cause. Well, I'm sure that it may not be a good reason to you, but I got married when I was 16 years old...June 5th was the last day of school and I got married on June 26th...I got pregnant in October and had a baby come July, and no more school. [Dropping out] was for a good reason, so I felt.

With hindsight, this parent goes on to say, dropping out of school was not a smart thing to do. It was the decision she made at the time and she followed through on it. Now, ten years later, she decided to continue her education and planned to follow through on that decision also:

I'm more mature now and I see things in a different light than I did..at the age of 16...That was the decision I made then, and this is the decision I made now...when I started [back] to school. This is what I'm going to do, and I'm...going to be successful in it.

At the other extreme, six of the respondents were still wrestling with the transition from adolescence. They said they "resent not being able to go and hang with my friends" because they had to care for their young children. In fact, some did not let those responsibilities interfere with continuing the same life style they pursued as teenagers. This included selection of friends who shared the same values, abuse of alcohol and drugs, and lack of planning for the future.

The remaining 21 respondents fell somewhere between these two extremes. A common characteristic of all three groups was a sense that continuing one's education was important. For some, this was vaguely defined as being something that was good to do and was socially

acceptable. It was a way to "get your mother off your back about doing something with your life." For others, the goal was specifically defined as completion of a high school equivalency certificate.

Prior to entering the Family Literacy Programs, 24 of the 34 respondents had enrolled in various adult basic education programs and had dropped out before completing a GED or high school equivalency diploma. The next section will examine those respondents' reasons for not completing a GED certificate prior to entering the Family Literacy Programs.

Reasons for Not Completing the GED

After dropping out of high school, and before entering the Family Literacy Programs, most of the respondents had attempted to continue their education. One attempted to improve her reading and math skills through GED classes taught on the local public television station:

I was taking the GED from the TV. It didn't work out too good for me. I had to have help on some subjects.

Having a four year old in the house also made it difficult for her to keep up with the televised lectures. Another respondent reported that she was studying on her own at home:

I've been studying at home on my own, I haven't been to any programs. I've got a GED book...that I use to study off and on by myself.

These two respondents typify those who hesitated to return to school-based programs in order to continue their education. Seventy percent of the respondents said that they hesitated to enroll in ABE classes because they didn't like high school and thought the ABE classes would be similar. They expressed concerns about fitting in with the other students and fears they wouldn't be able to do the assigned work. Many overcame the reluctance to enroll in formal programs only after unsuccessful attempts to study independently at home.

Twenty-four of the 34 respondents reported having gone to some type of formal adult education class before they enrolled in the Family Literacy Program. One had attended a class sponsored by a church. Another had briefly attended classes in a local library. The rest had attended adult basic education (ABE) classes sponsored by the local public school systems.

None of the respondents completed GED certificates during this time, even though most had the skills and ability to accomplish that goal within a reasonable period of time. A lack of regular attendance precluded sustained progress toward the goal of GED completion.

Respondents identified two common problems which deterred participation in adult education, daycare and transportation. All had young children, and it was hard to find a babysitter on a regular basis:

I had little kids at the time...and I didn't have anybody to keep them, so I didn't get to finish the [adult education] program out there.

When babysitters could be found, they were too expensive for many respondents to afford:

I could attend for a while, but the babysitter...that would be about \$65 or \$70 a month. I couldn't deal with it. I mean it's taking too much from me, and plus I got to take her there, which is more money [for the bus].

In addition to the cost, the quality of daycare was a concern. Eighty percent of the parents said they had not found a daycare center or babysitter with whom they were comfortable leaving their children.

For respondents who were able to get over the daycare hurdle, transportation problems often interfered with attending ABE classes. Sixty-nine percent described transportation problems that interfered with regular attendance. One respondent in Henson County spoke of the frustration of not having public transportation available, and having to depend on others to give her a ride to classes:

I have tried. I have been to [county adult education center], but I didn't go for a month because I was going with a cousin and he wasn't really into it. So I couldn't go because he didn't go. So, I said 'forget it.' I wasn't going to learn anything. By the time I learned it, I would forget it by the time he was ready to go back again.

While daycare, transportation, and finances commonly deterred participation in adult education programs, many of the parents did manage to attend classes for short periods of time. What they found in those classes, however, was a setting that reminded them of high school. A common complaint was that the classes were isolating. There were no opportunities to develop relationships with students and teachers. The setting offered no sense of mutual support and no

sense of security for those who wanted to risk learning something new. A respondent from Metro City describes her experience in an adult education class of 25-30 students:

We just sat off by ourself, everybody had to be quiet. You would feel bad running up to the teacher, asking her to help you. Especially if you are shy or something like that. 'Oh, these people are going to think I'm dumb.' You really didn't know the people personally so you just had to sit there by yourself.

Another respondent from Metro City described a similar experience:

It wasn't pleasant at all...the first time I went, they gave me these tests, which is normal and it was fine, to see where you would be at. Then, after you had taken the tests and they're all checked and everything, they'd say, 'Here's your work, go do it.' You'd go to a table, you'd sit down, and you do the work. [if you need help] it's like, 'I'm too busy' you know, like 'shut up.' So I ended up quitting that.

Another complaint about the adult education classes was that the work was not appropriate to their needs. Some respondents reported being in classes where the work was too advanced for their level of functioning. Others reported being in classes where the work was too easy:

[It] was like second or third grade work. I mean we went through it like that [snaps her fingers].

Reasons for Entering the Family Literacy Programs

At this point, the respondents had had unsuccessful experiences in high school and in adult basic education classes. They felt no sense of belonging in school settings but they did value what an education represented, demonstrated by the willingness to enroll in the family literacy programs. This section will examine the meanings that respondents attached to education.

Upon entry into the family literacy programs, virtually all respondents stated the desire to complete the GED certificate. Even though the programs were oriented toward education of both the parent and the child, entry decisions were based on the felt needs of the parents. For some, completing a GED represented removal of a roadblock--not having the GED was preventing them from pursuing an educational or career goal. For others, getting a GED was a means of escaping a current situation that was unsatisfactory. Finally, completion of a GED represented a form of personal affirmation for others who enrolled.

Thirteen of the respondents described educational and career goals upon entry into the family literacy programs. All had come to the point where a GED was required before taking the next step toward those goals. Two wanted to pursue training as nurses. Others wanted to get jobs that "paid good money" and that were personally satisfying:

[One of my neighbors said, "I ain't got time for school." I said, when push comes to shove, other things take precedent...If you don't have a diploma, you cannot get a good job. The best thing you can get is a dishwashing job. I want something where I can use my head instead of my hands.

For three of the respondents, completing a GED represented a form of personal affirmation. They could read and write as well as most high school graduates. In fact, many of their friends didn't know that the respondents had not finished high school. Finishing the GED was a way to prove to themselves that they were as intelligent and as capable as those who finished high school. One respondent described the encouragement received by her husband:

He went to college....He's never been ashamed of me but he just always wanted me to go back [to school] because he thinks I'm smart....he wanted me to go back and show everybody that I could do it. But mostly he said, "I don't want you to do it for me, I want you to do it for you."

For six of the respondents, "working on my GED" was a socially acceptable activity that kept welfare case workers and relatives off their backs. It allowed them "to do my thing and no one else's" without interference. They attended the programs sporadically, often to meet minimal requirements for maintaining welfare benefits.

Three of the respondents were living in abusive home situations. They felt trapped, not being able to leave because they had no way to support themselves and their children. They had neither the vocational skills nor education to get jobs. Getting a GED represented a tangible step in the move toward independence. As one parent described her plans:

Well, my first plan is to get a job and get me an attorney, get my divorce, and get legal rights back into my house. Where he won't have to be in the house. Where I know he won't come back to the house. [Then] I can go into the house, out of the house, and I won't feel guilty about it....I can take the kids places....I can go out with my girlfriends....I can do this and come back into the house and I won't feel like I'm shaking to death....So I got big plans. I'm going to say at 29 I finally start living.

Seven of the respondents saw the GED as a way to develop functional literacy skills needed in everyday life. They wanted to be able to read bus schedules and newspaper advertisements. Several mentioned the desire to be able to read the Bible on their own. A common concern among this group was that they lacked the academic skills needed to help their children with homework:

I knew, sooner or later, I had to get back to school. I know that my [older] child is reading, but he could read better. That kinda made me feel bad. Maybe one day he might come up to me and say mama, what does this say? I didn't want to feel embarrassed, or embarrass him, by saying I didn't know.

In fact, one mother of a seven-year-old was already experiencing this kind of difficulty:

He brings homework....well, mama, how do you do this? I have to send him over to his aunt's house or to my cousin because I don't know how to do it. I hate to say, well, I don't know how to do it. I used to feel ashamed and that makes me upset. So I say I got to go to school.

Finally, two of the respondents were recovering drug and alcohol abusers. Working toward a GED was part of a larger plan for self-recovery:

Other than my AA, this is the only other positive thing that I've ever done for myself. I came into the program for myself. I didn't realize...it was going to be so beneficial to my two girls, too.

Both respondents talked about how education contributed to one's sense of self-respect and self-confidence. Both described the fragility of their current state and how important it was to maintain an emotional balance. Working toward a GED was a positive step to take and it was helping to build the strong sense of self needed for continued recovery. Both were cautiously optimistic about the future:

I don't want the enthusiasm for my education...to slow down because I don't know if I could get the energy up again...if I had a lull in there...I have to keep looking at that kind of thing and keep my confidence up....I think if I flubbed on a big test it would be hard to bounce back from there, so I have to be really cautious.

As the respondents talked about reasons for entering the family literacy programs, one point was made over and over again. Participation decisions were made on a day-to-day basis. At first, parents made the decision to go to the program for a day and see what it was like. Based on that experience, respondents would decide whether to return the following day. Persistence in the

programs was the result of this decision being made over and over again. The next section discusses reasons for persisting in the family literacy programs.

Reasons for Persisting in Family Literacy Programs

The respondents in this study had a history of failure in school. All lacked a sense of belonging in school settings. As the previous section showed, this reluctance to return to school was outweighed by the importance attached to getting an education. Respondents were willing to try yet another educational program in order to complete an education. This explains why they came the first day. What influenced the decision to return the second day and to continue returning after that? A majority of respondents cited two reasons. The first was the positive, supportive attitude of the teachers:

I mean if...I walked in and had a teacher that she was strictly school instead of caring about [us as people]...you know we do have things that go on at home everyday....I think if she felt like she didn't care...keep your problems at home, I wouldn't come.

If we miss a day she's always calling us and checking on us, not being nosy but just checking on us seeing if we're OK and that means a lot, means a whole lot.

First, when I got here, I felt others were smarter than I was and it made me feel kinda bad....Mary [the adult education teacher], she kept talking to me....Don't compare myself with somebody else because somebody else might be a little higher or a little lower than what I am. So I just kept thinking about that. Then, after awhile, [feeling bad about myself] just went away. I don't think about it any more. I just try to think about getting my GED and going a little bit farther.

Parents also said that the teachers were supportive but never patronizing:

[The adult education teacher] gives you so much confidence. She's helped me a lot because I felt like I couldn't do anything.

You're treated as an equal, you know. The teacher in our class who is a great lady and great at her job, really great at her job, she's not above me or above anyone in the class. She's there to instruct us but she's our friend, she's our compadre'... you know that's the difference. And that makes a big difference in how one performs.

A second reason cited for persisting was the mutually supportive atmosphere they found in the adult education classroom. It "felt good to be there" and they "could feel it" when

someone was absent. Their descriptions of the climate in the family literacy program classrooms contrast sharply with the earlier descriptions of other adult education classes they had attended. Many respondents used the word "family" when they described the group of adults in their class.

It's like going to ordinary school but yet it's like being with a family too....if you're feeling bad the whole class feels it.

One parent described how the other adults in the class helped her through a difficult period:

I lost my grandmother a month after school started and if it hadn't been for the school program I woulda went crazy. She's all I knew for 25 years and when she died...everybody supported me real good. If I had stayed in the house I know I woulda went crazy and you know everybody was calling me. [They said] don't stay at home by yourself, come on to school. I didn't do any work them weeks but I came and I felt like I had somebody to lean on and somebody to talk to.

Another parent described a situation faced by a father and daughter who had been enrolled in the program. The father was involved in a divorce and battle for custody of the daughter. To retain custody of his child, he needed to find a full time job. He and his daughter dropped out of the program so he could search for a job. The other parents in the class got involved:

One of our fathers was going to lose custody of his daughter if he didn't get a job. We were all caring, thinking how we were going to find him a job. One of the mothers in the program, she got him a job with her husband.

One of the parents at Metro South talked about why she thought so many people use the word "family" when they talked about the Family Literacy Program. While it was true that the program worked with families, it also provided a secure atmosphere for the participants:

[Family Literacy Program] is a good name for this program because everybody does care about each other....that's what a family is supposed to be, caring...They had a low self-esteem about themself and just, you know, felt like nobody cared. Then when they came in the program [they saw] that people do care.

Conclusions

The respondents in this study provided a unique perspective on participation in educational programs. Their views encompassed the developmental transition from adolescence to young adulthood, the behavioral change from nonparticipation to participation in schooling, and the psychological change from alienation to identification with schooling.

Two transition points were especially apparent in respondents' descriptions of educational experiences from middle childhood to young adulthood. One transition occurred at the transition from elementary school to middle school. It was during this time that many reported the beginning of a process of disengagement from school. The second transition occurred after the culminating act of that process, dropping out of high school. At this point, respondents encountered the tasks of young adulthood. Increasingly complex environmental demands spurred many to rethink previously negative attitudes about education. They saw the value of a high school degree in that it would allow them to pursue personal, career, and economic goals.

Perry's (1970) work with college students provides a framework for thinking about these types of developmental changes and how they influenced participation in education during adolescence and young adulthood. One's epistemological stance influences how educational experiences are interpreted and subsequent decisions to participate in schooling. The current research literature in the area of low literate adults has not addressed the role of developmental change in studies of participation.

In conjunction with developmental changes, behavioral and psychological changes occurred during the two transition points mentioned above. Respondents who actively participated in schooling as youngsters gradually became disengaged. They dropped out of school. Then, spurred by an increasing value placed on education, they began to participate again in educational programs as adults. By the time they were interviewed as participants in the family literacy programs, most were actively participating in school programs.

Finn's Participation-Identification Model, developed as an explanation of dropping out of high school, provides a useful framework for examining those transitions and explaining the

underlying causes of disengagement from school. The model can also be extended to explain the subsequent reengagement in schooling evidenced in the family literacy programs.

Dropping out of high school was the culminating act of process of disengagement from school. As mentioned above, that disengagement began for many respondents during the transition from elementary to middle school. During that time, respondents' sense of belonging in school decreased. They sought out friends who shared the same sense of alienation and who placed a low value on schooling. Participation in school decreased over time, leading up to the point of dropping out.

When encountering the complex demands of young adulthood, many respondents came to understand the value of having a high school degree. This was expressed in the need to "get my GED." At this point, valuing led to increased participation in educational programs despite the continuing sense of alienation from schooling. Even as adults, the respondents lacked the sense of belonging in school settings.

The sense of alienation from schooling persisted during participation in adult basic education (ABE) programs. According to respondents' descriptions, they felt as out of place there as they had in high school. The messages they received from the environment and the teachers were similar to those experienced in high school. There were no opportunities to form authentic relationships with teachers or with others in the classes. They gradually withdrew from those programs also.

The value placed on completing a GED drove most respondents to enroll in the family literacy programs. They enrolled despite the continuing discomfort in school settings. Over the course of participation in family literacy programs, however, this discomfort diminished. Parents and children developed a sense of belonging in schools. The messages they received from teachers and classroom structures encouraged this change in interpretation of the meaning of schooling (Blumer, 1969). They revised expectations about themselves and about the future educational experiences of their children.

Future research should include examination of the role of developmental change in participation in adult and family literacy programs. Epistemological stances taken at different times of development influence how educational programs are perceived and the subsequent levels of participation by adults. A second line of research should focus on adult participants' views of schooling and education and the messages communicated in adult literacy programs. Adults enter programs with different goals, even though most may state them in terms of completing a GED, and many with a sense of alienation from schooling. How programs address those differences and influence low literate adults and their families should be investigated.

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