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Changing Women: An Ethnographic Study of Homeless Mothers and Popular Education

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This article discusses ethnographic research conducted between 1995 and 1998 that studied the impact of popular education on the lives of fifty homeless and formerly homeless mothers. Data collection involved in-depth interviews and participant observation in a family shelter located in one of Boston's poorest neighborhoods. The article argues that popular education increased the women's self-esteem, they were inspired to help other low-income women, they learned to advocate for their rights and they became more involved in their children's education. The findings suggest that popular education can best address the academic, personal, and community goals of very poor women.

Introduction

Between 1995 and 1998, I studied the impact of popular education on a group of fifty homeless and formerly homeless mothers who participated in a shelter-based adult literacy program located in one of Boston's poorest neighborhoods. When I first visited The Family Shelter, I met with a group of homeless mothers who were studying for their General Education Diplomas (GED). They said they were returning to school to improve their economic opportunities and to provide a better life for their children. They also said they were fortunate to be clients in the Family Shelter's unique popular education program because it provided them with more than basic literacy skills.

The popular education classes at The Family Shelter were rooted in a model of education that involved problem-posing and consciousness-raising activities based upon the problems or

"generative themes" in the lives of the poor women. Popular education is a methodology of teaching and learning through dialogue that directly links curriculum content to people's lived experience and that inspires political action (Beder, 1996; Freire, 1990, 1973; Williams, 1996). The majority of the popular education classes I observed in the Family Shelter focused on generative themes related to Motherhood and Parenting, and Social Inequality. The generative themes were also linked to subject matter that developed and strengthened reading and numeracy skills. Teachers used stories written by homeless women, neighborhood newspapers and photographs as "codes" to represent the generative themes in the lives of the women. In their classes, the women discussed the problems represented in codes, how they had experienced these problems, why the problems existed, and what could be done to address them. I observed how the popular education classes inspired homeless and formerly homeless mothers to become actively involved in changing their community, both inside and outside of The Family Shelter. I sought to learn more about popular education and its potential for promoting collective social action.

The purpose of this article is to examine how the homeless mothers were affected by their participation in the popular education program at the Family Shelter. Based on my observations, I argue that the Family Shelter's popular education philosophy and the provision of comprehensive social services addressed the women's personal, academic, and community needs. I argue that popular education had a positive impact on the lives of the homeless mothers that extended beyond learning important reading and numeracy skills.

Methodology

This article focuses on a sub-set of data from a larger study (Rivera, 2000). Between January 1995 and June 1998, I gathered data from 50 currently and formerly homeless women about their classroom experiences in popular education classes at the Family Shelter. I conducted over 1500 hours of participant observation in popular education classes at the Family Shelter. Most of the observations occurred in classrooms as women participated in

discussions based on subject material provided by teachers or injected by the women into the program planning. Research also included an open-ended education history questionnaire.

Over three years, I collected a significant amount of data from fieldnotes, education histories, and transcripts from interviews. In analyzing the data, I looked for the frequencies in which several women came up with similar comments and observations. Specifically, I examined whether there was an order or process that led to a particular action or event (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). I also cross-referenced fieldnotes and interview data from the same women as a way of conducting "consistency checks" (Carspecken, 1996, p. 166). I organized recurring themes into conceptual categories using three broad categories of "School-Life," "Family-Life," and "Community-Life." Under the category of "School-Life," I examined the women's educational histories before they entered the program; under the category of "Family-Life," I analyzed the poverty-related obstacles in the women's lives based upon in-depth interviews. The data for this article are drawn primarily from the third category, "Community-Life," in which I examined how the women related to one another within the context of the popular education classes and how they were affected by popular education.

Profile of Sample

Fifty women who had participated in popular education classes from three months to three years were included in the study. Most of the women were referred to The Family Shelter by the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) or by homeless shelter follow-up programs. Twenty (40%) were African-American, eleven (22%) were Puerto Rican, six (12%) were from Haiti, and most of the rest were from English-speaking Caribbean countries.

Forty-two percent of the women in the study were homeless for at least three months between 1995 and 1998. The other 58% had been homeless for at least three months between 1990 and 1995 and were still considered to be "at-risk" of homelessness. In addition, 80% of the women received AFDC/TANF welfare benefits at least some of the time between 1995–1998. The mean age of the women, at the time when they enrolled in the program

was 30, with a range from 21 to 47. The average number of children was 2, with a range of 1 to 5. In addition, 66% of the women had participated in the paid labor force prior to their enrollment in the popular education classes.

In this study, all of the mothers lacked a high school diploma. Most of the women quit school at the 10th grade, some as early as the 7th grade, and seven women never attended school at all. 82% of the women had attended at least one other adult education program prior to enrolling at the Family Shelter. In addition, the reading comprehension levels of the women were varied: 28% of the women entered the program with reading comprehension levels ranging from 0 to 4th grade; 46% had reading levels between 5th and 8th grade; and 26% had reading levels between 9th and 12th grade.

Theoretical Framework

What is Popular Education?

In 1998 the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) consolidated over 50 employment, training, and literacy programs into three block grants to states.¹ Under Title II of the new law, the *Adult Education and Family Literacy Act*, one of the primary goals for adult education is to assist adults in becoming literate and obtaining the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency.²

The passage of the WIA further fueled a long-standing debate in the field of adult literacy education regarding the purposes of literacy and what it means to be literate (Beder, 1987; Heaney, 1996; Hunter & Harmon, 1979; Macedo, 1994). Since the 1970's there has been a growing critical literacy movement that questions the conditions that create the need for literacy programs and that explores adult literacy as a tool for social change (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). According to Degener (2001), "Critical theorists believe that critical education should guide students toward becoming political. Different theorists have different names for this process—emancipatory education, liberatory education, democratic education, transformative education—but it all boils down to the importance of moving

students beyond learning content and toward taking political action" (p. 37). The Center for Popular Education and Participatory Research (CPEPR) states that the following are central themes in popular education:

First, popular education is community education, aimed at empowering communities through cooperative study and action. Secondly, popular education is political education, with a stated goal of collective social action toward a more equitable society. Thirdly, popular education is people's education, traditionally aimed at marginalized and disenfranchised communities (CPEPR, 2001, p. 1).

Popular education's roots can be found in Brazil in the late 1950's and early 1960's during a period of political reform, industrialization, and great social changes (Ferreira & Ferreira, 1997). In 1961 the Catholic Church in Brazil sponsored a national literacy program based on the work of Paulo Freire, who had been developing literacy programs using popular education methods (Ferreira & Ferreira, 1997; Freire, 1973; Gadotti, 1994). Freire was influenced by Catholic, existentialist, phenomenological and Marxist philosophies (Berryman, 1987; Gadotti, 1994; Giroux, 1981; Gramsci, 1971; McLaren, 1989). Marx's views on praxis—the "free, universal, and self-creative activity through which man creates (makes, produces) and changes (shapes) his historical, human world and himself" (Bottomore, 1983, p. 388) and Hegel's "dialectic" between master and slave are central concepts in Freire's best known work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (first translated into English in 1970).

Freire (1990, 1973) argued that humans named the world through dialogue. He opposed situations in which some humans "named" on the behalf of others and criticized "banking" methods of education that treated learners as if they were empty objects into which the teacher "deposits" knowledge. Banking education fostered "cultures of silence" in learners, and in order to break through the "cultures of silence" the issues discussed in educational activities must be related to the reality of the learners. These issues or problems became "generative themes" and teachers and learners developed "codes" which were concrete representations of the generative themes such as an object, a photograph, a drawing, a poem, a film, or a skit. The generative

themes and codes were the basis for discussion, reflection and action in classes (Freire, 1990, 1973). This dialogic process inspires *conscientization*, the development of a "critical consciousness" (Freire, 1990, 1973; Shor, 1992). According to Degener (2001), "When students begin to understand the reasons behind their problems, they begin to understand their world and what they need to do to change it. When disadvantaged learners are able to reflect on their commonsense knowledge and get beyond it, they begin to understand that they can take action to transform their lives" (p. 36). It is this rationale that influenced the development of the popular education program at The Family Shelter.

In October 1990, at the request of former shelter residents, The Family Shelter began its own on-site adult literacy education program. The volunteer teachers were Catholic nuns who recognized that for the homeless mothers a traditional GED program had little sense of context. They used popular education methods because they wanted to help the women gain literacy skills in a meaningful context. In addition, the design of the popular education program was influenced by the Catholic sisters' beliefs in liberation theology and the principles and practices of the Catholic Action method that emphasized a "historical process of reflection and action" and a mission to help others "see reality, articulate experience, judge, interpret, act, plan, decide, organize, evaluate and celebrate" (SND Fieldnotes, 1996; Berryman, 1987).

Studies on the impact of Popular Education

A longitudinal study of adult literacy participants by Bingham, Ebert, & Smith (1999) found that after one year participants reported positive changes in at least one of the following categories: employment, self-esteem, and children's education. However, the researchers found "no significant changes in community awareness or in how people felt about their community" (p. iii). They suggest that, "The lack of changes in community awareness could be partially explained by the traditional curriculum in literacy programs, the content of which has little to do with local communities" (p. 23). Another study by Beder (1998) found that participation in adult literacy education had several impacts on adult learners, including: changes in employment, job quality, and income; reduction of welfare dependency; learning gains in reading, writing, and mathematics; GED acquisition; changes in

self-confidence and increased participation in children's school activities (1998, p. 3). However, the study's findings were contradictory because there were differences between what objective measures found (i.e. standardized assessment tools) and learners' self-reports. Beder proposes that more qualitative research is needed that examines the "meaning of impact" from the perspective of adult learners (1999, p. 81). Ethnographic studies by Benmayor (1991) on El Barrio Popular Education Program in New York City's East Harlem neighborhood and Young & Padilla's (1990) study of *Mujeres Unidas en Accion* in Boston, provide evidence regarding the empowering effects of popular education on the lives of low-income women. However, these studies unlike my own, do not focus specifically on the experiences of homeless mothers in a shelter setting.

Thus, my ethnographic research with homeless women and popular education makes a unique contribution to a small but growing body of literature about popular education in the United States (McLaren & Giarelli, 1995; Williams, 1996). Few adult literacy programs in the United States identify their approach as popular education and much of the current literature about popular education focuses on the work of non-governmental organizations in developing nations (Torres, 1995). According to Beder (1996), popular education programs in the United States are more likely to be offered in community-based organizations (CBO's) rather than in organizations funded by federal or state governments. Government and for-profit organizations are more likely to reflect the interests of those in power and operate in a "top-down" operation. In contrast, the work of CBO's is compatible with the popular education philosophy: "education that serves the interests of the popular classes (exploited sectors of society), that involves them in critically analyzing their social situation and organizing to act collectively to change the oppressive conditions of their lives" (Beder, 1996, p. 74).

Findings

Why do the Women Return to School?

Beder & Valentine's (1990) research suggests "10 basic motivations" for adults attending adult literacy education classes: "self-improvement, family responsibilities, diversion, literacy de-

velopment, community/church involvement, job advancement, launching, economic need, educational advancement, and urging of others" (quoted in Wikelund, 1993, p. 28). The homeless mothers I studied confirm these findings, with an overwhelming majority of the women stating that their children were the primary motivating factor in their decision to return to school. For example, Renata wanted to be a "role model" for her kids:

I decided to go back to school so I could be a good role model for my kids. And I say that because how can I teach them something or tell them something I don't know? How can I tell my kids to go to or finish school if I didn't? They'll be looking at me sayin', why should I go to school you didn't finish!

The women also returned to school because they believed that once they obtained their high school diplomas they would have increased access to decent jobs, get off of welfare, and/or be accepted into a good job training program or college. Leticia said:

I wanna get my GED. I need this certificate for myself, for my son, to get higher education, to get, to get a good job. You know? To prove to myself that I can do it. You know, that I finally done it after all these years. I went back to school. You know? I mean, back in the day I had no choice but to drop out, but, you know, I want to get that GED paper. I wanna go into a computer-training program. But that GED, it's real important to me. You know? It's real important.

Many of the women had fond memories of elementary school. For example, Yvette explained that she used to be a good student: "Math and reading was my favorite subject and I had certificates and awards and all that from math. All my awards was for math, you know. Because I was a math crazy freak right then!" When Yvette, as well as other women, went to high school they began to have problems, or their existing problems worsened, and this is consistent with much research on urban high school dropouts (Fine, 1991; Way, 1998).

Although some women stated that they were involved in gangs while in high school and that they had skipped school on a regular basis, most of the women who attended high school, dropped out because they got pregnant. They could not return to school because they lacked childcare or because of family

problems. Also, the majority of the women said that they regretted dropping out of high school but that they did not have a choice. Florence demonstrates this:

I had a baby. And at 18, I was in 11th grade. They didn't have what they have for women today. You know what I'm sayin'? And, um, the father had start keepin' him for a while and I didn't like to come home and my room is destroyed. The baby didn't take a bath, you know. I just couldn't deal wit him tryin' to raise him 'cause he was still using [drugs] and he would take the baby wit him over to his other women houses and stuff like that. And I knew the smell on my baby was not a man's smell. It was a woman's smell. So I just said, "I'm gonna stop school and I'll take care of my baby."

According to Beder (1996), "Although the intrinsic benefits that derive from community, dignity, and empowerment are important in popular education, meeting participants' basic material needs through popular education is also important" (p. 78). The Family Shelter addressed some of the women's problems by providing comprehensive social services, including: counseling, childcare, food pantry, clothing, after-school youth programs, healthcare, housing advocacy and legal advocacy. 82% of the women in this study attended at least one other Adult Basic Education (ABE) program prior to enrolling in popular education classes at The Family Shelter. The women said that their former ABE programs were not able to help them with regards to accessing social services. For example, Florence compared her experience in another ABE program to the Family Shelter's popular education program. She said that in her other school, "*They okay when it comes to education, but then when it comes to life, they like, you know, skid off a little. It's like nobody be able to talk about life.*" She said, the Family Shelter is "*a better place for you to be in especially if you have problems, you have children, you have all kind of things, this is the better place for you to be.*" The Family Shelter's popular education approaches were better suited to help homeless mothers because their personal, academic, and community goals were addressed simultaneously and on an on-going basis.

Next, I will provide evidence of the positive impact of popular education by presenting the voices of homeless mothers who describe how their self-esteem increased and how they worked to

help other poor women like themselves. The women also became stronger advocates for their basic legal rights related to welfare, housing, health, and education, and they became more involved with their children's education.

"I Have More Self-Esteem"

This research confirms findings from studies that show participation in adult literacy education has a positive impact on adult learners' self-esteem (Fingeret & Drennon, 1997). All of the women who participated in the popular education classes saw their return to school as a "big change" in their lives. For example, Maxine said, *"Going back to school has made a big improvement in my life. I see things changing."* Yet, for many women, their decision to go back to school, especially during a time of crisis, was not supported by their family or friends. Maxine said, *"Some people are encouraging me to keep going on and to finish. Other people have an attitude like they don't want me to finish. It's like they are envious or jealous."*

Tashawna, a recovering addict, also said people did not want her to change and because she was no longer using drugs her old friends "disappeared." She said, *"Everybody used to want to come over on Mondays and Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, because they didn't want me to change. They didn't like the change. But now they have no choice, because I don't have nothin' in my way anymore. So now, they are all just scattered everywhere. They disappeared on me."* Florence, who lived in a public housing development, described how her neighbors criticized her in the mornings when she went to the classes at The Family Shelter. She relied upon her mother for support: *"My mother always calls me and says, 'Girl, you hold your head up high, and act like you don't hear it.'"*

The longer the women participated in the program, the more they saw themselves as changing and the better they felt about themselves. According to Leticia, *"I have more self-esteem 'cause I used to call myself a failure. I used to be like, 'Oh I'm a failure. I fail at everything.' So, it's like now I've got a lot of self-esteem. I went and took half of my GED tests and I know I'm goin' to get those points and I'm goin' to get where I want to go."*

"So You Teach Somebody Else"

At first, women who entered the program did not trust each other. When Leticia first joined the program she had negative feelings towards some of the women. She said, *"I don't think about the other girls. I worry about myself. Because there's girls here who've been here for 2 years, and they still haven't went for nothin'. You know? I don't think about them. I think about myself gettin' the work done."* She also criticized some of the women: *"They're scared. They have low self-esteem. That's the way I see it. You know? I come here, I don't expect all the teachers to help me. I don't expect all the students to help me. You know, if I feel I need to work on my own, I will. So I don't worry about nobody else that comes to this class."*

Not unlike debates among adult educators and policymakers, the women had conflicting beliefs regarding the purposes of education. In particular, new students struggled to understand the popular education process in their classes. The focus on generative themes in classes was viewed critically by some of the women, especially when they did not see how the problems being discussed were related to the subject material required for the GED. Some women such as Florence, Tashawna, Delila, Crystal, Holly, Georgia, Rae, and Maxine spoke openly about their problems in classes, but they did not relate these problems to the entire group. For example, Yvette complained: *"There's times that we was upstairs that, you know, Florence is mad and we had to wait for them to calm her down before we get on a problem, you know before we start readin' or somethin'. So that's what I'm sayin'. Personal problems like they've had maybe should be left at home."*

A few women who held traditional views about school refused to participate in activities that they did not see as related to the GED. Some of these activities included workshops with guest speakers about health, housing, and welfare, fieldtrips, arts activities, conferences, neighborhood events and holiday celebrations. These women, Yvette, Edith, Celia, Rhoda, and Rachel, were older and had held full-time jobs before enrolling in the popular education classes. They would often ask teachers, *"Is that gonna be on the GED?"* For example, Rachel, who did not want to attend a holiday party, asked, *"Why is it that we are obligated to attend all these things, pot lucks, pizzas, and so on?"* I asked her why she

didn't want to attend group celebrations and she argued, "*There's nothing you could do here, but provide the tools for people, who have to pick them up and use them.*"

Yet, women's relationships changed over time as they discussed commonly shared problems in classes and as they worked together to complete group projects. For example, a group of women were asked what they "expect" from each other:

Tashawna: *I expect their support. You know when I need help, I expect that um, I can feel comfortable. You know, and I can go and talk to them and ask them for help. Could they help me? And I expect for them not to, you know, feel like they know it all and for me to ask somebody else. I expect for them to help me when I ask for their help. That's what I expect.*

Florence: *Same here.*

Leticia: *Me too. I expect support.*

Tashawna: *But some students are not that way.*

Florence: *Yeah, but that's not the way life goes. 'Cause somebody learned it to teach you, so you teach somebody else.*

Florence's comment, "*Cause somebody learned it to teach you, so you teach somebody else*" embodied the spirit of popular education and fostered a sense of community among the women. One day I observed Delila telling a group of new women, "*It's very hard to work and accomplish something if you don't work together.*" Women like Rachel, Cynthia and Leticia who at first claimed that they did not care about the other women, later assumed teaching or leadership roles in the program. Yvette, who complained about how other women aired their problems in classes, later said, "*Coming here gives me more strength to see that I'm not out there by myself. It's not just me.*"

Because the homeless mothers had weak social networks outside of the program (shelter was a last resort for many of them), they began to develop a community of support within the context of their popular education classes. The teachers described the women as a "community of learners," and the women reinforced this notion by helping one another with schoolwork, by offering parenting advice and exchanging goods such as clothing or furniture. Tashawna described the popular education program as "like a family" and "different than a regular school":

Oh, it's been the best. Oh, God only knows. It's been the best. I'm tellin' you. It's been the best because I mean, it's, it's so different than a regular school. You know, because I mean, there's people here that you can, you know, communicate with. I mean, it's just real. People here that you can communicate with. It's like a family, um, it's like a family setting.

"It Gave Me a Backbone"

My findings show that the popular education program not only increased the women's self-esteem and their sense of responsibility to one another, but the women also wanted to address the root causes of problems and they often talked about changing "the system." Some women like Celia, Leticia, Elsie, Loretta, Holly, Concepcion, and Yolanda became volunteer advocates for homeless women and welfare recipients at local shelters, neighborhood community centers, and health centers. Others like Frieda, Octavia, and Chauntal said they learned about their "rights" and how to "stand up for myself" while at the Family Shelter. For example, Chauntal said that the program "gave me a backbone." She explained:

There was a lot stuff that they showed us how we should do, you know? Um . . . better involved us, ourself to learn how the system, how the system can work for you and how they can work against you. So, that was, um . . . really good, you know, because I stayed involved, this was just a lot of stuff I be fighting now, um, with the system . . . Boston Public School system in regards to my children which I think, they're the ones that gave me that, that backbone to don't take no, you know, because there's hope, you know? That's what I consider I really got from the program is that even with me living here [in The Family Shelter] how they had me fight for my housing like if welfare told me, "Oh no well, you don't qualify, you can't get this," you know, they [the program] showed me well, you can write an appeal because they don't have no reason to refuse you. So, the program all in all, they, they the ones that gave me a lot of backbone to stop acting like well okay, it's no, it's no. I'm just gonna walk away. I can't do it. They push, they push you a lot to say, "No, you can do it!" you know?

In this instance the encouragement from teachers and other women as well as the provision of needed legal services at The Family Shelter helped foster Chauntal's belief that the "system" could be challenged. Similarly, Delila told me, "I don't like working with the

government because I would be working against the government, so . . . (pauses) See, I like to work to change things, to make better things, you know."

As the women at The Family Shelter became actively involved in their learning they developed a critical consciousness—an understanding of their "own being in the world"—and the popular education classes inspired collective action outside of The Family Shelter (Freire, 1990). For example, I observed how the women circulated petitions to extend the two-year Massachusetts welfare time limit. In their writing classes, the women wrote letters to state and federal legislators protesting changes in welfare policies and advocating for affordable housing. The women organized and attended lobby days at the State House where they met with their legislators. Other women spoke at rallies to increase affordable housing and to change the welfare reform legislation. When the Family Shelter received a "Participatory Health Education" state grant, the funds were used to train the women as popular educators, and they developed materials for information booths at local health fairs and neighborhood festivals. Elsewhere I examine how political cartoons and letters to the editor in local newspapers were especially effective codes for facilitating dialogue, critical reflection, and action (Rivera, 2000).

"We Sit Down and Do Homework. They Do Theirs, I Do Mine"

Popular education strengthened the women's ability to advocate for their children's education. For example, Renata and Soledad studied the effects of Ritalin on their children and they later met with their children's special education teachers to express their concerns about the drug's long-term effects on their children's health. After learning more about child development in their classes, and after a lengthy critical discussion about their childcare providers, a group of women developed a set of questions and a guide for choosing a quality daycare provider.

As stated earlier, the majority of the women returned to school during a time of crisis because they wanted to help their children. For example, Delila was not able to help her son with his homework until she gained the literacy skills she needed to understand the material. According to Delila:

We sit down and do our homework. They do theirs, I do mine. And, before he [her son] never asked me for help, he look at his homework, if he could not do it, he put it back in his bag, he never asked me for help. Now, when he comes and he looks at his work and he puts aside what he needs help with, and then he does what else he needs to do. And he goes like, "Mummy, mummy, I need your help." "In what?" "In my homework." I say, "How am I supposed to help you?" "I help you! Why don't you help me?" That's what he says!

As the women and their children studied together, education became a common bond for the family. The mothers and their children learned together and supported one another's educational goals. In addition, the women held high expectations for their children's education. The women wanted their children to have opportunities that were not accessible to the women, and they wanted them to succeed. According to Billie: *"You know, I always encourage her [my daughter]. Stay in school because if you don't stay in school, you're gonna have a hard time like me. You know, even though I'm still trying to go back and I'm still tryin', I refuse to give up."*

Some mothers, Soledad, Cynthia, Maxine, Florence, and Phyllis, brought their children—who had been suspended from school—to class with them because they did not want to miss school themselves. When these children came to school with their mothers, the other mothers made sure they were kept busy and were learning something. Other women offered advice to these children telling them to "Study hard," or "Stay in school." On one occasion, I overheard Norma lecturing Soledad's son. She asked him, *"Do you want to end up like your mother?"*

Outcomes

In 1995, although 50% of welfare recipients in Massachusetts had less than a high school education, under the state's two-year welfare reform "work-first" policy, welfare recipients were mandated to find employment as soon as possible. Welfare recipients who had been participating in adult literacy education programs were forced to forgo their education for the sake of low-paying jobs. Several studies have documented significant dropout rates and declining enrollments in adult education (D'Amico, 1998; Hayes, 1999; Imel, 2000; Kates, 1999; Knell, 1997; Pachikara, 1998;

Reuys, 1997; Sparks, 1999). Many of the adult education programs that had the greatest decline in enrollments were intensive (20 hours a week), community-based programs that offered classes during the morning hours to accommodate the schedules of mothers with school-aged children (Reuys, 1997; Sparks, 1999). Some of these programs were popular education programs like the Family Shelter's that, in addition to providing literacy instruction, were also aimed at increasing political empowerment and social change.

By 1999, only one woman, Kimberly, was still a participant in the popular education program. 36% of the women left the Family Shelter's popular education program without completing their high school credential because of welfare reform. Specifically, Leticia, Delila, Coletta, Adrienne, Georgia, Margarita, Celia, Octavia, Tracy, Cynthia, Rosario, Edith, Valerie, Susan, Renata, Maxine, Soledad and Denise all dropped out because they were pressured to enroll in welfare-to-work training programs at the risk of losing their welfare benefits. They all went to work in minimum wage jobs that did not lift them out of poverty, and many of them struggled to obtain subsidized childcare from the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance.

Other women (26%) dropped out of the program during the course of the study because they continued to face poverty-related obstacles that prevented them from attending school or working full-time. Elsewhere I document how the women faced severe barriers to education and employment including: health problems, learning disabilities, lack of transportation, lack of child care, domestic violence, and substance abuse (Rivera, 2001). Specifically, in this study of 50 homeless women: 36% of the women reported participation in drug rehabilitation counseling; 64% reported violent experiences in their past such as rape, child abuse, homicides of family members, gang violence, and family violence; 44% reported that they were currently in abusive relationships. I suspect the number of battered women is higher because most of the women became homeless because of domestic violence, and it is common to deny abuse. Grace and Bernice dropped out because of health problems and Billie, Chauntal, and Augusta dropped out because they got pregnant. Two women, Rachel and Latrice, died during the course of this research. Phyllis, Crystal,

and Claudia dropped out because they had drug addictions, and they remained homeless. In addition, Tashawna, Jessie, and Rae were transferred to other shelter programs during the course of this study.

Research has shown that a high school diploma, or a GED, provides little economic rewards and that "the surest path to a middle-class income is to complete at least two years of education beyond the high school level" (Moscovitch, 1997, p. 1). Thus, while 36% of the women at The Family Shelter successfully completed their GEDs, they continued to struggle with homelessness, illness, lack of childcare, and insufficient income. For example, Sylvia and Loretta got full-time jobs after completing their GEDs, but they remained homeless. Florence and Norma also finished their GEDs and were working full-time jobs at minimum wage. Yvette finished her GED and was about to enroll at the local community college when her sister died and she was granted custody of her nieces and nephews. Both Holly and Rayna finished their GEDs but they are disabled and cannot work.

The popular education program had a strong collaboration with a local public university and philanthropic foundation that supported a scholarship for formerly homeless women who wanted to attend college. After finishing their GEDs Magdalena, Helena, and Frieda all received scholarships to attend college, but they dropped out because they lacked childcare. Concepcion and Yolanda were also awarded scholarships for college, but Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance did not approve of their college plans and they too were forced to find employment. As of 1999, Emma, Louise, Shanequa, Elsie, Rhoda, and Winnie were full or part-time college students.

Implications of the Study

I have argued that the Family Shelter's comprehensive social services and its popular education approaches helped address the women's personal, academic, and community goals. Through a process of collective sharing and reflection, the homeless mothers in this study began to "act upon the world," challenging their internalized oppressions and understanding how structural forces shaped and constrained their lives (Freire, 1990). Their growing

awareness of their relationship to others and to the world increased their self-esteem, challenged their "cultures of silence," and inspired them to help other women and become stronger advocates for their children.

Yet, more research is needed about the impact of "work-first" welfare reform legislation on popular education programs that seek to promote political empowerment and social change. Welfare reform increased pressure on teachers at The Family Shelter to meet the goals of women who needed their GEDs as soon as possible. Teachers worried that the program's goals of political empowerment and social change were being subsumed to meet the practical necessity of the GED credential. More and more teachers were hearing from new students, "Is this gonna be on the GED?" Robin, a teacher, told me, *"I have never seen it like this. The women are so focused on getting the GED. They are in such a rush to take the test, even though they are not ready yet."*

Popular educators and critical theorists like Freire argue that schools reproduce social inequalities. This research highlights the contradictions in the belief that education is the path to economic success. By limiting access to adult literacy education through "work-first" welfare reform policies, social inequalities are produced and reproduced. The fastest-growing sector in Massachusetts' labor market is the services industry. Denying access to education for the women in this study ensured that they serve as a source of cheap labor. Kates (1999) writes, "There is a disconnect between a) economic trends that indicate education and training levels of workers should be raised and b) public assistance policies that have greatly reduced access to education and training for hundreds of thousands of women who are entering the workforce" (p. 1).

As Congress prepares to reauthorize the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, it should increase access to education for those who need it most. Some women continued to attend popular education classes at The Family Shelter despite the "workfare" requirement. They hoped that the law would change and tried to advocate for changes. For example, Delila explained, *"Look, I tell my friends, don't give up on education because welfare is pushing you. Okay? Yeah, the law is fine today, okay? There is a new law this minute, but who knows what's gonna happen [next year]? Things can change."* Indeed, the time is ripe for change.

Notes

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1. See <http://www.doe.mass.edu/ACLS> for more details.
2. The Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) in the United States encompasses programs such as Workplace Education, English for Speakers of Other Languages, Family Literacy, Native Language Literacy, Adult Basic Education, and Adult Secondary Education. See www.nifl.gov for more information.

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