Review

Increasing low income women’s literacy skills for the workplace and beyond: A review of the literature

Christine B. McClung

The Pennsylvania State University, 801-897-4197, 1.7112 W.8170S.West Jordon, UT84081 America.

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Literacy is a basic human right, yet so many women are either denied or severely lacking in those skills which afford a productive livelihood and civically engaged life. Women are the main caregivers and more often the main providers as well. Yet with low literacy skills, single parent female headed households are also impoverished. This paper, taking on the form of a review of the literature, suggests that increasing a woman’s literacy skills is necessary, but that it moves beyond just raising her reading, writing, and math levels. Though women need such skills to enter and be an active part in the workforce, literacy skills may also be viewed as skills needed to be active parents and citizens. Thus, increasing women’s literacy skills moves beyond the workplace into the vicinities of their school, personal, and family and community life as well. Literacy education is therefore a vestibule action which transforms women’s lives. It is the beginning and only pathway up and out of a life of poverty and dependence on others. It offers women new perspectives, their voices to be heard, and the means to become who they desire.

Key words: Women’s literacy, women’s literacy skills, women literacy effect on family, women and workplace, women’s and family, women’s literacy programs.

INTRODUCTION

It has been said that if you educate a woman you educate a nation. It is therefore a dramatic statistic that worldwide around two-thirds of illiterate adults are women (ProLiteracy, 2008). What does it mean to be literate? On its very basic level literacy can be defined as simply the ability to read and write. However, this paper suggests that the power of literacy extends beyond a simple set of skills into an understanding of the environment in which these skills are used, which allows one to be a productive citizen, parent, family and community member, and employee. Further, Riemer (2008) asserts “becoming literate involves the acquisition of not only a new set of discrete cognitive skills, but also contextualized practices that have social, political, and ideological significance” (Collins and Blot, 2003; Street, 1984; as cited on p. 444). Indeed literacy cannot be divorced from its social, environmental, economic, cultural, and political contexts. Literacy skills can help in negotiating the tasks and challenges that accompany the economic and social changes of modern life. Schnell-Anzola et al. (2005) promote this argument in stating, “Literacy skills will always be defined in relation to particular social conditions” (p. 23). In other words, what accounts for literacy skills may even be certain attributes or characteristics that are needed and rendered meaningful in a particular time and place, and then may transfer to other domains.

In discussing low-literacy among women, this paper also focuses on the concomitant issue of poverty. Women most in need of improved literacy skills are most often those living in the lowest economic levels. Literacy may act as a catalyst in integrating low-income and marginalized groups, specifically women. Furthermore,
statistics show that “Women increasingly face the demands of childrearing alone...women head 90% of single-parent families” (Carnegie Corporation, 1994; as cited in King and McMaster, 2000, p. 21). In other words women are continually becoming the main provider of their families, and may struggle in so doing. One statistic noted “Over a third of women who head their own households are poor” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001; as cited in Belle and Doucet, 2003, p. 101), while another cited “Forty-six percent of female-headed households with children less than eighteen years old are below the poverty line” (Sheared et al., 2000; as cited in Rogers and Hansman, 2004, p. 17); and it has also been mentioned that the majority of children on welfare come from single parent, female headed households (Coccia, 1997); these statistics are telling. Low income women therefore need to have the necessary skills and knowledge to feel confident at home, in the workforce, and other areas of their lives. One author suggests, “As women moved out of the home and into the job market, many returned to the classroom to upgrade skills that had languished or never existed” (Coccia, 1997, p. 4). What are the skills women need and desire to be successful? For the members associated with Riemer’s (2008) study, “Becoming literate implied becoming something better” (p. 444). In other words, there is a desire for more than just literacy skills at their basic level. They desire skills and attributes that may contribute to a new sense of being – of becoming – that will enhance many facets of their lives. The idea of becoming better is not meant to be seen in deficit terms. Rather, the notion is that women desire something more and realize that obtaining more and different skills than they currently posses usually implies and leads to something better – a new way of living or a new way of understanding. It is upon this thread that this paper is woven.

This paper proposes that the skills that are needed to be successful in the workforce are in effect the same skills that are necessary to succeed as parents and citizens and vice versa; and therefore “literacy” skills have different attributes and meaning according the life domains in which they are used in leading a person towards becoming. Thus, throughout this paper, the term skills may be seen as basic literacy skills and other skills with which women need and desire to be successful in their multiple roles. Therefore, through a review of applicable literature, this paper attempts to discuss that there are literacy skills, or even attributes in specific areas of life that women need and desire towards this end. Though more and more women are moving into the workforce, the areas of focus in this paper move beyond just the workplace to also include: academic, personal, and family and community life. Each will be expounded upon in the discussion that follows. The main theoretical framework this paper draws upon is Bandura's (1994, 1997; as cited in Hammond and Feinstein, 2005; Leininger and Kalil, 2008; Zeigler et al., 2006) work and interpretation of self-efficacy. He suggests that self-efficacy is the amount of control one believes they have over their life conditions. This can play into one’s general emotions, motivations, confidence for life’s circumstances and one’s overall well-being. It is basically how effective one perceives they will be in executing a given assignment. Possible manifestations or benefits of self-efficacy, as cited by Hammond and Feinstein (2005), include confronting problems, acknowledging mistakes, communicating more effectively, and accepting and/or challenging opposing viewpoints. Throughout the literature self-efficacy is also related to locus of control and even resilience. In the efforts to increase their skills, self-efficacy surfaces as the main and perhaps essential skill or attribute that low-income women gain and a needed characteristic for further participation in learning. It is the overarching trait or skill that leads to a new way of thinking and being for low-income women, and most often accompanies an increase in basic literacy skills. It is with self-efficacy that women can begin to become; and with self-efficacy that additional skills and attributes are manifested in other domains of their lives.

METHODS

The methods employed in research for this review produced a wide range of literature. Articles surfaced from journals of business, anthropology, policy, education, sociology, psychology, human resources, and more. Initially the years included in the search covered a span of five years, but it became necessary to expand further from 1990 to 2009. This allowed for a more inclusive and in-depth research. The database ERIC was used in all research. This database was chosen because it contains many and varied journals, which aided the success of a broad range of literature for the review. Only peer reviewed journals were used. The key words and descriptors used in the search included terms such as: women's literacy, women's literacy skills, women literacy effect on family, family literacy, women and workplace, women's and family, women's literacy and benefits, and women's literacy programs. While the articles illustrate how women's literacy and education are related to either the workforce, school, their personal lives, or family and community life, this paper attempts synthesize the literature in a way that draws a relationship between all factors.

WORKFORCE

There is a continual and steady increase of women participating in the workforce. One statistic noted that participation has grown from “43% in 1970 to 59% in
income and low literate women who are returning to work must update and increase their skills in order to achieve their aspirations – in order to become better. The possession of certain basic skills and traits predict future success in employment and beyond. Having baseline literacy and numeracy skills reflect the ability to perform basic work related skills. Such skills must be met to be successful. It is therefore imperative that low income and low literate women receive the training and education they need to update or gain skills that will help them find rewarding and satisfying work. In order to get and keep such jobs, these women need skills that will transfer to all areas of their life. These women who have come from stressful life circumstances and difficult experiences most often have negative beliefs about themselves and their own ability to succeed – or their self-efficacy. Such attitudes affect all areas of their life and may hinder their efforts and development towards becoming better. Thus any educational or training endeavor must include an understanding of the socio-economic positions and histories of these women. Low income women can benefit from educational attainment. That instruction which is successful in preparing them for the workplace will also provide the physical, mental, and emotional skills necessary for all facets of life. The workplace can be an important venue for low income women only if they are properly and appropriately prepared for it. While they still may experience job interruptions, if they have the knowledge and know-how to keep abreast of the ever changing world of work, they may more smoothly transition in and out of the workforce. An increase in literacy and personal skills for the workplace only serve to benefit all other areas of a women’s life as well.

ACADEMIC

More women are returning to school. Studies have shown that “since the early 1970s, the greatest growth in college enrollments among traditionally aged students has occurred among women from low-income families” (Lindholm, 2006, p. 580). Why is this so? Gerrard and Roberts’ (2006) qualitative study notes that, “women on the whole are the primary caregivers” and that this fact is “reflected in the growing trend for women to return to education in order to return to work” (p. 395). As women increasingly have the responsibility to be the sole providers, they may find that the skills needed to enter or return to the workplace are ones wherein they lack or are insufficient. The U.S. Census Bureau (2000) has noted that a “Lack of education has an enduring impact on women’s poverty; the less education women have, the more likely they are to be poor” (Ziegler et al., 2006, p. 59). This may be due to the fact that as they are the main providers, a lack of education leads to a lack of job possibilities. Studies further show that “some (single)
mothers with young children do not work and are often dependent on welfare” (Cao et al., 1996, p. 207), and that the “majority of the population over age 55 living in poverty have been identified as unmarried women who are not employed” (Sandell, 1987; as cited in Hill, 2001; p. 181). Socioeconomic status, or class, often reflects vocational and educational development choices, endeavors, and outcomes. Therefore, life experience often predicts where one’s values lie as to the importance and meaning of work and schooling (Bluestein et al., 2002). Training and education may provide lower socioeconomic status individuals, in particular women, a path out of poverty – a way to see the world differently. However, low income women face many barriers and obstacles to being involved in education and training. Jackman (1999) suggests that, “Unlike younger students...for whom college is an anticipated ‘next step’ after high school, older adult women who reenter college have made a conscious choice to do so, expecting the experience to radically change their lives” (Goldsmith and Archambault, 1997; p. 54). These women want life changing experiences from their educational endeavors. They interpret gaining further knowledge as becoming different, becoming more. These women desire tangible and intangible skills and qualities by their attendance in educational programs. Perhaps this is due to what Quinnan’s (1997) study on adult students concludes, which is that “For a few, there is a personal realization that this may be one of the last chances to finish a task they started decades earlier” (p. 84). Beder and Valentina’s (1990) study suggest that there are multidimensional motivational factors, or desired outcomes that affect adult basic education participant attendance and retention. Their study found that the most common type of adult basic education students are women and married students who often have children at home, with a high number of homemakers. With this population in mind, they list ten motivational factors of which the highest mean scores were those for: Educational Advancement, with such participant statements as, “I want to prove to myself that I can finish school”; and self improvement, which included participant statements such as, “I need to feel better about myself” (p. 85-86). From Beder and Valentine’s (1990) findings, it is clear that there are many more attributes and skills that women desire other than just learning to read and write better or finding employment. The motivations for program attendance is multifaceted, and so too should be the programs. The participants in their study did not just desire one outcome for their attendance, but hoped for many changes in their lives due to their participation in adult education.

Many women who struggle academically and otherwise have also had poor examples in these areas. They have come from intergenerational poverty and low literacy. The world they know is small and defeating. Therefore, it is a powerful observation that Coccia (1997) made in her study of women welfare-to-work participants. She noted that “College faculty and counselors represented a life different from the one the women were living, and for the first time some of them were able to imagine new lifestyles for themselves” (p. 9). It is in participating in an environment so diverse from theirs, and in seeing women who are unlike the women they know that they can envision something different for their lives. Their desire to learn and increase in skills also transforms into a desire to become more. There seems to be a relationship between increasing adult learning and skills and increasing levels of self-efficacy. Fishe (1988) noted that adult participation in education “assumes control over one’s life” (p. 144; as cited in Roberson and Merriam, 2005, p. 272). Studies have further proven that, “A single year of college cuts minority women’s poverty in half, and welfare recipients who have attended college report significant improvements in self-esteem and agency” (Rice, 2001; Scarbrough, 2001; as cited in Belle and Doucet, 2003, p. 109). Thus it may be concluded that education and/or vocational training is the only plausible route to economic security and self-sufficiency for women; and that increasing academic knowledge also affects other areas in a women’s life.

**PERSONAL**

Low income women may seek opportunities to increase their basic skills for more than increasing basic skills’ sake. Looking again at Coccia’s (1997) study, the women she observed viewed participation in adult education activities as a “way to break the isolation in life and raise one’s self-esteem” (p. 10). That is, they didn’t see an educational opportunity as only a way to receive further academic knowledge, but also as a way to increase feelings of personal worth, to connect with others, to find meaning-to become more. As women are most often the primary caregivers and are now more often the providers as well, it is important to pay attention to factors which affect their well-being, and to the skills and characteristics that will increase their ability to succeed in their multifaceted lives. Riemer’s (2008) study on women’s adult literacy suggests that adult education "classrooms become communities shaped jointly by students and teacher, and literacy the medium for connecting with others and transforming of self” (p. 458). In other words, the classroom may be seen as a safe place in which transformation can occur. As women increase in literacy skills and other traits, they can find meaningful connections with the classroom, with others, and with the world and their place in it. They realize their potential and own effectiveness for their lives. Low income women most often experience lower levels of cognitive skills, such as low literacy and numeracy; and of non-cognitive skills, such as self-efficacy and locus of control (Leininger
and Kalil, 2008). Increasing in these cognitive and non-cognitive skills is vital to women’s well-being and success. Women need to feel that along with stronger ability to read and write they also gain a sense of control over their own lives. Increased self-efficacy, stemming from adult education, allows for this. Indeed, it is self-efficacy that is paramount to success in achieving literacy and other skills.

Hammond and Feinstein (2005) define self-efficacy as that which “concerns perceived control over important life circumstances” (p. 266). Leininger and Kalil (2008) further this by relating self-efficacy to locus of control in that the outcome of their behaviors depends on how much they are in control of their lives (internal locus of control) versus someone or something else having control over them in (external locus of control). Self-efficacy is a key indicator of success. Most low income women and low literate women perceive they have very little power over their life circumstances and may feel they are not effective in their undertakings. Women need to see their life chronicle as a construct in which they can make choices, in which they do have control and are further able to make changes in the “systems of which they are a part” (Wiessner, 2005, p. 114). Belle and Doucet (2003) announce that, “Poor women are often so powerless in their dealings with employers, landlords, and government bureaucracies that their coping strategies are severely constrained and unsuccessful” (p. 104). Such strategies are “passive…emotional …and evasive” (Lever et al., 2005, p. 379). This suggests an external locus of control which is detrimental to one’s well-being and success in life. Ziegler et al. (2006) study advises that female participants of adult literacy classes may benefit through retraining of their self-talk. With less negative talk and external locus of control, and with an increase in self-efficacy, attendance and program persistence will increase and meaningful learning may take place. They further suggest internal and external loci of control are related to levels of self-efficacy and resilience. An increase in self-efficacy and resilience may provide women with protection from negative mental and social influences and a way to move forward, to become more.

Rivera’s (2003) study of the use of Freire’s popular education with homeless mothers furthers the concept of education empowering women. She indicates that an increased awareness of the women’s relationship to others and to the world also served to increase their self esteem. This increased awareness came from raising “critical consciousness” (p. 44) regarding the poor women’s life situations and the knowledge that empowers them to become politically active and promote social change. As women increase in basic literacy skills, their real life situations are also used as themes in teaching and learning material. Thus, they are provided with more than increased skills in just reading, writing, and arithmetic. Success found in adult learning also serves to “builds confidence and self-efficacy” (Hammond and Feinstein, 2005, p. 278), which infiltrates all areas of their lives. As they become more aware of the world around them and their sense of control of their world, low income women can picture a new way of being.

Therefore, in seeking adult education, many women are often “searching for a ‘self’ of their own” (Jackman, 1999, p. 57), and work to discover and recreate their identities (Prins et al., 2009) throughout their time in participating in the programs. The importance of combining the personal with the professional, merging lived experience into the adult education classroom, cannot be ignored. Women need to express themselves; need to tell their life and self stories. Jackman (1999) emphasizes that any effective adult learning site must include the lived stories of the participants, as adults perceive their experiences as their identity. How they frame the meaning of their lived experiences becomes the way they identify who they are in relation to others and to the world.

Kasworm (2003) found that the adults in her study “defined and acted on classroom learning according to their beliefs about the relationship of college to their life worlds and the interactions of their adult roles and relationships with the student role” (Kasworm, 1990, p. 84). In other words, when school learning is juxtaposed to meet real life challenges and interactions, meaning is made and the most valuable learning takes place. Adult education therefore, must take into account the varied reasons women attend and the varied needs and desires they may have for outcomes of their participation. While attending to the academic, they are also increasing in personal skills that will allow them to be more successful in their personal, family, workplace and in other interactions within the social system.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LIFE

As it has been shown thus far, women most often are balancing several roles simultaneously. Women, who are the main caregivers and the main providers, are often returning to school so as to increase their ability to perform successfully in these areas. However, these multiple roles of family, work, and school may sometimes come in conflict with one another. A study by Gerrard and Roberts (2006) considers the plight of low income single mothers and the potential effect furthering their education could have on the development of their children. They query whether the sacrifice on family and finances is worth it to obtain further education. They state, “The financial strain that the student parent reports in this study may produce a future generation with a wide range of social problems” (p. 400). Indeed, role stress and strain may have far reaching affects on the women and their family. However, Home (1997) noted that lower
stress and role strain was reported by those students with strong support from family and friends. A strong support system was shown throughout the literature as positively impacting women’s ability to deal with the multiple roles they are striving to balance. Kirby et al. (2004) similarly mention that for adult women returning to school, “Social support moderated the effect of stress” (Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992; p. 66). Therefore, when considering low income single mothers and the possible negative effect furthering their education could have on they and their children, instructors and counselors could be a vital influence in the success and retention of these students. If these adult women students feel supported by faculty in the way of flexibility, understanding, a listening ear, and even more options for getting their work done; (that is, distance education) their stress can be measurably less, thus improving their chances for success with their varied roles. An alternative view of multiple role women comes from Jackman’s (1999) study in which she identifies how some women are learning to simultaneously play-out their multiple roles by bringing school home and home to school. Using their real life experiences in the classroom and in their writing, the students in her study find that by combining the two they can better “analyze problems, explain concepts, and evaluate circumstances” (p. 56) at both home, school, and work settings. In other words, as they synthesize their life experiences with their school and work experiences they are better able to find meaning in all areas. Kirby et al. (2004) add to this stance in stating, “returning to school may be a positive role model for family members, and increased problem solving and time management skills gained in school may have a positive impact on family life” (p. 74). Thus, though returning to school may be a difficult choice, and may inflict role conflict, women can also find balance and integrate their many roles. Increasing in literacy skills does have the great potential of positively impacting a women’s personal and family and community life. Having the desire and courage to become better, these women are offering a new way of life for their children as they endeavor to increase their skills for the workplace and beyond. Throughout the literature, it was clear that the women in the studies had no regrets being mothers. Most often, it was because they were mothers that they desired a change in their lives. They realize that they want their children to make different choices, they want a different life for their children then they may have. Therefore, the women who desire to increase in skills do so with a desire to better themselves. The women in Rivera’s (2003) study remarked that the reason they return to school is to “improve their economic opportunities and to provide a better life for their children” (p. 31), which often includes a strong desire to get off welfare. Most low income women have experienced intergenerational effects of poverty and low literacy. Adult literacy education can help give them the confidence, guidance, and support they will need to help them use what they learn in the ways that will be most beneficial in improving their lives. Low income women who have increased their literacy skills often reach out to others in similar situations, helping them gain many of the skills and the knowledge and confidence they have. Many women become volunteers in their communities using their newly gained skills to help and encourage others as well as advocate for themselves and others in similar conditions. Through basic literacy and workplace skills education, low income women are seen to increase in self-esteem and self-efficacy which strongly influences their ability to be successful not only in the workplace, but in all areas of their complex lives. They are more likely to advocate for themselves and for their children, and to be heard in their communities and within their spheres of influence. They feel competent and know their skills are valued. They develop new social ties and networks which encompass a new form of interacting all together. They have more patience and knowledge for parenting, and offer a healthier and more productive life for their children. They plan more purposefully for the future and find their dreams can be more tangible. They become more; they become better.

**CONCLUSION**

Why is it that if you educate a woman you educate a nation? It is because women are, or womanhood is the keystone to the essence of mankind. Women continue to be the main caregivers, thus it is their influence that is most prevalent to children. It is their knowledge and attitudes that will be passed to the children they are raising – and more and more often raising alone. It is so very important to give women the skills and knowledge they need to have the power to become successful in their efforts. It was very evident throughout the literature that women need and desire to increase in skills that will help them to provide for themselves and their children; they desire to be better role models, to feel better about themselves and to become better.

This paper claims that in gaining basic literacy skills, low income women are not only preparing themselves for the workplace for which they have need to be a part, but also that such skills transfer to all areas of their lives. In effect, gaining in basic literacy skills can be seen as the “fertiliser needed for development and democracy to grow. It is the invisible ingredient in any successful strategy for eradicating poverty” (Archer, 2006, p. 21). The desperate conditions in which so many low income, low literate women find themselves can be improved or indeed even eliminated through an increase in literacy. As low income women feel more confident in their literacy abilities, they increase in self-efficacy or their effectiveness in their life tasks. As they gain further knowledge...
and understanding, they feel empowered to make a difference in their lives and in the lives around them. As they come to develop personally, they also have a positive affect their families and their communities. Thus, this literature review has shown that an increase in literacy skills infiltrates all areas of low income women's lives. The studies reviewed and discussed are rich with theory, data, and proof that in seeking further education women desire more than just basic literacy skills. Indeed, they want to have personal, academic, and family and community goals addressed simultaneously. Literacy offers a way up and a way out of current life circumstances for these women. The new social networks and support systems they gain through adult education programs show these women a new way of life, a new way of being. These women gain control of their lives. They come to know that they can and do have a say to what happens to them, as they increase in awareness of the world and who they are in relationship to it. They find a place. They move forward. They become more. Reimer's (2008) study so poignantly concluded that, "literacy provided a way of making meaning, of maintaining hope, and of retaining a sense of self in a world that offers little consistency other than change" (p. 452). The women throughout the studies learn how to critically analyze their worlds. They find meaning and connections between their existing knowledge schemas and the new knowledge and skills they are seeking and learning. They begin to see that their knowledge is valued. These women are challenging the systems of which they are part; acting as advocates for themselves, their children, and other women in similar circumstances to make changes for the better. They are consciously aware of their place in society, and can critically assess and address areas which need improvement. Their newly acquired and updated cognitive and non-cognitive skills make for a new and different way of being, of understanding. They are becoming better in all areas of their lives; as Morris and Beckett (2004) recognize, "the construction of identity in the home and at school, intersects with the construction of identity, in...the workplace" (p. 75). Thus, increasing skills and attributes in one area of life equates with a new construction of abilities and traits in other areas of one's life. It goes unattested throughout the literature, and indeed the academic arena, that literacy is a basic human right. Human and economic development could be enriched across the nation and afar if educational reform was the order of the day. Literacy for all, and especially increased literacy for marginalized peoples, including and particularly women, should be the basic dogma and premise of the political agenda of any world leader. Literacy is the only sure path out of poverty. Women hold the keys to the future – the children. They need the opportunities and knowledge to better themselves in order to turn those keys in the right direction. Increasing skills to help low income women function successfully in the workplace and beyond offers them hope to hold onto and a chance to become.

REFERENCES


