

[Home](#) | [Job Search](#) | [Career Strategies](#) | [Business](#) | [Entrepreneur](#) | [Web](#) | [Money](#) | [Education](#) | [Network](#) | [International](#)

Advancing Women in Leadership Online Journal  
Volume 21, Fall 2006

[AWL Journal Home](#)

[Current Volume](#)

[Archives](#)

[Call for  
Manuscripts/Guidelines](#)

[ [Journal Index](#) ]

Linking Literacy and Community Development: A Case Study of Women in New Orleans  
Jennifer E. Subban

Wright State University

### Abstract

This paper examines the impact of a family literacy program in New Orleans, developed in response to low literacy levels, high drop-out rates, and a corresponding lack of resident participation in community development efforts in the area. The program, Toyota Families for Learning (TFFL), worked to transcend disciplinary barriers by linking adult literacy education and community development through a community-based approach to adult literacy. TFFL continuously evolved to serve as a catalyst for transformation in the lives of the women it served, their families, and their communities. The experiences of the women in this study were explored in relation to the following indicators of community building: (1) developing the ability to express personal experiences and observed phenomena, (2) constructing one's own knowledge, (3) setting and following through on goals, (4) building a positive community environment, and (5) developing a vision of the community. Qualitative data in the form of literacy narratives informed this inquiry. The narratives were triangulated with field notes and focus group data collected over a six-year period commencing in 1992. The findings of this research indicate that literacy programs can be structured to successfully build the capacity of participants to engage in community development processes.

Linking Literacy and Community Development: A Case Study of Women in New Orleans

Women's leadership takes many forms and often exists in unexpected places. This study chronicles the transformation of five female adult learners in a family literacy program. Their transformations positioned them as agents of change for members of their families and their communities. Through their participation in the Toyota Families for Learning (TFFL) program, which adopted a community-based approach to literacy, these women were able to engage in a healing process that facilitated their empowerment and their ability to influence others around them. Their transformations are explored through five indicators that were used to demonstrate the link between adult literacy and community development. Their transformations represent an important stage in their development as leaders.

The backdrop for this study is the Toyota Families for Learning program in the city of New Orleans. TFFL was developed in response to low literacy levels, high drop-out rates, and a corresponding lack of resident

participation in community development efforts. The program was structured as a family literacy program, implemented by Alma H. Young and James R. Garvin, with initial funding from the National Center for Family Literacy, and a partnership with New Orleans Public Schools and the City of New Orleans.

Family literacy programs, as implemented by the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL), represented a novel idea at the time of implementation (1992). These family literacy programs represented an educational model in which family strengths became the center of curriculum design and implementation. Attention was directed toward helping parents realize their strengths and their power to transform these into action that benefited their families. The programs were to provide a mechanism and an environment that encouraged critical thinking and problem-solving germane to matters in family life. In this model, growth occurs as the families in the program test various alternatives while recognizing their responsibilities as members of a unified group, whether of a family or of a larger family literacy unit (Potts, 1992). According to NCFL, family literacy programs using this "family strengths" model would help participants develop a sense of self-worth, promote social interaction, encourage the development of both individual students and the group as a whole, and teach strategies that assist in dealing with everyday stresses.

The experiences of the women in this study were explored in relation to the following indicators of community building: (a) developing the ability to express personal experiences and observed phenomena, (b) constructing one's own knowledge, (c) setting and following through on goals, (d) building a positive community environment, and (e) developing a vision of the community. These categories were based on Fasheh's (1995) five sub-levels of community building at the invisible level but were altered to reflect the indications of community building observed through the experiences of women in TFFL.

The model prescribed by NCFL is the Kenan Model that centers program activities on four integral components: (a) Academic Time, (b) Parent Time, (c) PACT (Parent and Child Together) Time, and (d) Volunteer Time. Academic Time focused on Adult Literacy and Early Childhood Education. The adult literacy component was based on cooperative learning strategies that balanced non-educational and educational needs and incorporated the goals and needs of adult learners into the curriculum. Parents participated in adult education classes while their children participated in the early childhood/preschool component of the program.

Parent Time was designed to focus on parent education, but in TFFL it was expanded to address a broader range of issues relevant to adult participants. Together with the teachers, adult participants made decisions on topics of interest for discussion and study. Topics included understanding and coping with children's behavior, improving communication between parents and children, sexuality, spousal abuse, racism, effective communication, working with caseworkers, access to community resources, and job and educational opportunities. Parent Time was designed to create an atmosphere among participants that promoted both their own identity within the group and a group identity, encouraged peer support, and helped ameliorate attendance and retention. During PACT time parents and their children played together in the preschool classroom. The children were encouraged to take the lead in these activities while parents learned how to teach their children through play and practiced what they had learned about effective parent-child communication during Parent Time.

Volunteer Time was designed to allow adult participants time to interface with school staff and resulted in important parent-teacher/staff relationships. The parents worked in the school office, the cafeteria, classrooms, and on the playground. During this time, parents and teachers became aware of the mutual benefits of having parents at the school.

The Kenan Model allowed TFFL staff to engage adult participants in learning activities that embraced key principles of community-based education and community building. From its inception, the TFFL program in New Orleans linked family literacy to community development. One of the first lessons learned by the

administrative staff was that these linkages had to be nurtured if they were to develop the interest and capacities needed to foster engagement in community affairs. As such, it was necessary to develop community building as a subtext to literacy. Within the second year of the program's implementation, this subtext was incorporated into the program's definition of literacy, following feedback from participants through in-depth interviews and staff reflection on program effectiveness. The impact of this expanded notion of literacy on the lives of the women participating in TFFL is central to this study.

### Adult Literacy/Community Development Theoretical Framework

The Kenan Model had already extended the traditional approach to adult literacy education by including a focus on issues of parenting, establishing a link between home and school, and building on the strengths of participating families. TFFL recognized that while this was an important step away from the singular focus on functional literacy in many adult literacy programs in the city, building capacity to enhance communities required moving at least one sphere beyond the unit of the family. Functional literacy by definition focused on the skills of reading, writing, and performing calculations (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1987; Samant, 1996) with little attention to the structural factors that lead to low level literacy. Focusing on the family, its members, and their strengths places the reality of learners within that context and recognizes that it affects one's life in significant ways. However, context extends beyond the bounds of family to the neighborhood in which one lives, the social structure and relations of power within which we are embedded, and the political and economic structures that affect our reality (Bhattacharyya, 1991; Fingeret, 1992; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Kelder, 1996; Smith, 1987; Street, 1984; Venezky, Wagner, & Ciliberti, 1990; Weinstein-Shr, 1993). Proponents of cultural literacy suggest that the cultural context within which literacy experiences are embedded shapes how learners experience literacy, interpret texts, and apply their knowledge (Asante, 1991; Bhattacharyya, 1991; Giroux, 1987; Heath, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Shujaa, 1994). Embracing the culture of learners within literacy programs recognizes the importance of learners' culture to the learning experience and to knowledge construction. Despite its importance to how we define and understand ourselves and our communities, cultural literacy is not enough for transformation. Community building and transformation rely on the combination of skills and processes inherent in functional, cultural, and critical literacy (Freire & Macedo; Kelder, 1996; McCaleb, 1994; McClaren, 1991; Vella, 1994).

Critical literacy challenges existing relations of power, starting with the relationship between teachers and learners (Freire, 1970; Padamsee, Ewert, & Deshler, 1996; Vella, 1994). In this approach, teachers shift from the position of authority to one of facilitator of learning, which creates an environment in which all engage, learn, teach, and investigate their reality relative to others (Freire, 1970; McCaleb, 1994; Vella, 1994). This learner-centered approach to adult literacy makes visible the multiple realities that exist at the nexus of language, culture, power, and history (Kelder, 1996), and the impact of such on our lives. Padamsee et al. (1996) wrote that adult literacy programs within the critical pedagogy perspective must be designed to promote respect for self-worth, collaborative learning, praxis, a spirit of critical reflection, and the "nurturing of self-directed empowered adults...[who]...see themselves as proactive, initiating individuals engaged in a continuous re-creation of their personal relationships, work worlds, and social circumstances" (as cited in Brookfield, 1985, p. 48). This is critical to the transformation of communities. Moreover, in a learning environment that seeks to transform communities, it is critical that the content of the curriculum and the material used to enhance basic literacy skills is relevant to the lives of individual learners, their families, and their communities. Engaging students in this way increases the relevance of information exchanged within the classroom, consequently making the learning experience more meaningful. One outcome of the critical literacy approach is that learners develop reading skills along with decision-making, problem-solving, and leadership skills (Padamsee et al., 1996).

Community-based education espouses principles consistent with the goals of the TFFL. The unit of focus in community-based adult literacy programs is the community rather than the individual, as is the case with



functional literacy. It is understood that each individual contributes their own strengths and capacities to the process of community building, but it is the combined effect of their individual talents, skills, and capacities focused on a collective goal that serves to enhance and transform communities. According to Fasheh (1990), if education is to play a role in community transformation, it must engage learners in concrete things that have the potential to enhance life. Through concrete experiences that address practical needs within the learners' environment, they can learn important skills, begin to understand the limitations of their action in changing the circumstances that result in the situation they have addressed, and develop solutions to problems they identify and prioritize. Important aspects of these solutions lie in nurturing feelings of self-worth, empowerment, and self-acceptance among learners. The solutions lie both within and outside the communities in question, and networking, communication, and the exchange of ideas and experiences are necessary to address strategic needs associated with improving their status and their communities, and changing the power structures and systems that govern them (Moser, 1993; Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2003). Ultimately, the goal of community-based education is the development of human capital for the purpose of enhancing the community. It is a process that challenges those involved as they seek to confront traditional ways of thinking about and understanding their communities, their roles within it, and the existing social, economic, and political structures (Fasheh, 1990).

As described above, community-based education demonstrates its propensity for the development of human resources in ways consistent with the capacities required for community development. It is in the community-based education approach that the coincidence between adult literacy education and community development are most clear (Bhattacharyya, 1991; Padamsee et al., 1996; Subban, 2005).

Community development, as we understand it today, is a multifaceted endeavor focused on the physical, economic, human, social, environmental, and political functions of a community. In large measure, and despite numerous perspectives and approaches to community development, they can essentially be broken down into the product-oriented functions and the process-oriented functions. While these functions must be linked for effective and sustained efforts at community development, adult literacy programs are best suited to nurturing process-oriented functions. Process-oriented development focuses on building community capacity and human and social capital (Bhattacharyya, 1995; Fasheh, 1995; Green & Haines, 2002; Korten, 1990).

Bhattacharyya (1995) defines community development as the pursuit of solidarity and agency, which resonates with Green and Haines' (2002) articulation of the need to build a range of community assets, including human and social capital, that facilitate community development. They speak to the urgent need to weave a tapestry that supports and sustains community development efforts. Community-based education can serve as a vehicle for accomplishing this. Moreover, these scholars recognize that in communities where the conditions necessary to support community development are not present, they must either be developed or reconstituted. Hence, the importance of community building, the process through which a community's capacity to engage meaningfully in its development, is actualized. It is a learned process, the practice and discipline of which needs to be internalized by community members through formal instruction, observation, and their own participation therein (Korten, 1990). It is the process through which ordinary people learn the public skills necessary for rebuilding community and exercising some control over their lives and institutions (Boyte, 1980).

Efforts at community building must necessarily focus on the human resources within a community because the solutions to a community's problems can only come from within (Fasheh, 1995). Fasheh likens community building to developing the immunity of our bodies: building the internal strength of individuals, institutions, and the community. He divides the task of community building into activities that take place at the visible and invisible levels. Visible level activities include social organization, building physical institutions, and accessing in technology. Invisible community building activities are those at the human and institutional development level. They include developing an environment within institutions that is

conducive to learning, commitment, taking the initiative, and developing community members' internal abilities to deal with, among other things, interpersonal problems and issues of control (Fasheh, 1995). Invisible level community building activities are the foundation for effective community development, particularly in distressed communities. Indeed, meaningful development cannot take place without invisible level community building. When the communities targeted for development are able to direct its course, when members of the community are engaged in its processes, inform it and learn from it, and when it reflects the needs and interests of the community, then community development is considered most meaningful. Attention to community building activities is necessary because they sustain visible level community building and product-oriented acts of community development.

### TFFL Program Implementation

The experiences of the women who participated in TFFL are highlighted in a set of literacy narratives which provide some insight into the nature of invisible level community building required in the communities served by TFFL. They also indicate participants' perceptions of TFFL, which are important to understanding the structure of the program and its ability to facilitate community building. The discussion that follows explores participants' perceptions and the transformations linked to community building. Based on the narratives in this study, a primary result was the development of the human spirit: helping people to see their potential, nurturing them so that they can develop a positive sense of self-worth, and providing external motivation until such time as they are able to motivate themselves. This, participants say, is critical!

This study is informed by the literacy narratives of five women who participated in the program, triangulated with interview data collected annually from all participants, as well as participant observation notes collected over a six-year period commencing in 1992. The demographic profile of the families who participated during the period of this research reflect the following: The average age of adult participants was 24; adult participants ranged in age from 18 years to 65 years; 96% of all participants were African-American; 95% of all participants were female; 85% of the families were headed by a single female parent; 95% of the adult participants were unemployed; 94% of the participants had annual incomes of less than \$10,000; 74% of the families received public assistance; and most participants dropped out of school between the 8th and 10th grades. The program operated at three sites within the city.

#### *Participant Perspectives of Their Experience in TFFL*

Analysis of the narratives revealed three themes relative to participant perspectives of the TFFL program. The first documents the development of a sense of community among participants; the second explores the link between home and school as observed through the women's experiences in TFFL; and the third discusses the impact of these literacy experiences on the women.

#### *Creating a Community of Learners*

A critical difference between the women's school-based experiences and their literacy experiences in TFFL was related to the purpose driving the work in TFFL. In TFFL literacy was seen as a catalyst for community development, and the intent was to create literacy experiences that reflected skills and attributes necessary for meaningful participation in development.

From the narratives it is clear that women in the Toyota Families for Learning program were part of an environment that encouraged them to find ways to be comfortable. TFFL staff recognized that many of the participants entered the classroom with negative memories of past literacy and educational experiences, and they strove to replace them with new and positive ones. To this end the objective was that teachers develop a good rapport with students and encourage them to develop the same among themselves. By developing a sense of community in the classroom, staff (and participants) created an environment that fostered learning,

communication, and peer support to facilitate greater participation in learning activities. This was critical to the participants' academic success because it was not unusual for them to hide their lack of skills. Participants were encouraged, through various classroom activities, to rely on each other. They did this formally during academic time, through group efforts to develop solutions to problems discussed in Parent Time, and also informally. As a result participants came to realize that the answers to many of their problems lay within and among them, and that they had the capacity to effectively deal with them.

Another way in which teachers sought to develop a sense of community in the classroom was through fun learning experiences. Such activities relieved some of the tension participants brought to the classroom through their expectations, their home experiences, and their feelings of inadequacy. Role play activities were used to discuss such topics as conflict management, and field trips created shared experiences among participants as well as between staff and participants. Additionally, the narratives indicate that staff tried to create a comfortable environment for participants by soliciting student input into curriculum development. Most often ideas were solicited for Parent Time discussions, but these ideas were also incorporated into the academic component. This was critical to participants' developing a sense of ownership in the classroom and increasing active engagement in the learning.

A critical issue for adult literacy classrooms in TFFL was how to deal with the vast range of academic levels. Peer tutoring helped in this regard, especially where one-on-one attention was needed. This issue was also dealt with through group discussions. Group discussions were encouraged as a way of leveling the playing field in the classroom and an alternate way to recognize the strengths and knowledge of participants. Participants were generally more comfortable with their verbal skills than they were with their academic skills and, consequently, their confidence and level of participation increased during group discussions. Group discussions reduced the intimidation factor some participants felt when working on academic skills. They also reduced the barriers between those with higher and lower level academic skills, opening the way for peer tutoring that became important to and valued among participants. The relationship between participants and their teachers was critical to developing a safe and comfortable learning environment. Participants who appreciated their teachers did so because they felt their teachers cared. The narratives indicate that the women had developed a bond with their teachers and were able to communicate freely with them. Teachers took on a number of roles for participants and have variously been described as friends, mothers, big sisters, confidants, advisors, and, of course, teachers. Teachers often provided an ear to participants who needed to discuss personal situations. Participants appreciated their teachers' willingness to engage with them on a personal level, through the sharing of life experiences. They generally felt that their teachers respected them and that they were treated as adults. With the exception of one teacher, participants did not feel undermined by their teachers or the nature of their relationships with their teachers. These positive experiences with teachers in the program helped pave the way for learning. They broke down the barriers of hierarchy evidenced in the case where the teacher held onto relationships of power over students.

Teachers in TFFL generally placed more emphasis on the effort of students than on the outcomes, helping students to relax around their "mistakes." Teachers also learned to be motivators in their classrooms. Past literacy experiences had created the need for this among TFFL participants. In the final analysis, teachers in TFFL assumed the role of literacy facilitators, balancing the various needs and interests of the adult learners they served and positioning themselves as learners and teachers. Where this role was not assumed, students had a very different experience. Until such time as the teacher involved could be replaced, participant interactions with other staff members, workshops, and other activities helped mitigate some of the negative effects of the situation and still resulted in the empowerment of participants. In this situation participants played a vital role in keeping their peers motivated.

### *Linkages between Home and TFFL*

In keeping with the philosophy of the program and the knowledge of transformative education, TFFL tried



to link home and school. This was necessary because many participants felt unwelcome as parents and were intimidated by the school environment. One of the ways in which this was accomplished was through Parent Time. During Parent Time participants discussed issues relevant to their lives. In these facilitated discussions participants generally revealed much about their reality, their perceptions, and their experiences. This is critical to the sharing of information that took place between the teacher as an outsider and the participants as insiders. It provided staff with some insight into the behaviors and perspectives of participants and vice versa. One such example involves parents who wanted their children to succeed in school, but who acted dismissively when asked to help with homework because they did not want to reveal that they "didn't know" how to help. At other times situations in the home environment resulted in behaviors that did not transfer well to the school environment. Sharing information often provided opportunities for new strategies that were acceptable to participants, teachers, and the school.

It is evident from the narratives that participants enjoyed the dialogue between their homes and communities and the learning environment in TFFL. Participants could identify with what was happening in the classroom and learned that their contributions in the classroom were valuable. The dialogue allowed new information to enter into both the classroom and the lives of participants, allowing them to make more informed decisions. The same can be said for staff and program outcomes. Participants of this study revealed that they were more likely to appreciate new information if it was relevant to their lives. They did not, however, always feel that this was the case.

The link between home and learning environment was established through the very nature of the program. Parents attended school with their children. Discussing issues of parenting was commonplace during Parent Time and PACT Time, but also during informal conversations with teachers during breaks. Parents often reported transferring the activities of PACT Time to the home environment. An important lesson for parents was that they learned to identify what they wanted to achieve in terms of parenting. This often made decisions about parenting easier. The point, thus, was not to tell parents what was right or wrong, but to provide information and tools to facilitate effective decision-making. While the program was structured, it maintained flexibility regarding lessons for the day. This allowed home issues to enter the classroom more easily and proved particularly valuable when a crisis occurred within the communities served. The link between the TFFL classrooms and the home/community environment of participants was also established through culture-centered workshops. These included writing workshops which dealt with the issue of linguistic hegemony, the "Undoing Racism" workshop which helped participants give expression to the phenomenon of racism, and the sexuality workshop which discussed the issue within the context of the African-American community in New Orleans . Participants were able to link their experiences to academic activities through these workshops, in a classroom environment set up to encourage interaction rather than isolate participants.

### *The Impact of Literacy Experiences in TFFL*

As might be expected, the literacy experiences of the women in the Toyota Families for Learning program differed from their school experiences. All the women talk about having renewed confidence in their abilities and a more positive sense of self-worth as a result of their participation in TFFL. It is evident from the narratives that while the women may credit TFFL with the change they experienced, they have changed because they have done the work to change. Sometimes the change crept up on them as a result of things they were doing. Other times it was directly related to their struggle to implement new ways of doing things in their daily lives.

A major area of change, evidenced from the narratives, is the way in which participants related to others. Often the change was as much physical, as it was social. The fact that participants felt more comfortable around "outsiders" meant that they could relax the stance they normally displayed with outsiders. The program had been a practice ground for some of the conversations they wished to have with family

members, friends, employers, and their children's teachers. This brought a new level of comfort and effectiveness to their conversations and in some cases reduced participants' isolation. As a result of this personal growth and empowerment, participants were able to effect changes in their relationships with partners, other participants, and family members. Based on the narratives, the most profound changes took place in their role as parents. As parents, participants generally began to feel more in control of their abilities to parent effectively. Having more information on child development helped them to be more relaxed in their parenting because it changed their expectations. They also had support of their peers in frustrating situations.

Participants learned that they were capable adults who could realize their dreams. Additionally, they realized that they could affect people around them. They affected their children, their peers, their children's teachers, their families, their neighbors, and those with whom they worked. While they recognized that this was not always easy, they knew that it was possible.

Participants went through the program and healed themselves of old scars and then current afflictions. Their journey to having a positive sense of self-worth was only possible because they had the opportunity to heal themselves. The environment of TFFL provided that opportunity. It was a place to talk about old hurts, to write about it, to read about it, and to learn about it. It was a place for sharing and caring, a place where you could be challenged around your thoughts and actions. It was a place where you could be held accountable for holding onto old ways when new and better ones were in your grasp. It was a place where you could make mistakes and try again, and be supported in doing so. It was a place where you could choose not to share but still be privy to the care. It was a place to be yourself, love yourself, and know yourself. It was a place that reflected participants and allowed the reflection to change as they did. It was a place of making decisions and solving problems individually and collectively.

### Impact of Literacy Education on Community Development

The experiences of the women in this study were explored in relation to Fasheh's five sub-levels of community building which include: (a) developing the ability to express personal experiences and observed phenomena, (b) construction of one's own knowledge, (c) setting and following through on goals, (d) building a positive community environment, and (e) developing a vision of the community. These indicators of community building were used to assess the link between adult literacy education and community development. As discussed earlier, community building best describes the work undertaken to foster an interest in community issues and develop the capacity of participants to engage in community work.

#### *Developing the Ability to Express Personal Experiences and Observed Phenomena*

It is evident from the narratives that participants were not always comfortable expressing themselves. This was as true in the classroom as it was in their daily lives. For some participants, their silence in the classroom was an extension of the ways in which they had been silenced in their homes, in their communities, and in society. For others, more accustomed to expressing themselves in their home environment, the classroom was disconnected from that environment and, hence, was a hostile and alienating place. It was a place where they dared not be themselves and, yet, suppression of their identity often erupted into altercations, frustration, and a lack of motivation to participate in the learning process. To reveal one's thoughts and feelings would be to lay oneself open to ridicule. Protection against that possibility consumed much of some participants' time when they first joined the program. Participants were often trapped in a pattern of behavior through which they sought to preserve their dignity, but at the same time deprived them of it.

Learning to express oneself is difficult because it forces one to bear witness to the true nature of one's life. During the course of the interviews conducted for this study, many tears were shed. However, participants



considered them tears of healing. It was a relief to be able to express their experiences and some closely guarded secrets. It was a process of finding one's voice after being silenced over so long a time, in a space where others could identify with you. Significantly, it was something they had learned to do in a safe classroom environment in TFFL.

The most profound impact of personal expressions on the life experiences of the women in this study was its healing effect. Once the secrets and anguish were spoken, they could be reckoned with. They could be laughed at, cried over, written about, spoken back to, informed, understood, acted upon, and altered. This was the way in which the women dealt with many painful experiences.

Another level of developing the ability to express oneself is related to the expressions of observed phenomena. Participants expressed their concerns about such phenomena as the nature of schooling and teachers' performance, the ways in which meaning is constructed and reconstructed, injustice and oppression, their experiences as children and as parents, and their lives as women and the actions of men. The dialogue around these issues played a critical role in many of the transformations which they made during the course of the program. Some changed their children's teachers and schools; others began to want more from their relationships; parenting habits changed; learning became fun and less intimidating; communication with outsiders became easier and more relaxed. Often the expressions of personal experiences were also expressions of observed phenomena. The women were aware that their experiences were not theirs alone. Their common experiences, problems, hopes, and aspirations helped the women talk about observed phenomena.

Of significance also was the fact that the women were able to find the words to describe their experiences. Sometimes participants had to help each other do this. At other times, even with the help offered, they still lacked the language to express the things they saw and experienced, a situation which fueled questions, requests for information, and ultimately, the curriculum. These requests were either dealt with in the classroom or participants ventured on their own to access the information and explanations they sought.

Expression, as realized in TFFL, is critical because it can take place within the cultural context of the community. It represented a process where a community can come to know itself and the issues which confront it. Developing the ability of expression allowed community members the space to explore their world, the world of others, and the interactions between them.

### *Construction of One's Own Knowledge*

Developing the ability of expression is an important step in the process of knowledge construction. The ability of a community to construct its own knowledge is essential to its survival and growth. Without such knowledge a community is at the mercy of others to define it. History has shown that "self-definition" based on others' conceptions usually favors those who are defining. They generally do not inspire feelings of cultural pride and self-worth among those being defined.

In TFFL, the construction of knowledge was encouraged around issues raised by participants. Thus, expression provided the stepping stone to the construction of self-knowledge. As participants engaged in group discussion, they were often held accountable for their words. They were often asked, "What did you mean? How did you come to your conclusions? What could have been done differently? How would you do it differently?" Such questions were important given that participants were often tougher judges of each other than outsiders. They had internalized the measures used to assess their worth, and would use these measures to judge each other with greater fervor. It was through the exploration of participants' expressions that they were able to examine their own beliefs and values.

The definitions of literacy that participants shared are an example of how they came to change from

standard ways of knowing to ways of knowing that were relevant to their lives and the lives of others in their communities. Each of the women in this study knew that literacy was the ability to read and write. They accepted this definition, and over time used it as the base for a definition of literacy which addressed the barriers which they, and others, faced in becoming literate. By necessity, their definitions of literacy allowed the women to express new meanings of the term. They saw how literacy, which was held in such high esteem, was limiting because even "literate" individuals were excluded from the promise "literacy" made. They understood that literacy was not an end in itself but rather a means to an end. As Terri stated, "literacy is power." The implication is that literacy programs should teach people how to access their power so that they can transform their reality.

The ability of participants to construct their own knowledge was related to their ability to access information and to an increased level of awareness. Accessing information includes having knowledge of available resources and the skills necessary to access those resources. Participants learned that texts came in many forms and that texts reflecting their interests were available. They also learned the value of the rich oral tradition in the African-American community and were encouraged to access it and other resources within their communities.

Through the resources mentioned above, participants were able to access information that increased their awareness. They read poems, stories, and novels; watched movies; and listened to and dialogued with guest speakers and each other. As a result they began to develop explanations for the experiences and phenomena they had previously described. They began to seek new information that they used to define themselves and understand the nature of their oppression and the roles they can and do assume within that context. Of great significance was the fact that they began to question the knowledge of "experts," recognizing as they did so that all knowledge had to be weighed for its relevance to their lives. This is part of the process of recognizing the validity of one's own knowledge.

Another important aspect of knowledge construction in TFFL was the products of participants' work. Participants moved from functional skills and verbal communication to produce essays and poems about their lives and their dreams. These works stood as a record of their lives and a representation of their culture. Over time they will become a record of their transformation.

### *Setting and Following through on Goals*

Setting goals is one of the first exercises participants were asked to engage in when they entered the program. This was often a difficult task because participants were not accustomed to doing this, and because they were usually so focused on their day-to-day activities that having a vision of what lies beyond did not come easily to them. In some cases participants were afraid to set goals because not achieving them would represent yet another failure. It was usually the case that the goals participants espoused at the beginning of the year were markedly different from the ones they had at the end of the year. Even the tone with which participants began to speak of their goals changed. By the end of the year goals were spoken of with a sense of conviction that they are possible. Participants were usually passionate about their goals because they had come to realize their ability to achieve them and the power of having a sense of purpose. Some would acquire the information necessary to develop a plan for achieving their goals. This was evident in the narratives. Atlanta, Chantelle, Mandissa, and Terri all want to attend college. Each of them planned to work with a branch of the National Service Corporation to facilitate this. Each of them accomplished that goal, working for a period of two years with organizations linked to their goals where possible. This work afforded them approximately \$5,000 per year, which they used to pay for college expenses. Atlanta also began tutoring in a local literacy program as a way of staying in touch with her skills and gaining information and experience to open her own literacy program. Louella worked at McDonald's and was being trained as a manager. At the time of this study she was trying to secure a job that would afford her training as a chef. Even when life events got in the way of achieving goals, these women found opportunities to

facilitate their goals. They indicate that their vision of what was possible for them is a result of their participation in the program.

### *Building a Positive Community Environment*

The importance of building a sense of community among participants in TFFL has already been noted. Building a sense of community in the classroom was a critical element because it helped to create a safe classroom environment where participants felt comfortable talking about their personal experiences, exploring their reality, and asking for assistance. This was necessary in all components of the program.

Community building activities took place in academic time through group work and through peer tutoring. It also took place in PACT Time when children played with each other and experienced the support of adults other than their parents, and when parents worked together in fun activities. They were also prevalent in Parent Time when participants discussed personal information, advised each other, and offered support during difficult situations, or sought solutions to problems encountered. Terri talks about the age divide between participants in her class but notes that this divide was abandoned during parent time (Subban, 1998).

A sense of community was also developed as participants came to realize that despite differences, their lives had many common threads. They were parents, dealt with partners and their own parents, had experienced teachers who denigrated them, stressed over their children, and had similar experiences with caseworkers at the welfare office. They were all African-American women who had to make ends meet on a meager budget and they did not talk "proper."

Equally important to efforts of community building in the classroom was the way in which learning was structured. This included the process by which participants shared information. Issues such as confidentiality, respect for others' opinions and experiences, and addressing persons in the classroom in positive ways were constantly raised. It allowed participants to deal with such difficult situations as thefts and poor personal hygiene. It also allowed participants to deal with the diversity of interests, experiences, and perspectives which co-existed in the classroom.

Yet another critical element of building a sense of community in the classroom was the role of the teacher. As is evident from the narratives, the teachers' perspective and actions determined the tone of the classroom. This refers to the meaning teachers attached to their role as a facilitator of learning in the classroom and to the relationships they developed with participants.

What is clear from the experiences of participants is their appreciation for the sense of community they experienced in TFFL. For many participants it was this experience which fostered an interest in building a sense of community outside the classroom. An example of this is seen in Louella's realization that adults should teach children in the community to manage their differences rather than further those differences through arguments among each other (Subban, 1998).

### *Developing a Vision of the Community*

Developing a vision for one's community is not a task that can stand alone. There are many levels of experience that connect one to one's community, contribute to the knowledge one has of the community, and increase one's familiarity with community issues. Furthermore, one has to be able to identify issues that need to be addressed and formulate ideas for how to address them. Participants generally felt connected to their communities. They were able to look beyond the negative stereotypes of their communities and recognize their positive aspects. They valued the transformations in their own lives and recognized what it took to make such transformations possible. They wanted to share their growth with others in the



community and in so doing enhance life opportunities and the living conditions therein.

The women in this study recognized that a vision for the development of their communities required a multifaceted effort. Their narratives reveal that it was as much about the spirit of the community as it was about having the skills to make the changes they envisioned for it; it was as much about how people related to each other as it was about exposure to technology; it involved the nature of institutions, like schools, and how they served the community, as much as it was about the development of new institutions; it was about healing community members so that they could participate in the process of learning about oneself and one's cultural knowledge; it was both grand in scale and intimate in its effect. They saw the necessity of being primed to embark on the process of development as important to having a positive outcome and were certain that members of the community had to be a part of the process, defining their needs and developing solutions.

### Summary

This paper is a reflection of the transformation experienced by the women informing this study. As the women moved through various experiences in TFFL they added new layers to their abilities, their knowledge, their resolution, their vision, and their sense of self-worth. Each new layer made another possible. Each was necessary for the transformations that transpired. The experiences of the women were explored in light of their relationship to community building. More specifically, it was community building at the invisible level; the kind of community building that develops the capacity of a community to engage in meaningful development.

It is evident from the narratives that TFFL served as a catalyst for these transformations. What happened in TFFL affected the women's interactions with family, schools, teachers, and neighbors. The impact of the work of the women who informed this study is impressive and speaks to the effect that linking literacy and community development can have on participants and their spheres of influence. Among their successes is the work in which they are engaged. Except for one participant, all the women informing this study have opted for careers that develop human capital through education. All the women find time to be active in their children's education including volunteering at their respective schools. All the women have furthered their education beyond attaining their GED and are in various stages of completion. Despite limited resources, illness, and now natural disasters, they have persisted in their attempts to attain their goals. They have used their knowledge, skills, and commitment to serve their communities by tutoring adult learners and school aged youth in need of assistance. They have created a forum to support adult learners, recognizing that the process of engaging in adult literacy is fraught with challenges, not least of which are the emotional challenges. They have become activists, speaking on behalf of women and men who have yet to find their voices, while helping them to realize their potential. Post Katrina they have been sought as a resource to set up a tutoring program for displaced children and adult learners. They have also been recognized for their work by being spokespersons for poor women and adult learners at various regional and local forums. They have transformed as leaders.

### References

Asante , M. K. (1991). Multiculturalism: An exchange. *American Scholar*, 60 , 267-276.

Asian Development Bank. (June, 2003). *Gender and development: Our framework, policies and strategies*. Retrieved December 10, 2005, from <http://www.adb.org/documents/Policies/Gender/gender0401.asp>.

Bhattacharyya, J. (1991). Towards a community development approach to

literacy. *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 22 (2), 84-98.

Bhattacharyya, J. (1995). Solidarity and agency: Rethinking community development. *Human Organization*, 54 (1), 60-69.

Boyte, H. C. (1980). *The backyard revolution: Understanding the new citizen movement*. Philadelphia : Temple University Press.

Brookfield, S. (1985). A critical definition of adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 36 (1), 44-49.

Fasheh, M. (Feb., 1990). Community education: To reclaim and transform what has been made invisible. *Harvard Educational Review*, 60 (1), 19-35.

Fasheh, M. J. (1995). The reading campaign experience within Palestinian society: Innovative strategies for learning and building community. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65 (1), 66-92.

Fingeret, H. A. (1992). *Adult literacy education: Current and future directions, an update* (Information Series No. 355). Columbus, OH : U.S. Department of Education.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York : The Seaberry Press.

Freire, P. M., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. South Hadley, MA : Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc.

Giroux, H. (1987). Literacy and the pedagogy of political empowerment. In P. Freire & D. Macedo (Eds.), *Literacy: Reading the word and the world* (pp. 1-27). South Hadley, MA : Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc.

Green, P., & Haines, A. (2002). *Asset building and community development*. Thousand Oaks, CA : Sage Publications.

Heath, S. B. (1985). Literacy and learning in the making of citizens: 1985 Butt Lecture. In *Civic Education, Pluralism and Literacy*. Joint publication by AESA News and Comment and the Center for the Studies of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, August 1986.

Kelder, R. (1996). Rethinking literacy studies: From the past to the present. *Proceedings of the 1996 World Conference on Literacy*. Retrieved from <http://www.literacy.org/products/ili/pdf/ilprocrk.pdf>

Korten, D. (1990). *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*. West Hartford, CT : Kumarian Press.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1995). *Designing qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA : Sage.

McCaleb, S. P. (1994). *Building communities of learners: A collaboration among teachers, students, families, and community*. New York : St. Martin's Press.

McClaren, P. L. (1991). Essay review of "Literacy: Reading the Word and the World" by P. [Freire and D. Macedo, 1987](#). In M. Minami & B. Kennedy (Eds.), *Language issues in literacy and bilingual and multicultural education*. Cambridge, MA : Harvard Educational Review.

Moser, C. O. N. (1993). *Gender planning and development: Theory, practice and training*. New York : Routledge.

Padamsee, D. L., Ewert, D. M., & Deshler, J. D. (1996). Participatory action research: A strategy for linking rural literacy with community development. *Proceedings of the 1996 World Conference on Literacy* . International Literacy Institute, University of Pennsylvania . Retrieved from <http://www.literacy.org/products/ili/pdf/ilprocdp.pdf>

Potts, M. W. (1992). *A strengths model for learning in a family literacy program* . Louisville , KY : National Center for Family Literacy.

Samant, U. (1996). Literacy and social change: From a women's perspective - Mi Shiknar: I will learn. *Proceedings of the 1996 World Conference on Literacy* . Retrieved from <http://www.literacy.org/products/ili/pdf/ilprocus.pdf>

Shujaa, M. J. (1994). Education and schooling: You can have one without the other. In M. J. Shujaa (Ed.), *Too much schooling too little education: A paradox of black life in white societies* . Trenton , NJ : African World Press, Inc.

Smith, D. E. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Boston : Northeastern University Press.

Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice* . Cambridge , MA : Cambridge University Press.

Subban, J. (1998). *Talking from the inside out: The link between literacy and community development* . Unpublished doctoral dissertation, College of Urban and Public Affairs, University of New Orleans .

Subban, J. (2005). *Linking adult literacy education and community development: Bright hope or wild goose chase* . Paper s ubmitted for publication.

Vella, J. (1994). *Learning to listen, learning to teach: The power of dialogue in educating adults* . San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Venezky, R., Wagner, D., & Ciliberti, B. (Eds.). (1990). *Toward defining literacy* . Newark , DE : International Reading Association.

Weinstein-Shr, G. (1993). Overview discussion: Directions in adult literacy -An invitation to dialogue. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27 (3), 517-518.

Jennifer E. Subban is an assistant professor of Urban Affairs and Public Administration at Wright State University . She also serves as principal investigator on a New Directions community development project and the Community Development Work Study program. The author acknowledges Alma H. Young for her support on this and other related projects.

**Copyright:** Advancing Women in Leadership holds the copyright to each article; however, any article may be reproduced without permission, for educational purposes only, provided that the full and accurate bibliographic citation and the following credit line is cited: Copyright (year) by the Advancing Women in Leadership, Advancing Women Website, [www.advancingwomen.com](http://www.advancingwomen.com); reproduced with permission from the publisher. Any article cited as a reference in any other form should also report the same such citation, following APA or other style manual guidelines for citing electronic publications.

[Home](#) | [Job Search](#) | [Career Strategies](#) | [Business](#) | [Entrepreneur](#) | [Web](#) | [Money](#) | [Education](#) | [Network](#) |



[International](#)

[About Us](#) | [Advertising Info](#) | [Content, Reprints](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Sitemap](#)

AdvancingWomen Web site Copyright © Advancing Women (TM), 1996 -

For questions or comment regarding content, please contact [publisher@advancingwomen.com](mailto:publisher@advancingwomen.com).

For technical questions or comment regarding this site, please contact [webmaster@advancingwomen.com](mailto:webmaster@advancingwomen.com).

Duplication without express written consent is prohibited