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**ITALIAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND LITERACY:
A CASE STUDY**

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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Education

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

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ABSTRACT

ITALIAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND LITERACY: A CASE STUDY

Patricia Costantino

The focus of this qualitative study is to explore why Italian immigrant women enroll in a literacy program in a second language context; second, it presents the sociocultural and psychosocial effects of the course on the women; and finally it states the views of the instructor on issues pertaining to the course and to Italian immigrant women.

Personal development and personal independence, communication with immediate and extended family, social interaction, and the acquisition of literacy skills are the fundamental reasons why these women enroll in a literacy program. Several positive effects of the literacy program are noted. These range from an increase in functional skills to an improvement in self-confidence. Communication with grandchildren and family members was facilitated by their English literacy acquisition. The isolation that they may have felt at home was also diminished. The instructor also noted a strong need for social interaction among the women.

The reasons for enrollment underscore the basic need for personal development and also illustrate that there is a growing demand for such courses in the community. These courses are provided to immigrant women in the aspiration that they will become full participating citizens in the community.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Stella Pace and to all Italian immigrant women.

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PREFACE

My particular interest lies in what motivates Italian immigrant women to enroll in an English literacy course in Montreal. The following questions provided me with a focal point for my research. What do they hope to achieve in the course? Why have they decided to take the course at this point in their lives? Most of all, do these women find themselves socially isolated in their communities and families?

My personal interest in this research topic revolves around my desire to gain a better understanding of female Italian immigrants who participate in English literacy courses. I think they are an admirable group of women because they are pursuing an education at a later time in their lives and it is their perseverance to acquire new knowledge and to better themselves that is the most commendable.

Being of Italian origin, I have been exposed to the context and culture of the study; however, I believe that this study could confirm or add to my knowledge of the immigrant experience. In the last few years, meeting women who are representative of the Italian immigrant community, has been a driving force in my life. Moreover, it became important to me to gain a different perspective on literacy participants other than what I have been exposed to-which is solely on an academic theoretical perspective.

These women represent my own mother- a woman who immigrated to Canada in the early 1960s, who is 67 years of age, who worked in the textile industry for thirty-one years, who is recently retired, who is a mother of three, and a joyous grandmother of two. I have seen her struggle throughout her life to be included in her children's lives. On a daily basis my mother wanted us (her three daughters) to speak Italian at home, so that she could participate in our everyday conversations. Yet, we often did not listen to

her needs and in turn contributed to her social isolation within the household- due to our assimilation into the mainstream society it became second nature for us to speak English at home.

I therefore dedicate this thesis to her, and all Italian immigrant women who at some point in their lives may have felt voiceless in their environments. I hope they gain some solace in the fact that they are not alone in what they may be feeling and that other immigrant women share similar interests and feelings towards literacy acquisition.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is to explore why Italian immigrant women enroll in a literacy program in a second language context; second, to present the sociocultural and psychosocial effects of the literacy program on the women; and finally to state the views of the instructor on various issues pertaining to the course and to Italian immigrant women and English literacy acquisition.

The study is based on ten older Italian immigrant women who were participating in a literacy program at The Italian Women's Centre of Montreal. The women range in age from 50 to 70 years old. I selected this group for the following reasons: 1) it is an age group that is becoming increasingly important to adult educators as a source of clientele because of the aging of the population; 2) it is an age group not covered by other researchers in Montreal; and 3) it has the potential to provide positive role models of older immigrant women.

In this study I use the term sociocultural as stated in the *Random House Dictionary* (1990) "as pertaining to, or signifying the combination or interaction of social and cultural elements" (p. 1270).

Psychosocial: Is defined in the *Random House Dictionary* (1990) "as pertaining to the interaction between social and psychological factors" (p. 1090). Psychosocial factors may include one's self-esteem, attitudes, beliefs, values, and opinion of others. These

factors may have great bearing on one's behavior and interaction in their environment.

Furthermore, they may include traditional values and attitudes of family members.

Italian immigrant population: In this study I refer to Italian immigrant women who immigrated to Montreal, Quebec after World War II. Although these women were immigrants when they arrived, one must keep in mind that they are now Canadian citizens. Furthermore, it is also important to remember that these women came to Montreal as adults. Some of the women came with established families of their own and some came as new brides to the country.

Literacy: Literacy definitions are varied and controversial. For the purpose of this study, I would like to employ the term critical literacy as proposed by Brady and Hernandez (1993). Critical literacy refers to decoding the ideological aspects of texts, institutions, social practices, and cultural forms such as television and films, in order to reveal their selective interests. The purpose behind this literacy is to create a citizenry critical enough to both analyze and challenge the oppressive characteristics of the larger society, so that a more just, equitable and democratic society can be created (p. 324).

A more precise definition for the subject matter of this study will be to employ a critical literacy definition in reference to women. Literacy in the context of immigrant women as learners should encompass the aim of helping women understand the root causes of their subordination and subservience. Consequently, it should enable them to turn individual powerlessness into collective struggle with the capacity to transform their lives, and ultimately the wider social order (Bee, 1993, p. 106).

Literacy is not only about learning how to read and write. Aside from its

significant functional purpose, it also develops critical thinking and fosters political, social and cultural awareness which consequently influences choices being made in everyday life. Literacy will not only improve students' ability to function better in their jobs, but it will definitely build overall confidence as citizens. Knowing how to read the newspaper, fill out application forms, write cheques and being able to communicate in one's native or second language can empower an individual (Panunto, 1999, p. 1).

This study was inspired by several studies that have been done by feminists using open-ended interviews as a research technique. Rockhill (1987), Horsman (1990), Bee (1993) have contributed to increasing my knowledge on qualitative approaches to research.

It is important to note that I do not intend to examine the relevance of learning style theories on teaching English literacy courses, nor do I intend to focus on learning English as a second language. The study is based solely on interviews with women who participated in an English literacy course at The Italian Women's Centre of Montreal.

I purposely chose this location because it met the following conditions: it offers English literacy courses to predominately Italian immigrant women; it offers English literacy courses that run throughout the year where participants can talk about their personal experiences; and finally it is located in Ahunstic, Central-East of Montreal, a geographically accessible area for most women.

The Case Study

Clientele and Funding

This study was carried out at The Italian Women's Centre of Montreal, Quebec. Contrary to its name, the centre does welcome and accept women from other cultures. Italian women constitute eighty percent of the clientele. The rest of the clientele originates from Algeria, Morocco, Argentina, Syria, Peru, Lebanon and Quebec. The centre was founded in 1978 and it is run by an all-female staff. The work staff consists of two permanent workers; a Sociologist, a Social Worker and a part-time worker with a Communications degree. There is also a Board of Administration headed by women that elect members yearly to oversee the operations of the centre. The centre receives its funding from Centraide du Grand Montreal (60%), La Regie regionale de la sante des services sociaux de Montreal-Centre, the Italian community which contributes a small sum of money annually to the centre, and from the membership and activity fees of the clientele. The centre charges an annual membership fee of ten dollars (The Italian Women's Centre of Montreal, 2000a, p. 1).

Mission of the Centre

The mission of the centre is to promote solidarity among women and to improve women's social, economic, and political conditions in Quebec society. The main objectives of the centre are the following: to end the isolation of women by offering them a place to meet together, to offer moral support and referrals, to encourage women's social and financial autonomy and personal growth, and finally to establish links among women of different origins (The Italian Women's Centre of Montreal, 2000b, p. 3). The centre offers many services that are kept confidential between the centre's staff and the clientele. It

offers a drop-in service, active listening in person or by telephone, information and referrals. Additionally, a documentation centre, and support groups that provide information on issues ranging from sexual abuse to alcoholism are available to the women. Moreover, legal advice and excursions to various sites in Montreal are provided. The centre is used as a sociocultural integration tool for immigrant women. It also offers a variety of activities such as conferences, literacy courses in French and English, coffee hour discussions, communal meals, relaxation courses, intercultural activities and day trips. Some activities are free while others require payment (The Italian Women's Centre of Montreal, 2000b, p. 4).

English Literacy Courses

In collaboration with the English Montreal School Board, English literacy courses have been available to women since 1983. The courses cost twenty-five dollars for members and thirty dollars for non-members. Two English literacy courses are offered twice a week for three-hour sessions and both run from September to June. There is no assessment of English proficiency at the centre. The women are taught according to the instructor's personal assessment of the individual and the whole class. Different levels of English proficiency are usually found in the classes. Unfortunately, due to budget cuts, only one course was offered this year. It was offered in September 2000 and ran until June 2001. Due to an overwhelming demand for the courses a waiting list has been established (The Italian Women's Centre of Montreal, 2000a, p. 4)

The organization's goals, with reference to the literacy courses, are first to end the isolation of women by offering them a place to meet together and second to help women gain autonomy from their family life. The courses are quite flexible in terms of enrollment criteria. The only criterion stressed is the women's level of education. Women who have more than a high school education are not allowed to enroll in these courses (The Italian Women's Centre of Montreal, 2000a, p. 5).

The classrooms accommodate fifteen women between the ages of approximately fifty and seventy. The majority of women come from working class backgrounds with some literacy skills in their own native language. Materials are provided by the instructor at the beginning of the course. Instructors are mostly women hired by the English Montreal School Board (The Italian Women's Centre of Montreal, 2000a, p. 1).

Sample Selection

Several criteria were used for choosing participants. The women had to be post World War II immigrants, of Italian origin, and Canadian citizens who had been in Canada for several years. They had to have been enrolled in a literacy course since January 2001. I went to the centre to recruit the women. I successfully managed to recruit ten women who gave their consent in writing to participate in the study.

Method of Data Collection

In order to pursue my research as a case study, I decided to use a qualitative research approach. A case study is a detailed examination of specific individuals, groups and situations (Coleman & Cressey, 1993, p. 20). The goal of the case study is to understand a particular case in its idiosyncrasy and complexity.

I collected my data through a structured interview with each of the ten participants. Interviews have several advantages over other methods of data collection. Specifically, data is much easier to collect on one to one interaction with the subject (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 166). Interviews also allow subjects to ask questions, thus, clarifying ambiguities. However, I did consider the negative aspects associated with the use of interviews. Interviews can illicit negative responses in individuals. An interviewer may ask personal questions that the participant does not want to answer. This resistance can cause tension and distort or otherwise threaten the study's findings.

Due to the time consuming nature of the methodology, my sample was small. Prior to the formal interview, I talked to each woman on the phone. The conversations allowed participants to ask questions about the study and gave us an opportunity to schedule appointments to meet. Several of the women refused to meet outside of their course hours. However, after some negotiations, we came to an agreement and every participant, with the exception of two, agreed to be interviewed before class. Two participants wanted to be interviewed by phone for they could not make it at another time. At the same time, I asked permission to tape the interview, and it was accepted by every participant.

The interviews took place in a small conference room reserved for meetings and gatherings at the centre. Each woman was interviewed individually. I scheduled two participants per interview session and conducted the interviews in Italian. The interview guide prior to the interviews had been translated from English to Italian. A professional translator was hired for the translation of the guide.

I asked the participants thirteen questions (refer to Appendix C for interview questions). The questions were divided by different themes: background information, family and community, and experience and participation in the literacy course. The first set of questions focused on gathering information on variables such as age, and their length of residence in Montreal. Also, included in that section were experience and behavior questions such as the women's employment experience. The subsequent section consisted of background, opinion and experience questions that focused on the reasons for their participation in the literacy course and what they hoped to achieve in the program. The concluding section dealt with value and opinion questions, such as their opinion of the course and the ideal learning environment for them. The tape recorded portion of the interview ran about twenty minutes to a half hour. The interviews were completed over a two month period, between the months of March and April.

At the end of the interview process, my choice of instrumentation, a structured interview came in handy due to the complications I had encountered. I had some difficulty with my lack of fluency in Italian. Thus, asking each participant the same question in the same order did not permit me to interject or diverge from the questions. I did feel shy and a little intimidated by their proficiency in Italian. However, when I did make mistakes the women reassured me that I was understood and they encouraged me to speak my dialect with them. I answered any questions they had to the best of my ability.

The structured guide facilitated the interview process of the participants who were interviewed by phone. I did not have the opportunity of meeting them in person and undergo a natural interview process. Out of the thirteen questions I asked, most of the women answered all of them. For my own purposes and for what I sought to discover, I had to simplify the questions. Therefore, I did not blatantly ask the women what sociocultural reasons led them to enroll. I asked general questions hoping to get responses that highlighted sociocultural and psychosocial reasons for enrollment. Some women gave long elaborate answers to the questions while some gave short less detailed ones. An example was when they all gave very short answers to questions about their early education and work history. At times, I probed, but they did not elaborate on questions they felt were adequately answered. Moreover, none of the women understood the question pertaining to their definition of literacy, thus I decided to omit the question altogether. A new theme arose from the responses to my questions. The women stated many barriers they faced before entering the literacy program. They provided great examples and information that created a new avenue to explore in the thesis. Therefore, I decided to incorporate their responses and added it to my data reporting section. Overall, the women seemed to enjoy themselves and they stated that they were pleased to be part of the study. I created a very friendly and comfortable environment, and tried not to interrupt or add my views to the questions.

I also wanted to conduct a follow-up interview at the end of course, but several factors prevented me from doing so. I noticed that the women could not fit me into their

busy schedules. They also stated throughout the first interview that they were consumed with family responsibilities and could not allot more time to another interview. A month after the interview, I decided to go back and form a focus group. At first, the women were reluctant for they did not know what it entailed; but, through a brief explanation in Italian, they agreed to participate. I managed to gather five women together and I talked to them informally about several topics that were previously covered and some that were new to them. I prepared a general interview guide in Italian where topics such as immigrant women and literacy, the perceived benefits of the course and its purpose in their present lives were outlined. The questions were not in chronological order and I did not structure the questions in themes. My intention was to create an informal environment where the answers to my questions would come up naturally, without any pressure.

The focus group took place in the centre's conference room. Initially, relevant topics and questions on the course and English literacy acquisition were not tabled and answered successfully. The women either did not understand the questions or spoke over one another making it difficult to understand one another. I decided to take another approach. I had the women engage in discussions among themselves, but that did not work well either because they kept interrupting one another. In the end, I asked the women four questions and simplified them when any confusion arose. The questions focused on the course itself and what they felt they had achieved to date. Some women gave long elaborate answers and some gave short less elaborate ones. In all, the women and I spoke for thirty minutes.

I noticed some interesting differences between the personal and group interviews. When I interviewed them in a group they often spoke over another and interrupted each other. They seemed very eager to speak and state their viewpoint on the program. At times the conversation got heated because some women criticized fellow classmates for their behavior in class. I let the women speak and after a few minutes managed to steer them back to the focus of the session. Furthermore, two women in the focus group tended to monopolize the time allotted to us. Thus, not much time was left for the others to speak. Overall, the interviews and focus groups went well and they gave me great insight into the lives of Italian immigrant women.

Initially, the instructor had some resistance to being interviewed in person. Thus, her interview by phone in English took place at a later date, in the beginning of May. I administered a semi-structured interview. I had eight questions drawn out, but I also had the flexibility to change the order of the questions. She was asked eight questions that included the curriculum, her views on Italian immigrant women, and on women and literacy in general. Her responses to my questions were detailed and thorough. She particularly liked the question on women's reasons for enrollment in literacy programs and spoke from her twenty-five year experience teaching women and English literacy. She did not answer questions pertaining to the Italian culture because she felt they were not pertinent to the study. Her interview was typed out verbatim. She initially agreed to be interviewed for twenty minutes, but fortunately she spoke to me for almost an hour.

Data Analysis

All the interviews were listened to several times and then typed out verbatim. At times, some of the women's responses were not very clear and this posed a problem during the transcribing process. Also, throughout the taping of the interviews, the noise level in the centre was quite high. At times their responses were hard to make out because of the background noise; thus, I decided to call the women that I had trouble understanding and they were very receptive in clarifying their answers to me.

When I finished the interview process and write up, I decided to divide the information and sought common and contrasting responses. From the first interview, themes started to emerge such as family, relationships with people and social integration. I used color codes to mark important themes on paper and added new themes as they emerged from the data. Some overlapped while new themes emerged from existing ones. All the information was divided, compared and contrasted with existing literature.

In the following chapter, I highlight various perspectives and definitions on literacy as well as literature on the Italian culture. Major studies on women in general and immigrant women vis-à-vis their participation in literacy courses are also presented. Chapter III presents the data collected from the participants and its analysis. The interviews focus on the women's early lives, their families and their reasons for their participation in the literacy program. Furthermore, the data from the focus group and the instructor's interview is presented. Chapter IV presents the conclusions and suggestions for future research on Italian immigrant women and literacy in the Canadian context.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter highlights various perspectives on literacy as well as functional and critical definitions of literacy. In addition to theoretical considerations on literacy, this chapter includes literature on women and literacy, immigrant women, reasons for enrolling in literacy programs and barriers to literacy.

Literacy programs that are functionally defined, community-based, critical theory based and culturally relevant are presented. The effects of literacy programs and literacy on environments for learning are also stated.

Various Perspectives and Definitions of Literacy

The present research literature is without agreement on what constitutes literacy. Many conclusions seem to be based on sociocultural assumptions, popular culture, and sociopolitical assumptions. Some researchers assert that literacy has a social context (Levin, (1985), cited in Barton, 1994) and is socially constructed (Cook-Gumperz, (1986), cited in Barton, 1994). In this view, literacy is seen in terms of cultural and communicative practices and patterns which take place in face to face interactions and are more situated in different types of communicative settings (Cook-Gumperz, 1986, p. 10). Here the view is that literacy is a multiple phenomenon and it involves different forms of communication. The focus is on how literacy is actually lived in concrete practices and daily interactions. On the contrary, Vincent (1989, cited in Barton, 1994) argues that it is related to popular culture. Others such as Freire and Macedo (1987) believe that

empowerment, culture and politics are linked to literacy. Others such as Stromquist (1990) take a feminist perspective and state that literacy is linked to the distribution of power and resources in global society.

On the other hand, Rockhill (1987) defines literacy as power. The power of literacy has been framed primarily in terms of economic development, equality of opportunity, and the possibilities of liberty and democracy (p. 156). In its most basic form literacy has meant “being able to read and write” (Random House, 1990, p. 792).

Functional Literacy

The continuous debate of the definition of literacy is ever-changing across the world. However, one widely accepted definition, developed for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 1985, and adopted by the National Adult Literacy Survey in 1990 is “using print and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (Laine & Geddis, 1992, p. 9). This definition can be understood in the context of three scales representing distinct aspects of literacy: prose literacy, document literacy and quantitative literacy (Laine & Geddis, 1992, p. 10).

Functional literacy views literacy as a set of functional tasks. It came into prominence in the 1960s with the pronouncements of UNESCO and still appears to be the most widely used term in government documents. The functional definition links literacy to individualism and capitalism – one becomes more literate in order to become a more productive worker (Campbell, 1992, p. 3). De Castell et al. (1981) express concern about the notion of functional literacy and say:

we must be particularly wary...of concepts of literacy which embody a built-in passivity factor (e.g., functional literacy qua acquiescent consumer competence or restrictively defined occupational skills). The intent of literacy instruction in Canada must not be the creation of manipulable populace, characterized by passive acceptance of information and prescribed behavior. (p. 16)

Others employ the term functional literacy as defined by Hunter and Harman (1978).

The possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders, and members of social religious and other associations of their choosing. This includes the ability to obtain information they want and to use that information for their own and others' well being; the ability to read and write adequately to satisfy requirements they set for themselves as being important for their own lives; the ability to deal positively with demands on them by society, and the ability to solve problems they face in their daily lives. (p. 7-8)

Horsman (1988a) interviewed twenty Maritime women who were students in adult basic education (ABE) programs to explore their experience of literacy. The research uncovered one of the inadequacies with the definition of functional literacy. The ABE programs, which are shaped by a functional definition of literacy, view literacy "as simply a set of skills a woman needs to acquire in order to function adequately in society" (Campbell, 1992, p. 15). However, Horsman discovered that women resisted the dominant discourse that classified them as functionally illiterate and that their motivation for attending classes did not hinge on wanting to learn 'functional' skills.

Critical Literacy & Critical Feminist Literacy Views

Several authors such as Jeanne Brady, Adriana Hernandez, Barbara Bee, Peter L. McLaren, Colin Lankshear and Henry Giroux have drawn their ideas heavily from Paulo Freire's views that literacy is linked to empowerment, culture, and politics. In general critical literacy supports people who have been marginalized by society by helping them

develop the literacy skills to communicate their needs, interests and experiences in social exchange with others. Critical literacy aims to challenge the “culture of silence” by helping students find their voice, a voice with which to speak out against discrimination and exclusion, to question the way things are, to cope with the written and unwritten rules of modern society, and to share their unique complex selves. Literacy becomes a context within which students think critically about social issues, try to understand the root causes of their problems, and generate their own solutions (Freire, 1974, Giroux, 1988, McLaren, 1998). Critical literacy involves decoding the ideological aspects of texts, institutions, social practices, and cultural forms, such as television and film, in order to reveal their selective interests. The purpose behind acquiring this type of literacy is to create a citizenry critical enough to both analyze and challenge the oppressive characteristics of the larger society, so that a more just, equitable, and democratic society can be created (Brady & Hernandez, 1993).

This perspective on literacy influenced both feminist literature and postmodern views. Many theorists have recognized that traditional literacy has to be changed to acknowledge what Brady and Hernandez (1993) address in *Feminist literacies: Toward emancipatory possibilities of solidarity* and Bee (1993) addresses in *Critical literacy and the politics of gender*. They argue that literacy needs to be redefined in political and ethical terms and cannot be disengaged from relations of power (p. 324).

Brady and Hernandez (1993) state that critical feminist literacy strives for a place that incorporates social practice within a postpatriarchial discourse. It is radical philosophy

that attempts to expose and challenge a hierarchically ordered sexist, classist, and racist worldview by reconstructing the relations of power in a way that enables women to speak and act as historical subjects within democratic social relations (p. 332). Its basic premise is the need to end sexist oppression and sexism. It also challenges the politics of domination in areas of not only gender, but of race, class, and ethnicity as well (p. 332).

According to Bee, (1993) critical literacy involves taking a critical approach to literacy which encompasses the aim of helping women understand the root causes of their subordination and subservience symbolically reflected in their lack of literacy. As a result, it enables them to turn individual powerlessness into collective struggle with the capacity to transform their lives, and ultimately the wider social order (p. 106). It must also deal with issues relating to women's work in the home, as well as in the work force, so that women can see the demands made on them by their families beyond the immediate domestic situation.

The Italian Culture

The Family

In the 1976, practically 90% of the Italian population of Canada resided in urban centres of 100,000 and more and 69% of the population were concentrated in cities with a population of one million and more, thus making Ontario and Quebec the two provinces of residential choice for more than two thirds of the Italian immigrant population (Phinney, 1990). Most of the literature on the history of Italian immigration to Canada (Phinney, 1990) discloses that their survival is dependent on the nuclear and extended family.

Essentially, the family is the nexus of Italian culture.

Indeed, the family serves as the primary function for most children of immigrants. Some popular notions of the Italian culture's values are paternal authority, duty, honor and responsibility (Phinney, 1990). The traditions attached to Italian familialism have been maintained since the late 19th century when Italian immigrants came to Canada; "Italian immigrants sought to preserve their familial values, and when necessary adjust them to the new economic imperatives" (Phinney, 1990, p. 13). A study conducted in Montreal in the mid 1960s discovered that two of three sampled Canadian born Italians had their closest relative living in the same household, or building. If that was not the case, then close relatives were living nearby (Phinney, 1990). Therefore, keeping the "family" together is very important in the Italian culture.

An article in the *Toronto Star* entitled "The family is something we treasure" written by Angela Bianchi (1992) underscores the value of family in the Italian culture. The focus of the article, Elio Rosati stated "The Italian family is something we treasure, it has not fallen apart as has happened in some other groups in society. It is the family that makes us Italian, whether born in Toronto or Italy. It transmits our cultural heritage, our ancestral language. To be Italian is not to eat pasta, or support Italian soccer teams, it is to be a member of an Italian family" (Section F p. 23).

Why Do Immigrant Women Enroll in Literacy Courses?

Women in General

Many studies, the most important being Horsman (1990), Bertrand (1997), research conducted by the University of Natal (1996), cited in Bertrand, (1997), Mwansa (1996), Mwansa and Lind, (1996), cited in Bertrand (1997), Dighe (1996), cited in Medel-

Anonuevo, (1996), Stromquist (1994), create a sense of the reasons why women participate in literacy programs. The above studies were conducted in different parts of the world: Canada, South Africa, India, Australia and the United-States. Several reasons for women's enrollment in a literacy program were noted: to help their children with homework, to gain personal independence and development, to upgrade their employment or to obtain a job, to end their social isolation, to acquire functional skills, to overcome feelings of shame and to find an opportunity to meet others (refer to Appendix A for a summary of each study).

Immigrant Women

Due to limited resources available on Italian immigrant women in Montreal, I selected the following studies which prove to be relevant to the nature of my study. These studies were chosen because they all deal with immigrant women and literacy in a second language context. The following articles clearly convey that there is a universal need for English literacy among immigrant women.

Black and Thorp's Australian study (1997) entitled *Literacy Practices and Linguistic Choices* focused on immigrant women enrolled in a basic education program entitled Reading and Writing for Adults (RAWFA). Five women were interviewed and their reasons for enrollment overlapped. The fundamental reasons for enrollment were the following: gain personal independence and personal development, acquire functional skills, assist family members, communicate with children, seek employment, and increase social interaction.

Bee's article (1993) focused on immigrant women she taught in Australia. These women have resided in Australia since the 1960s. They entered second language literacy programs for three major reasons: they did not have an opportunity when they were younger, they lacked the confidence in their abilities to enter or re-enter the world of work after being homemakers, and they wanted to improve their speaking and reading skills.

Rockhill (1993) stated that Hispanic speaking immigrant women in West Los Angeles enrolled in English literacy courses due to the nature of their work. Men could learn English informally, but women did not due to the nature of their work. For instance, women were bifurcated between dead-end factory, domestic, and field jobs requiring no communication, and highly literacy dependent jobs in clerical, secretarial and women's caring professions. English was crucial and their lack of access to learning informally led them to enroll in a program (p. 345). For these women, English language literacy was desirable and provided them with a symbol of educational attainment in a different dominant cultural formation (p. 345).

Cumming's study (1991) on Indo-Canadian women in Vancouver, stated that the women's intentions for improving their English literacy were to interact more extensively with the English-speaking population in Vancouver, to perform specific tasks independently in English (e.g. banking, major purchases, interact with their children's schools), and either to obtain employment requiring more English literacy (i.e. menial labor), or to enter English-medium training programs which would enable them to upgrade their employment qualifications. All of them felt that their existing Punjabi literacy based on their schooling in India (ranging from 9 to 12 years) was sufficient for their present life circumstances. With regards to English literacy, the women expressed far more interest in

improving their reading and functional conversational vocabulary, rather than writing. Furthermore, all the women stated their desire to move out of their life routines in which they were essentially bound to their homes and family obligations, routines which occurred almost exclusively in Punjabi (p. 18).

Barriers to Entering Literacy Courses

Women in General

Many studies have also addressed barriers women experience vis-à-vis literacy programs. Several articles and studies have looked at women's barriers to education. Stromquist (1990), Patel and Dighe (1997), Horsman (1990), McGivney (1993), McCaffery (1985), Gumede (1995), cited in Bertrand (1997), Reddy (1991) cited in Bertrand, (1997) addressed factors blocking women's access to literacy education. The following factors were cited: family responsibilities, lack of motivation, poverty, opposition by husbands, and difficulty with access to establishments (refer to Appendix A for further elaboration on a few of the studies).

Immigrant Women

Cumming' s article (1992) states that many immigrant women experience barriers preventing their access to literacy education. The barriers that most of these women face are institutional, situational, psychosocial and pedagogical. Common institutional barriers are the lack of on-site child care by trusted members of their own culture, location of classes in unfamiliar institutions outside of local neighborhoods, and course schedules that conflict with family responsibilities. Situational barriers may include lack of safe or

convenient transportation to and from classes, commitments to part-time work, unfamiliarity with institutional practices and government services, and responsibilities to children or extended family members. Psychosocial barriers may appear in traditional attitudes of family members or community leaders, which may restrict women from educating themselves beyond initial schooling or from seeking employment that conflicts with family responsibilities or conventional roles. Pedagogical barriers may include instructional materials and lessons that do not have immediate relevance to women's personal situations, appear too "bookish" or impractical to be of immediate benefit, or threaten cultural values or roles (Cumming, 1992, p. 3).

Cumming (1992) states that a psychosocial barrier such as traditional attitudes of family members or community leaders may inhibit or prevent literacy participation. This barrier was seen in Cumming's study (1991) on Indo-Canadian women. Traditional family roles exerted a major influence on the women's decision to participate in the classes as well as their capacities to study at home or to interact with the majority of individuals in society. All the women reported that their husbands and husbands' families had greater control over their personal lives than they had control over themselves. Expectations or commitments to child care, extended families, and visiting relatives consumed most of the women's time, making studies for more than two afternoons per all week all but impractical. Likewise, their husbands assumed responsibilities for most family financial tasks, major purchases, and institutional interactions, further restricting the extent and quality of interaction that the women had with the wider society (p. 11). Moreover,

several of the women noted that their husbands sometimes teased them about the value of their further education as it was a process conventionally reserved for men.

Rockhill's research (1993) focused on Spanish speaking immigrant women's experiences in learning English literacy in the United-States. The women interviewed were more dependent than men upon classroom instruction in order to learn English; yet, the women were often hampered from participation because of either subtle or overt opposition in the home or their structural location as women. The women who were interviewed did not drive, did not have access to a car, were not permitted to go out of their homes, and/or were terrified to do so because of crime rate in their district. Furthermore, not knowing enough English to defend themselves did not help their situation (p. 345).

Literacy Programs for Women

There are several different literacy programs that exist but the most noted are functionally defined, community-based, critically theory based, and culturally relevant programs. A brief description of each program and studies pertaining to the programs is presented below.

Functionally Defined Literacy Programs

Functionally defined programs focus on preparing citizens to participate in the labor force. As stated above in the definition section, a functional definition of literacy links literacy to individualism and capitalism—one becomes more literate in order to become a more productive worker (Campbell, 1992, p. 3). Several programs around the world have focused on the acquisition of functional skills. The following studies: Dighe

(1994) cited in Patel and Dighe (1997), Rockhill (1987), Stromquist (1990), Campbell (1992), Patel and Dighe, (1997), Ekstrand (1987), cited in Stromquist (1990), Thompson (1983), cited in Campbell (1992) and Bhasin (1984) present critiques and information vis-à-vis functionally defined programs (refer to Appendix B for an elaboration of the studies noted above).

Community-Based Programs

Community-based literacy programs began emerging in the late 1970s as traditional upgrading programs offered through colleges and school boards (Campbell, 1992, p. 12). Consequently, these programs have chosen to stress a human development (social demand) orientation as opposed to a labor orientation. In a participatory study, Gaber-Katz and Watson (1991) named the fundamental elements of a community-based program as learner-centredness, literacy from a critical perspective, and community building. The element of learner-centredness is described as encompassing “a commitment to active learning, a process whereby learners will be involved in setting their own goals and determining their own curriculum” (p. 13). Studies such as Mackeracher (1989) cited in Campbell (1992), Ramdas (1990), Belanger (1997), Horsman (1988a), Bertrand (1997), McBeth and Stollmeyer (1989) cited in Campbell (1992) address various issues and principles related to community-based programs (refer to Appendix B for the contents of the studies mentioned above).

Critical Theory Based

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, believed that education should empower people who are oppressed politically, socially and economically. His approach is based on the

belief that education should be a liberating and transformative process and that students and teachers should engage in an active dialogue that validates both voices, past experiences, and pre-existing knowledge. In this approach students are viewed as active participants in their education as opposed to the banking system which entails “the depositing of information by teachers into students which are viewed as receptacles” (Doane, 1998, cited in Smoke, 1998, p. 159).

Freire (1970) offers a conceptual model made up of several components. The problem-posing curriculum consists of employing codes, reflection, generative themes and finally action seeking strategies. In a classroom these components are constructed from what the learners already know; therefore, the curriculum comes from material that is relevant to students’ lives. The sharing and analysis of personal experience incorporated with regular classroom instruction sets the stage for a liberatory education. Hooks (1988), Parajuli and Enslin, (1990), and Bertrand (1997) provide examples of where critically based programs have been implemented (refer to Appendix B for more information on critical theory based programs).

Culturally Relevant Programs

There are many elements to a culturally relevant program. Among the common elements common to these programs are a) the location of classes within the ethnic neighborhoods and at local centres with reputations for community services, b) instructors who find themselves members of the minority population, are able to speak the minority language with students when necessary or appropriate, c) scheduling of classes at times that are convenient to participants, d) curriculum content and instructional material based

on participants' own immediate experiences, personal knowledge, perceived problems and social interests and aspirations. Studies such as Cumming (1991), Dighe (1996), cited in Medel-Anonuevo, (1996), and Quigley (1990), Gumede (1995) cited in Bertrand (1997) address issues surrounding culturally relevant programs (refer to Appendix B for summaries of the studies above).

The Effects of Literacy Programs

Bertrand's study (1997) of six South African women taking a literacy course documented several positive effects of their literacy program participation. These positive effects included the acquisition of practical benefits, an increased ability to speak, read, and write in English, increased independence, improved self-concept, a break from their social isolation, and the increased organization of oneself (p. 82).

Cumming (1991) stated that as the Indo-Canadian women improved their English literacy over the duration of the program, their self-confidence visibly increased, reinforcing their commitments to language studies and greater personal independence. Furthermore, the women's frequency of reading in English, communications with their children's schools, and use of the telephone in English increased dramatically from about once per month at the start of the research to almost daily ten months later (p. 13).

The women's lack of familiarity with public institutions and services in Canada was a particularly conspicuous aspect of their limited integration into the wider society. As the English literacy classes introduced the women to local libraries, public health and employment services, banking routines, and schooling, their knowledge and the use of these facilities also increased (p. 13).

Dighe's study (1996) cited in Medel-Anonuevo (1996) was based on a literacy

campaign that was launched in 1991-1992. It reported many positive effects of the literacy campaign on its participants. Many of the women felt they had become “knowledgeable, more understanding” through literacy. There were others who stated that the campaign increased their self-confidence, personal independence, and self-esteem (p. 107).

Regardless of the barriers and problems that women face when they attend a literacy class, the trainers and literacy participants whom Bertrand (1997) spoke to were all strong advocates of participation. The Masifundisi trainers spoke about ways that literacy class helped women by increasing their self-esteem, confidence and independence (p. 96).

They noted that women were often shy when they first came to class, but they eventually started to speak up and began sharing their problems. Improving reading and writing skills increases learner’s pride and increases self-confidence. One trainer stated that coming to class “takes them out of their little room and little cells that they have built for themselves.” (p. 97) Another trainer said that students often came to their classes feeling old, tired, and hopeless, but that learning, reading, and writing skills made them feel important.

Environment for Learning

Brady and Hernandez (1993) address the fact that the marginalization of women, especially third world women, can be eradicated by providing space for them in the classroom. There is a need for creating an analytical space for understanding third world women or women in general, as subjects of various struggles in history. This idea is

further substantiated by a study on the Total Literacy Campaign in South Delhi, Dighe (1996) cited in Medel-Anonuevo (1996) stated that the ambiance of the classroom must be such that women feel comfortable, relaxed and do not experience anxieties. Since women lack a social space they can call their own, literacy classes must provide them with that space (p. 109).

Conclusion

The literature above explores issues that relate to women, particularly immigrant women in literacy participation. Qualitative research done on female participation in literacy programs reveals that factors such as family, personal independence, and work play major roles in women's decisions to enroll in literacy programs. The studies also reveal that women's lives tend to centre around their families and familial responsibilities. These factors can either hinder or encourage participation. The major themes that come out of the existing literature relate to family, employment, and the acquisition of functional skills. The literature has shown that programs are varied and have important aspects vis-à-vis literacy acquisition. Many studies have shown that programs can empower women and improve their self-confidence and functional skills.

In the following chapter the data collection is presented. The responses to the interviews are stated. They are divided by themes in the first section and the second section presents the focus group conducted with the women. The concluding section deals with the instructor's interview. All the interview data is compared and contrasted with existing literature on the specific subjects.

CHAPTER III

FINDINGS

The focus of this chapter is on the data collected from the interviews. In order to protect the identity of the participants, the participants are given fictitious names in the chapter. The data collected from the first interview consists of the following: background information such as age, year of immigration to Canada, educational level, marital status, employment history, family composition, and languages spoken by family members. In addition, the women's views on the course and their viewpoint on the ideal learning environment were gathered (refer to Appendix C for interview questions). Furthermore, common responses provided by the participants are examined and compared with the existing literature. A new theme, barriers to female participation in literacy courses arose from the data and it is compared and contrasted with existing literature on the subject matter.

The second section focuses on the focus group conducted a month after the initial interviews with the respondents. The data from the focus group is presented as well as new data originating from the discussion.

The last section consists of data collected from the instructor's interview. The interview consisted of eight questions. Information such as employment information and personal information is noted. Furthermore, the instructor's views on immigrant women and literacy are stated. The instructor also gave her view on the ideal learning environment and the curriculum used in the course.

Background Information on the Participants

MARIA

The first participant's name is Maria. She is a 50 year old Italian speaking women. She lives in Montreal-North. She immigrated to Montreal in 1966. She completed the sixth grade in Italy. Although, she does not work now, she did work as a sewing machine operator in a factory. After her children were born, she began working at home under contract sewing collars, arms, and necks of coats. She is married and has three children, a daughter and two sons. Of her children, only her daughter is married. She does not have any grandchildren. Her children speak, read and write English, French and Italian; however, only Italian is spoken at home among family members. Amongst themselves the children speak English and French. This was her second literacy course in which she enrolled in January 2001.

KARINA

The second participant's name is Karina. She is a 62 year old women. She was born in Naples, Italy. She immigrated to Canada in 1972. Due to her mother's early death, she completed only first grade. Her mother died when she was six years old and education was not a priority at the time because she had to take care of her younger sister. She now lives in Montreal-North. She is married with two children. She does not work presently, but did work as a sewing machine operator in a factory. She has two children, a daughter and a son. Her son lives in Toronto and is not married. Her daughter lives in Montreal and has two children. Both of her children speak, read and write English, French and Italian. Her grandchildren speak, read and write English, French and Italian. She speaks Italian with her family members. In January, she enrolled in her second English literacy course at the centre.

ANTONIA

The third participant's name is Antonia. She is 62 years old and came to Canada from Calabria, Italy in 1955. She completed the third grade in Italy. She is a recent widow. For thirty years she worked in a cookie factory as a machine operator. She has three children and six grandchildren. Two of her children live in Calgary and are married with two children of their own. The other child lives in Montreal with two children as well. All the children speak, read and write English, French and Italian. Among all her grandchildren, only the ones living in Montreal speak, read and write English, French and Italian. The four grandchildren who live in Calgary speak, read and write English, and their Italian is very limited. Her grandchildren range in age from 8 to 14 years old. She speaks Italian with her family and grandchildren in Montreal. This was her second course at the centre in which she enrolled in January 2001.

ANGELA

The fourth participant's name is Angela. She is sixty-five years old and has been in Canada for 47 years. She completed the seventh grade in Italy. She does not work presently, but she did work as a machine operator in a factory for sixteen years. She is married with two children. Her daughter is married with two children. Her son has two children-one is 15 and the other is 13. Her children speak, read and write English, French and Italian. Her grandchildren speak, read and write all three languages as well. She speaks Italian with her family and grandchildren. This was her second English literacy course at the centre.

LEA

The fifth participant's name is Lea. She is 58 years old and came to Canada in 1963. She completed the fifth grade in Italy. She is married with three children. She had a

few jobs in her early life. She worked as a sewing machine operator for Champion Clothing, and she worked for several years as waitress in Ontario where she learned some English. She has three children who are 37, 35 and 33 years old. Her children speak, read and write English, French and Italian. Two of her children are married. She has three grandchildren who are 6, 5, and 2 years old. The older grandchildren can speak, read and write English, French, and Italian fairly well. The youngest can speak a little English and Italian. She speaks Italian with her family members. She enrolled in January 2001 and this was her first literacy course.

CONNIE

The sixth participant's name is Connie. She is 55 years old and has been in Canada for twenty-five years. She was born in Italy and lived there for five years. Then she moved to Argentina where she resided for twenty-five years. She did not divulge her level of education. She is married and has two children. She presently does not work, but she did work in a curtain factory as a sewing machine operator. Her children speak, read and write four languages, English, French, Italian and Spanish. She does not have any married children nor any grandchildren. At home she speaks Italian and Spanish with her family. The literacy course was her second course in which she enrolled in January 2001.

ANNA

The seventh participant's name is Anna. She is sixty years old and has been in Canada for 42 years. She completed the fifth grade in Italy. She does not work presently, but she was a sewing machine operator in a factory for twenty-two years. She has three children. Her children can speak, read and write in English, French and Italian. She has one daughter who is living in Europe and is not married. Her son and two grandchildren who are 11 and 8 live in Kingston, Ontario. In Montreal she has a son and two

grandchildren who are 1 and a half and 3 years old. Her grandchildren in Kingston all speak, read and write English and French. She speaks Italian at home and English to the best of her ability with her grandchildren in Kingston, Ontario. This was her first English literacy course at the centre.

NELLA

The eighth participant's name is Nella. Nella is 69 years old and came to Canada 36 years ago. She completed the fifth grade in Italy. She is married with one child. She does not work now, but she did work as a sewing machine operator for thirty years in a factory for men's coats. She has one son. He can speak, read and write in English, French and Italian. She speaks Italian at home with her family. This was her first course in English literacy. She enrolled in January 2001.

LISA

The ninth participant's name is Lisa. Lisa is seventy years old and immigrated to Canada in 1955. She completed the eighth grade in Italy. She does not work presently, but she worked in a factory for twenty years. She has two daughters who are married with children. Her daughters speak, read and write English, French and Italian. She has five grandchildren aged 16, 13, 13, 7 and 4. Two of her grandchildren live in Montreal and they speak, read and write English, French and Italian. The other three grandchildren live in Vancouver and speak, read and write English and French. She speaks Italian with her family in Montreal and French with her grandchildren in Vancouver. This was her second course that she began in January 2001.

CELESTINA

The tenth participant's name is Celestina. She is a sixty year old woman. She

came to Canada in 1968. She completed the fifth grade in Italy. She does not work now, but did work as a sewing machine operator for twenty years in a factory for men's clothing. She is married with two children. Her daughter speaks, reads and writes English, French and Italian. Her son also speaks, reads and writes English, French and Italian. She has three grandchildren. Two of her grandchildren are toddlers. Her eldest grandson is 10 years old. He speaks reads and writes English, French and Italian fairly well. She speaks Italian with her family members and English to the best of her ability with her grandchildren in Vancouver. She began her course in January 2001. This was her second course at the centre.

Why the Women Enrolled in the Literacy Course

Participants were asked "Why did you want to enroll in an English literacy class?" along with a sub-question asking them to answer "What purpose will learning English literacy serve in your life presently".

These two questions were treated as two parts of a question. In the section below I highlight similar and contrasting answers of the participants. The women stated several reasons for their enrollment in the course and they did not rank the reasons according to importance; therefore, I divided the reasons according to themes that they underlined. I felt the information would be more interesting and easier to comprehend if it were divided by themes.

Personal Development

Maria enrolled in the literacy course for personal reasons, as she affirmed "for myself". She has no problems communicating with her family because they speak all three languages. In terms of adapting to Montreal, she speaks French and mobility and

access to services has never been an issue. She enjoys the English language very much and feels that it is an important language to learn. Although she does understand it pretty well, she does not speak it fluently. Maria believes it is a very important language to acquire and she concluded her answer to the question with the statement “it is important for me to acquire it;” therefore, she felt enrolling in a course would enhance her personal growth and personal development.

Conversely, Karina made reference to her inability to communicate with her son’s friends and entourage in Toronto as the major motivating factor towards enrollment. Furthermore, she wants to be able to meet people when she goes on vacation where English is the major language spoken. These responses highlight her personal need to acquire the literacy for herself. Similarly, Antonia explained that she wants to engage in conversations with her children’s friends who reside in Calgary. Moreover, Angela feels she needs to improve her existing knowledge of English literacy in which she acquired in the September course. Likewise, Lea also wants to expand on the already pre-existing base in English. She had acquired a base in the language in her previous course at the centre and also in her time in Ontario. She believes that it is important for her to be able to communicate with her children in their second language-English that they tend to speak among themselves. Contrary to the others, Anna, Lisa, and Celestina want to be understood by their grandchildren. Anna stated that her husband takes no interest in her language learning and that she was their primarily for herself. Nella wants to pick up a few words so that she could be able to communicate better with people around her. Her son’s girlfriend speaks English with her son and she wants to engage in their conversations.

These statements are similar to the ones in Horsman's study (1990) where one of the reasons women enrolled in English literacy classes was for a better life for themselves (p. 105). Bertrand's study (1997) illustrates that women wanted to experience beyond their world of home and work (p. 100). Moreover, the women hoped to find a better paying job by improving their literacy skills. Similar findings were seen in Dighe's study (1996), cited in Medel-Anonuevo, (1996). Employment incentives vis-à-vis the acquisition of English literacy were also noted by women in Bee's study (1993) and in Cumming's study (1991). Based on my exploration of the literature review, a fundamental reason why women enroll in literacy programs is for personal reasons. The motivating factor for acquiring English literacy is to get a better employment or to be more socially independent.

Self-Confidence

Two participants expressed a psychosocial reason for participation in the literacy course. Anna enrolled in the course "to be more sure of myself". Similarly, Maria stated that "it is important for me" to be able to communicate and "move around freely in English environments". It is important to Maria's self-concept to acquire English literacy.

These statements are analogous to Bertrand's study (1997) wherein women participated in literacy programs to improve their self-concept (p. 84). Furthermore, Mwansa's study (1996) demonstrated that women enrolled to overcome insecurities (p. 192).

Personal Independence

Maria would like to speak with relative ease at local stores and shops. She would also like to go to medical appointments without her husband's assistance in translating

conversational pieces for her. It is important for her to be able to go to English speaking sectors and communicate with people. Karina often visits her son in Toronto and she wants to learn to speak English for her own personal independence. She would like to get by in grocery stores without anyone's assistance. She is also tired of her son translating conversations he has with friends. She would like to partake in conversations with his friends as well. Antonia expressed a need for English literacy so that she could communicate with airport attendants, passerbys, and her children's friends in Calgary. Angela wants to be understood by people when she speaks in English. She would like to communicate better in a predominately English speaking business office, at a doctor's appointment, and in shops. Likewise, Connie dreads another occasion where she could find herself struggling to understand an English speaking person in a commercial environment. Travelling freely to English shops and acquiring services in English are of paramount importance to Anna. Furthermore, Anna and Nella both want to be able to communicate better with the public. Lisa wants to be able to communicate without outside assistance with her American relatives. She too has a desire to venture to shops, and to business offices without outside help. Celestina expressed the same sentiments about not being preoccupied by language conflicts that may occur in public arenas in Vancouver and Montreal. English fluency can provide these women with a sense of personal independence and social integration. They are aware of the fact that English is a business language and is universal; thus, in order to venture to commercial centres throughout the world it is a necessity to acquire English literacy.

This sense of personal independence was underscored in such studies as Mwansa (1996) where the desire to be independent was a significant reason for participation in

both rural and urban areas (p. 196). These responses were similar to ones found in the research carried out by the University of Natal (Harley et al., (1996), cited in Bertrand, (1997) where learners had problems with everyday activities like shopping, going to the clinic, post office etc.. (p. 25). Furthermore, in Cumming's study (1991) the women sampled made it clear that their intention for improving their English literacy was to perform specific tasks independently in English (e.g. banking and major purchases) (p. 17). Likewise, the women stated that they wanted to interact more extensively with the English speaking population in Vancouver. Moreover, they wanted to make use of health care units, libraries, employment centres, and community support groups (p. 18). Dighe's study (1996) cited in Medel-Anonuevo (1996) revealed that the acquisition of literacy skills was perceived to be important in order to enable them to be independent, function autonomously and deal with everyday issues in an efficient manner (p. 104). Furthermore, in Black and Thorp's study (1997) one of the women, Nawal stated that she hoped to gain sufficient command of written English to make her socially independent (p. 22). Likewise, in the same study Maria wanted to be able to write cheques and keep control over the family business following the death of her husband (p. 20). Similarly Lilly, wanted to acquire an increased competency in English literacy in order to make her less reliant on assistance from external agencies, neighbors and friends (p. 19).

Learning

All the participants agreed that English literacy is an important asset for them to have in their given social environment. Maria believes that it is an important literacy to acquire because the English language is employed all over the world. Karina's incentive

to enroll is her appreciation of the language and her desire to learn English. Lea stated that she one of the reasons she enrolled was to pick up some new words in English. She had worked in Ontario for a few years, but wanted to improve her written and spoken English. Anna and Nella both enrolled in a French literacy course at the centre last year. They liked it very much and they expressed a strong desire to acquire as much information as they could to be socially independent. Lisa revealed that she purchased tapes, and books on both English and French literacy because of her immense appreciation for learning.

Most of the women expressed a strong desire toward languages. The students were there to learn a language they truly appreciated. They stated a need to learn practical skills such as writing, reading and speaking in English.

These statements are consistent with the findings in Bertrand's study (1997) where women attended literacy courses in order to learn practical skills such as being able to communicate in English, reading the newspaper and watching television in English (p. 106). Likewise, the women in Dighe's study (1996), cited in Medel-Anonuevo, (1996) had a personal reason for registering in literacy classes. Their main reason was that they shared a strong desire to learn (p. 104). Some thought if they could "learn a little" it would be very advantageous for them.

Family- In-Laws and Relatives

Lisa was the only women who stated that she enrolled in the course in order to communicate with her extended family. She has an eighty-two year old relative who cannot communicate with her. Likewise, Celestina and her son-in-law do not have a common language to communicate in and this makes her feel helpless. Similarly,

Antonia's son-in-law is Greek and she has to improve her English literacy in order to communicate with him. Therefore, these women may feel marginalized for they do not partake in conversations with certain individuals. Thus, English can serve a fundamental purpose in reducing that marginalization. Furthermore, it connects them to a wider social network that they are lacking. Their lack of English may stem from the insular lives they have led. The women live in secular communities where English is not a must. Therefore, with their children marrying people from other cultures their need to acquire the language is of paramount importance now.

These responses parallel the responses seen in existing literature on why women enroll in literacy programs. For instance in Black and Thorp's study (1997) one participant Mei Ping, wanted to acquire English literacy in order to help her husband in his work as an antique furniture restorer (p. 19). Similarly in Mwansa's study (1996) there is mention that the women participated for the sake of relatives (p. 196).

Children

Lea was the only woman that stated that she likes to speak to her children in English. They do speak Italian, but she likes to practice the language and converse with them. Connie stated that she wanted to enroll so that she could communicate with her two children. Although she speaks Spanish with her children, they speak English among themselves. She may feel shut out of conversations, for her children have spoken English throughout their childhood and adolescence. Therefore, the acquisition of English can enable her to be socially connected to her family.

In Black and Thorp's study (1997) some women such as Lilly and Mariam had to learn English literacy so that they could find a common literacy to facilitate

communication with their children (p. 19).

These findings are inconsistent with studies such as Mwansa (1996), Horsman (1990), Bertrand (1997), Dighe (1996), cited in Medel-Anonuevo (1996) that state that women participate in literacy programs for the sake of their children. In Mwansa's study (1996) children were considered a central reason for participation in a literacy program. The women participated because they believed that their education could ensure their children's success and improvement in school. (p. 196). In Dighe's study (1996), cited in Medel-Anonuevo (1996) the women sought to improve their English literacy in order to help with their children's literacy activities. They ranged from helping their children with their homework and monitoring their homework (p. 104).

Children's Friends and Affiliations

Some participants stated that they wanted to acquire English literacy in order to communicate with their children's friends. Karina would like to speak English with her son's English speaking friends in Toronto. Similarly, Antonia stated that she would like to be able to communicate with her children's English speaking friends and colleagues in Calgary. Nella wished that she could be able to understand the conversations her son has on the phone with his friends. Celestina also would like to communicate with her daughter's friends and colleagues in Vancouver. It seems that these women perhaps feel socially alienated when they visit their children and they have a need to socially integrate into their children's worlds.

These statements above are analogous to the findings presented in Cumming's study (1991) which showed how the women in the study needed to improve their English literacy to interact with their children's school officials and friends (p. 11).

Grandchildren

Antonia stated that her major reason for learning English literacy was to communicate with her grandchildren in Calgary, especially since they speak very little Italian. Lea also stated that she would like to learn English literacy in order to communicate with her grandchildren. Anna stated that her main reason for enrolling in the course was to speak to her grandchildren who do not speak Italian. She wants to be understood by her grandchildren. She feels that they consistently laugh at her because they do not understand her English. Although she wants to develop stronger ties with them, she presently cannot do so. Lisa hopes that the acquisition of English literacy would facilitate communication with her grandchildren as well. Likewise, Celestina stated that she enrolled in order to speak to her grandchildren in Vancouver who only speak English.

These women want to maintain a strong and active presence within the family and become a transmitter of domestic skills, cultural history, and folklore. Of the twenty-seven grandchildren reported, eighteen of them speak Italian in varying degrees. Therefore, a common communicative language is essential for these women to establish and maintain cultural and parental ties to their children's offspring. They have lived in secular communities for years and English has not been a priority to them. Having Italian speaking neighbors and husbands enabled them to raise their families without learning English; yet, their new role as grandmother requires that some women acquire English.

Black and Thorp's Australian study (1997) revealed that communication between grandchildren and grandparents was facilitated by the acquisition of English literacy. One immigrant woman, Mei Ping participated in a literacy program in order to write

stories for her grandchildren (p. 19).

Travel

A number of the women need English when they travel out of Montreal. Karina, Antonia, Lisa, and Celestina all want to acquire English literacy for travel purposes. For instance Karina stated that she visits many places such as Columbia, Venezuela, Florida and the people there are predominately English speaking. The others clearly need English for their regular trips to Vancouver and Toronto.

In the existing literature there is no mention of travel as being a motivator towards enrollment.

Time

A number of the participants stated that their retirement from their previous jobs motivated them to enroll in a literacy course. Previous time-constraints combined with family obligations hindered any kind of participation in formal education. Maria, Angela, Anna, Nella, and Celestina candidly said that they were not able to enroll in the past and they were not about to miss their opportunity now.

Cumming (1992) stated that immigrant women experience situational barriers preventing their access to literacy education such as responsibilities to children or extended family members and commitments to part-time work. Family responsibilities have been cited often in the literature as being barriers to enrollment into literacy courses. Horsman's study (1990) showed that the reproductive role of women, as mothers and caregivers, weighs heavily on women's time, energy and resources, which in turn influences women's participation in education. Raising children may limit women's participation in programs.

Horsman stated:

The presence of children and the full-time role many mothers must play in the care, feeding, play and schooling of their children, with no relief through daycare or other adults, can leave women with so little time, energy and sense of self that participation in a literacy program may be difficult. (p. 143)

Bertrand's study (1997) confirmed how family needs structure women's lives. Most of those women had difficulty finding time for their own educational needs and desire (p. 10). Similarly, Gumede (1995), cited in Bertrand's study (1997) stated that urban South African women's course participation is often hindered due to the time-consuming nature of the courses. In addition, Cumming's study (1991) stated that women had a desire to move out of life routines in which they were essentially bound to their homes, and family obligations, routines which occurred almost exclusively in Punjabi (p. 18).

Cost

Maria was the only woman who mentioned that she also enrolled because of the cost of the course. It was not as expensive as the other institutions such as private language schools where she sought information. The course only cost twenty-five dollars and a course at a private institution can cost up to two thousand dollars.

Bertrand's study (1997) confirmed how most of the women had difficulty finding money for their own educational needs and desires (p. 10). Likewise, Gumede (1995) cited in Bertrand's study (1997) stated that even when literacy course are available to urban South African women the schools are often costly. Conversely, in Cumming's study (1991) money was seen as a facilitating factor because the women came from affluent backgrounds and they could afford the courses (p. 10).

Social Interaction

Many women stated that the courses provided them with an opportunity to “get out of the house”. A salient example is given by Angela who feels “it is a good way to get out of the house in the wintertime”. Likewise, Lea wants a place to go and do something other than domestic chores. Furthermore, the course gives her an opportunity to meet new people. Anna finds that the course is not only a good way to get out of the daily grind, but also as an opportunity to meet new people. In other words these women want to break the social isolation they feel at home.

In Horsman’s study (1990) the women stated that programs provided them with a venue for social interaction with other women and helped diminish their isolation (p. 74). Most of the women were alone at home with her husbands. They all stated that they are consumed with family obligations and consequently felt constrained by home life. Thus, registering into an English literacy course served as an opportunity for them to meet new people and develop social skills in an educational setting. Moreover, in Bertrand’s study (1997), the women hoped to break the isolation they felt at home because some of them found themselves in a new town without any family and friends (p. 100). Similarly, in Dighe’s study (1996), cited in Medel-Anonuevo (1996) the literacy classes provided women learners with a social space away from home and offered them an opportunity to meet in a group to share their common experiences about work, family and illness (p. 104). In addition, Cumming’s study (1991) stated that women had a desire to move out of their life routines in which they were essentially bound to their homes and family obligations, routines which occurred almost exclusively in Punjabi (p. 18).

Peer and Family Pressure

Children, children's loved ones such as girlfriends, and the woman's friends, exerted significant pressure which motivated them to enroll in the course. Angela's daughter told her to do something with herself and suggested that she enroll in a course. Moreover, her niece's enrollment persuaded her and gave her an extra incentive to enroll. Connie's children also encouraged their mother to acquire a fourth language and told her she should enroll in a course. Nella stated that her son's girlfriend told her to enroll and learn something new for herself. Lisa stated that her neighbor near her home was enrolled and that was a good push for her. She was looking for a companion to go with to any course and her friend's enrollment enabled her to travel with someone and have a friend in the course.

These findings are consistent with findings from Mwansa's study (1996) where the strong influence of a friend or a relative was the more common and the stronger reason given for participation in the rural site of Zambia (p. 185). Similar studies in Britain found that in all cases, despite advertisements in newspapers and the mass media, the participants joined primarily as a result of support from interested friends or relatives (Charnley and Jones, 1979). Knowles (1980) has accordingly indicated that typically adult learners take part in literacy learning just because of friends.

Reading, Writing and Speaking

Overall many reasons were stated for women's participation in a literacy course; however, all the women stated their desire to acquire functional skills of reading, writing and speaking in English. Maria wanted to enroll to improve her speaking ability and in turn to learn new grammar rules and vocabulary. Likewise, Karina hopes to increase her repertoire of English vocabulary and to improve on her sentence construction

and speaking ability. For Antonia, an improvement in her speaking ability and writing skills are important to her. Conversely, Angela and Lisa want to improve on all three aspects of literacy; reading, writing and speaking. Furthermore, Lea would like to ameliorate her speaking and writing ability. Connie wants to acquire new grammar rules and improve her speaking ability. In addition, Anna, Nella, and Celestina want to improve their reading and speaking skills. Consequently, all the women reported that their major concern is acquiring verbal acquisition of English.

These findings are congruent with findings in Bertrand's study (1997) where women stated that they especially wanted to communicate better in English. They wanted to read the newspaper and understand English television programming. Mwansa's study (1996) stated that from the perspective of both participants and officials, learning to read and write for its sake was cited as an important reason for attending literacy programs. In Cumming's study (1991) women expressed far more interest in improving their reading skills and functional vocabulary rather than their writing skills.

Family and Community Influence

I asked the respondent the question "Did your husband, children, and /or the Italian community influence your decision to enroll in the course?" Six of the women, answered "no" to the question. Only one women, Anna stated that her husband gave her ammunition and an incentive to enroll. Her husband referred to her as stupid and told her that she could not learn the language. She further explained that his statement made her even more motivated to learn English- her goal was to prove him wrong. Karina stated that she received mixed responses from her friends, on her decision to enroll in an English literacy class. Some did not see the purpose of such courses, while others

supported her and stated it was a great way to learn. Connie stated that once her children and husband heard of her enrollment in an English literacy class, they were proud of her and continuously encouraged her to remain in the course. She stated their encouragement led her to stay in the course because she had serious family responsibilities that may have led her to eventually drop out during the session. Lea's daughter encouraged her to enroll and learn something for herself and improve her social interaction with others.

It would appear from these statements that the values and attitudes of the people in their lives motivated the women to enroll in the courses. The negative opinions and attitudes of community members and family did not demotivate the participants, instead they empowered them.

Students' Opinions of the Course

Since the interviews were conducted in March and April 2001, the impressions below only cover the first 3 months of the course. All ten women answered this question. Maria felt that it was a good course and was "good enough" for her. Karina stated she liked the course at the time. She did add that, she would have liked to have had more literature and do more reading in class. Yet, overall she really had enjoyed her time at the centre. The feelings were mutual for Antonia who stated that she liked the course and the instructor very much. Angela stated that she liked the course and that it interested her, however, she did express that her enthusiasm toward the course has diminished from the first day. She felt that she had not learned as much as she would have liked. Lea stated that she liked the teacher very much and that she liked the extra work the teacher gave her because of her proficiency in English relative to the others. On the same note, Connie stated the course was "mediocre" in her opinion. She felt that verbal practice of the

language was lacking in the course. Anna stated that she felt the course helped immigrant women to get out of the house and to receive some entertainment as well. Nella declared that she wanted to converse more, as she preferred to speak, rather than read or write. Lisa liked the course for she stated she has learned a few new words. She enjoyed the fact that she could have a formal language course that could clarify and explain the meaning of some English words she had heard before. She also liked taking down take notes and writing down information that she felt could be easily retrieved, once it was written down on paper and translated for her in class. Celestina liked the course at the time. She went on to say “that if one comes with the intention to learn, they will and the opposite effect is true as well”.

Perceptions of Ideal Learning Environment

At first this question was interpreted by most as- a two-dimensional question. Most of the participants thought it was directed to their present course and their personal opinion on their ideal learning environment. Eight of the participants answered the question “What is the ideal learning environment for you?”

Maria affirmed that she likes calm environments where everyone is in harmony. She feels that the women view each other as an extension of their family and offer each other support. Karina did not understand the question and even after an explanation, she refused to answer it. An environment that stimulates dialogue between the women is what Antonia believes is conducive to an ideal learning environment. Angela stated that she would like more verbal practice in the classroom. She likes English literacy courses that encourage dialogue and enable women to practice verbal English skills. Similarly, Lea confirmed that she prefers an environment

that welcomes dialogue; however, she does not like when people translate in their native language to simplify what they are learning. Likewise, Connie and Nella thought verbal practice was essential for any course, especially group conversations. Conversely, Anna asserted that the ideal environment is the responsibility of the instructor. She believes that if the teacher is good she will learn more. Lisa believed that stories are a good addition to a course curriculum. She likes the fact that stories are told in the course and then the students are given research to do on the subject matter. Lastly, Celestina chose not to answer the question.

Weekly Devotion to the Course

When I asked the question “How many hours a week do you study?” many of the participants took this question very seriously. For instance, Lea studies up to 5 hours a week, while Lisa and Celestina affirmed that they study up to 3 hours a day. Maria, Karina, Connie, and Nella stated they hardly do any work. They stated that they devote a maximum of three hours a week to studying English outside of their course. Whereas, Anna stated that she devotes one hour a week to the course work because she found it difficult to retain the information. She also feels that the Italian they speak at home inhibits her from practicing her English. She concluded that she does watch television and picks up a new word on a weekly basis. Lastly, Antonia and Angela stated that they either do not understand their homework or that they wait to do it in class with the others.

Favorite Subject/Component of Literacy in the Course

Participants were asked “What is your favorite subject/component in the course?” Maria stated that she likes the written work administered in class and for homework and

the grammar lessons. Karina and Connie like it when the instructor divides the class into groups to practice their verbal skills. Furthermore, Antonia enjoys the speaking and writing segments of the class. Angela and Lisa like it when the instructor teaches all three aspects of English literacy- reading, writing and speaking. Lea affirmed that she enjoys it when she is taught new words and grammar rules in order to construct longer sentences. Anna, Nella, and Celestina enjoy the reading and speaking sections of the class.

Focus Group

I met with the women in May-one month before the completion of their course in June. Angela, Connie, Anna, Nella, and Celestina agreed to be interviewed as a focus group. I asked the women 4 questions.

Personal Achievement so far

I asked the participants "What have you achieved so far?". Angela, Connie, Anna and Nella stated that they have increased their reading skills. Celestina feels that she has advanced. She has learnt simple verb tenses and likes the curriculum used in class. All the women stated that they found writing the most difficult part of the curriculum. They also feel that their initial aim of improving their verbal skills were not met; however, they do not blame it on the course entirely. They did want more practice in class, but they did realize their own effort outside the centre was lacking. During the focus group, the women sometimes interrupted one another, but in the end they all agreed that they have all learned new vocabulary, verb tenses and grammatical structures.

Improvement since January

I asked the respondents "Have you seen an improvement since January?" Angela said that she felt she has improved from her daughter's positive feedback

on her increased fluency and English vocabulary. She also feels that she has learnt a lot. Connie stated that she has improved her verbal skills, but that she does not use what she has learned at home because her children and her do not practice. Furthermore, the fact that they speak four languages at home does not help. They switch between languages often when they engage in conversations. She also has learned to read a little better. Anna stated that she has seen an improvement because when she speaks to her grandchildren they understand each other a little better. She added that she feels more at ease speaking with people and approaches English speaking people with more confidence. She feels that her reading skills have improved as well. Unfortunately, Nella stated that she does not have the opportunity to practice much. She only had a few occasions to test out her new skills with her son's girlfriend. She feels that she learned a lot, but feels that her retention level is not as good as she would like it to be. Celestina stated that she has seen "A big improvement in my reading and writing skills" and added "If I want to ask someone a question now, I can, I feel better now about it".

Two of the women above in varying degrees experienced an increase in self-esteem, independence and an improvement in literacy skills. All of the women saw an improvement in their verbal skills. Therefore, sociocultural and some psychosocial effects of the program were seen among the women. An increase in self-confidence, independence and the acquisition of literacy skills was seen in Cumming's study (1991) and in Dighe's study (1996) cited in Medel-Anonuevo(1996). Positive effects of courses were noted in Bertrand study (1997). The positive effects included the acquisition of practical benefits, and an increased ability to speak, read and write in English.

Definition of English Literacy

I had omitted the question “What do you think of when you hear the words English literacy or what is your definition of English literacy?” in the original interview. Therefore, I decided to ask it in the focus group. Only one participant answered the question. Celestina stated that “I think of speaking and saying a few words”. She obviously believes that English literacy is mostly about acquiring the language and not the reading and writing component of it. This answer underscores her need to communicate with her grandchildren and people in her environment as well.

What Can You do Now that You Could not do Before

The last question I asked the respondents was “What has the course enabled you to do now that you could not do before?” Angela, Connie, and Nella did not have time to answer this question. Anna believes that it depends on where she goes, but she feels a little more comfortable talking with people. The participant feels that she can now say a few more words. A few feel that they could understand their children more and foreigners when they go out of town. Celestina stated that she could now understand the television a little better for she has acquired more vocabulary.

Instructor’s Interview

Reason Behind Career

The instructor answered eight questions. The first question was, “What made you decide to teach immigrant women and literacy courses?” She responded that she did not have a choice in the type of students she teaches in her classroom. She likes her job and she has been mostly teaching immigrant populations for many years now. She is employed by the English Montreal School Board and she got an assignment to teach at

the centre for a term.

Career in Literacy Courses

The second question asked was “How long have you taught this/these course/s?” She has taught for the Montreal School Board for twenty-five years. She has taught a variety of classes, from the youth sector to the adult sector. She is presently teaching English literacy at this centre and at a Chinese community centre in Chinatown. This past semester she taught two literacy courses one at the Italian women’s centre and one in a Chinese centre.

Views on Literacy and Italian Immigrant Women

The third question I asked the instructor was “What are your views on literacy and immigrant women in general?” She feels that literacy is very important. She states that acute problems are related to lack of literacy. She gave the analogy that at home if a mother cannot read medicine labels it can cause severe problems. Therefore, she believes that women’s education is extremely important for their children’s upbringing.

Factors that Contribute to Enrollment

The fourth question asked was “What factors do you think contribute to the enrollment rate in literacy courses?” The instructor believes that the women are lacking English literacy. They also need something to do to keep busy. She also believes that it breaks their social isolation. She also has heard from former colleagues that they may enroll for the unconventional nature of the course. The make up of the curriculum also make the courses attractive. She believes that the lack of obligatory attendance and its low cost contributes to the high enrollment rates. She thinks the informal attitude a community centre motivates women to enroll. The centre is not an academic

setting wherein the women get evaluated and proficiency levels are assessed. The centre allows the women to learn something new and socialize at the same time. The women are even given a half-hour break where they speak to one another and at times eat homemade snacks baked by fellow classmates.

Benefits

The fifth question I asked the instructor was “What do you think the courses do for the students?” She believes that the progress they make in the courses increases their self-esteem. She also thinks that their progress gives them personal growth and personal satisfaction. She stated how Anna was so pleased when she filled out her own census form without any assistance. She also believes that the courses serve a functional purpose; they teach women how to read, speak and write in English. These skills enable them to function and cope effectively in present day society and integrate in mainstream society.

The instructor’s views on the benefits of the literacy course have been noted in such studies as Bertrand’s (1997) where trainers spoke about the ways that literacy class helped women by increasing their self-esteem, confidence, and independence. Therefore, this trainer believed that the course provided room for the women to move out of the social isolation they may have felt at home. Positive effects of programs have also been noted in the studies by Cumming (1991) and Dighe (1996) cited Medel-Anonuevo (1996).

Classroom Environment

The sixth question I posed to the instructor was “What do you think is the ideal learning environment for a literacy course?” She feels that letting everyone know that

they are of equal value is paramount in a classroom. Fostering trust, respect, and mutual understanding are also fundamental in a class. Speaking and giving women a voice is also essential. Collaborative learning is also essential in such a classroom and inequalities in proficiency levels are met with assistance from stronger to weaker students.

Brady and Hernandez (1993) believe that the marginalization of women can be eradicated by providing a space for them in the classroom to speak. The idea is also noted in Dighe's study (1996) which stated that the ambiance of the classroom must be such that women feel comfortable, relaxed and do not experience anxieties. Since women lack a social space of their own, literacy class must provide them with that space (p. 109).

Barriers to Enrollment

The seventh question I asked the instructor was "What kind of barriers do women experience when enrolling in a literacy course?" The instructor believes that women in general face many barriers to enrollment in literacy courses. She thinks that barriers such as time, family obligations, opposition from husbands, traditional attitudes of family members, money, lack of self-esteem, insecurity, and lack of support from friends and family hinder women from enrolling in courses. Barriers such as family obligations, money, and time were discussed and compared with existing literature on the subject. Yet, opposition from husbands is a topic often cited as a barrier in the existing literature.

In Bertrand's study (1997) literacy instructor's views on factors that create barriers to women's participation included women's relationships with men. Consistent with such studies as Horsman, (1990), and Dighe (1996) cited in Medel-Anonuevo, (1996), the trainers at Masifundisi cited women's relationships with men, chauvinism and sexist socialization as a major inhibitors to women's further education.

One trainer stated:

.....men are not supporting them, they are not supportive at all because you find in the most of the classes, some of the women, the men don't know, their husbands don't know they are attending classes, they hide the books or they would give their books to the facilitator.

Conversely, Cumming's study (1991) showed how husbands supported and assisted their wives in their language studies.

The instructor also believes that traditional attitudes from family members affect enrollment in literacy courses. Cumming's study (1992) stated that a psychosocial barrier such as traditional attitudes of family members and community leaders may inhibit or prevent literacy participation. This barrier was seen in Cumming's study (1991) on Indo-Canadian women.

Curriculum

The instructor spoke about the curriculum she uses in her course. The instructor at the time was using what she calls an "integrated" approach to English literacy. She incorporates both functional skills that have to be acquired with a critical approach to literacy. Her basic philosophy rests on the assumption that learners are self-directed, autonomous human beings that can learn on their own. This view is similar to Freire's belief that human beings have an inalienable right and ability to participate in their own education (Freire, 1970). She believes that the curriculum should be learner-centred, a process whereby learners are involved in setting their own goals and determining their own curriculum. These views are also based on the belief that individuals are not passive agents in their education. They have an active role and voice in their acquisition of a

literacy. Furthermore, she advocates Freire's approach to encourage active dialogue in the classroom that validates both voices, the instructor's and student's, their past experiences, and their pre-existing knowledge. She also applies Freireian principles such as his problem-posing approach to literacy. She tends to use parts of the problem-posing approach when necessary. She presents a representation or "code" to participants of a concrete situation which leads to nonjudgmental reflection which consists of the description of the situation, self-observation and putting self in the place of others (Doane, 1998, cited in Smoke, 1998, p. 160). Through these initial processes, generative themes are generated which encompass the way we think about and face the world. Generative themes is Freire's notion that curriculum should include themes and social issues relevant to student life couched in student vocabulary which can lead to reflection, action and change. This leads to the "action" phase which is made up of participants establishing what is the problem they need to solve, what do they need to learn and how they are going to learn and do it. This in turn generates the next level which is called collaborative co-investigation. It which poses new questions with a new set of codes. This process is a transformative one which validates the self of all participants (Doane, 1998, cited in Smoke, 1998, p. 160).

An example of this in a literacy class would be to find out what the learners already know. Whether it be a single point, a particular competency, a cultural investigation, or the interrogation of a posed problem, find out what the learners know (Doane, 1998, cited in Smoke, 1998, p. 163). The instructor does do this in her classes for all her learners have a small foundation. This is congruent with adult learning theory suggesting that adults learn best when instruction is contextualized in their life

experiences, related to their needs, and when they are involved in determining instructional goals and content. The instructor believes in using concrete, generally contextualized stories that the readers can relate to. She believes that the learners do not learn when the information is abstract and decontextualized. This means that the curriculum comes from within and draws on learners' cultural and personal histories; as such it may include telling, writing and reading stories about their own countries and cultures. The instructor welcomes stories from the classroom based on other cultures. She also encourages them to write about their daily routines at home. Furthermore, she welcomes discussions about national holidays in their native countries and stories of occurrences in their home. Moreover, a salient example wherein the problem-posing approach was employed was in an assignment the women were asked to do. One time in class the women were asked to write an essay on "who does the housework in the house". Housework became a generative theme that was used to stimulate discussion in class. It turned into a good discussion on how to challenge the oppressive structures of women's work in home and how to make them more equitable (Doane, 1998, in Smoke, 1998, p. 163).

Although, some time is allotted to women's personal experiences and topics that are controversial and may challenge sexist structures in society, the main focus of her curriculum is on the acquisition of skills for speaking, reading and writing. The women themselves told the instructor what they wanted the first day of class, the acquisition of English skills. The women did not have a need to critically analyze their present day situations or personal experiences. Luckily, at times, the instructor does generate discussion with the motive of enabling the women to critically analyze their situations.

Yet, overall she sticks to the students desire to learn skills. Although every class is different, she tends to spend the bulk of the class on teaching the mechanical aspects of English, and verbal acquisition of the language and welcomes other information later if time permits it. She feels that she should not elicit conversation on their personal lives. If the women chose to speak about a particular aspect of their lives, she does not discourage it.

Overall, her methodology includes language and verb tense drills, explicit phonetics, verb tenses, grammatical structures, reading material, comprehension articles, vocabulary fill in the blank stencils, games, and crossword puzzles. She also tends to draw heavily from textbooks she finds useful. One textbook she uses is entitled *Facts and Figures* from Patricia Ackert. She distributes a few chapters from that book to the women. One chapter I was given, deals with animals and stories about their habitat and their daily routines. Through that chapter students learn various names of animal, their lifestyles and foods they eat. Included in the chapter are review exercises and vocabulary quizzes. Another chapter deals with elevators, sign language and bodies of water in the world. The chapter has exercises to practice their newly acquired vocabulary and fill in the blank exercises to test their comprehension of the text. The instructor purposely chose these two chapters for they deal with things that the women may have seen or use on a daily basis. They are not abstract concepts and they can be grounded in their own experiences. For instance, the elevator article was chosen to inform the women of the utility of a piece of machinery that they use in their lives, but may not know why they use it. She believes that stories with a real context are better than stories with an artificial one. Furthermore, the animal stories are based mostly on mammals and she teaches the

relation they bear to humans for they both possess childbearing apparatus. This makes the acquisition of learning animal names and their characteristics easier for the women because they can relate it to themselves. Furthermore, most of the women come from rural backgrounds and they may have come into contact with the animals taught.

In terms of classroom teaching style, the instructor encourages individual self-directed learning. She sets aside a few minutes in every class so the women can work on material individually. She also asks the women questions individually. Furthermore, she is a strong advocate of collaborative learning. She believes for language learning practicing in groups is essential. Collaborative learning has been the most effective method in teaching literacy; specifically in a multilevel classroom. It encourages a creative atmosphere which facilitates students' ability to relate class activities with their own personal experiences (Panunto, 1999, p. 1).

The instructor has many constraints vis-à-vis her class. She has multilevels in her classroom. She has women who have more proficiency in English than others. Therefore, she feels her time is spent mostly on reviewing previously taught verbs and elementary grammatical structures with the slower students and creating advanced work for the stronger ones. She feels she has little time for an engaged and critical pedagogy in its purest form.

The existing literature on literacy programs addresses functionally based programs. The approach that she takes is definitely not one based on a functionally defined program. Feminist critiques have centred around the life skills component of basic literacy and job preparation programs through which women are taught. There have been few systematic studies of the contents of literacy program, but research from

Campbell (1992), Rockhill (1987), Dighe (1994) cited in Patel and Dighe (1997), Stromquist (1990), Patel and Dighe (1997) and Ekstrand (1987) cited in Stromquist (1990) report on the contents of programs. The programs seldom deal with the question of subordination and subservience either in the home or in the community. Likewise, the instructor does not address issues of subordination and she does not teach common subjects and skills for sewing. She does not advocate the traditional skills women are supposed to need such as childcare, nutrition , and family planing.

The centre also does not have a culturally relevant program. There are many characteristics stated by Cumming (1992) that constitute a culturally relevant program. For instance, the location of the classes are within the ethnic neighborhoods and at local centres with reputations for community service. The program is offered at an Italian women's centre but, the neighborhood is multicultural. The instructor is not from the minority population and cannot speak the minority language. Classes are not scheduled at times convenient for the participants. They are scheduled to accommodate the opening hours of the centre and the instructor's schedule. Yet, one aspect of the curriculum adheres to one principle of culturally based programs. The curriculum is partially based on participants immediate experiences, personal knowledge, perceived problems, and social interests and aspirations.

Conversely, her program does aim to promote gender consciousness and emphasize gender issues. As Stromquist (1990) believes programs should increase women's awareness of their oppression and exploitation. The instructor does not intentionally address issues of oppression, but welcomes discussion when they do arise on the subject matter.

The principles that guide the instructor's curriculum are analogous with components not only advocated by Freire, but other researchers in the field. The instructor does prefer involving the women's opinions in her curriculum. Yet, ultimately she decides what the women will learn. Her methodology is a combination of a functional and a critical approach to literacy. The program underscores components seen in functional, community-based and critical programs. A community approach incorporates all the characteristics of programs mentioned above. It is very comprehensive and gender sensitive vis-à-vis women. The only difference is that it advocates community participation.

Therefore, with all this said the instructor wants the women to acquire reading, speaking and writing skills. In addition, she would like to sensitize them to social issues as well. For instance, a conversation in class came up about love and it led to a discussion on divorce. She did not intentionally bring it up but the women spoke about it and problematized it. She does welcome engage pedagogy and wants all the voices of the women to be heard. Yet, her main goal is not to help the women understand the root causes of their subordination. She is not there to transform their lives for she believes serious personal matters really should not be scrutinized in class. She does encourage women to speak and if an issue does come up women are encouraged to critically think about it. Her main goal is to teach English literacy and have it grounded in their own experiences as much as possible. Social change is not on the agenda. Furthermore, as was seen in the reason why women enroll in the classes, they too are not there to critically analyze their lives but to acquire first and foremost some skills, independence, and social interaction.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the experience of ten Italian immigrant women enrolled in a literacy course at The Italian Women's Centre in Montreal. The relevant information about their lives consists of the following: background information such as age, year of immigration to Canada, educational level, marital status, employment history, family composition and languages spoken by family members.

The charts and table on pages 71-73 demonstrate that most of the female participants are between the ages of 50-70 years old. All of them have a limited amount of education. Some of the women may not be fully literate in own native language, which is Italian. They all immigrated after World War II and worked primarily in the textile industry as skilled workers. Their children are all literate in three languages: English, French and Italian. Furthermore, second generation Italian-Canadians (their grandchildren) are fluent in English and/or French but not necessarily Italian.

This background information has great bearing on these women reasons for enrollment in an English literacy class. The women find themselves illiterate in English and consequently, have a strong need to interact with English speaking family members, particularly their grandchildren. This generation gap between immigrant women and their grandchildren has created a communication barrier that may possibly threaten family ties.

Reasons Why the Women Enrolled in the Course

My goal was to explore reasons for literacy participation, first by locating them,

and secondly, by comparing them with the existing literature. Based on my study, women's literacy participation constituted the following: personal development and independence, self-confidence, motivation to learn, communication with in-laws, extended family and children, travel, tuition fee, social interaction, peer pressure, and finally acquiring reading, writing and speaking skills.

All of the above reasons underscore personal development. The women enrolled to become linguistically independent and no longer wanted family members nor people from the community to translate simple dialogues for them. Also to travel freely, without the need of a translator, was important to all the women. This sense of independence contributes to their personal development.

Their need to communicate with family members presents a sociocultural reason for enrollment. Their need to communicate with children and family members also leads to personal development. They want to preserve and maintain close ties to their family. This is substantiated by Phinney (1990) who stated that in Italian culture the family is of utmost importance.

Among the women, communication with grandchildren was frequently stated as an important reason for enrollment. Of the twenty-seven grandchildren, only eighteen are literate in Italian; therefore, this creates a communication barrier for the women. All the grandchildren are literate in English; however their grandmothers are not literate enough in English to fully communicate with them. This leaves the women almost no choice, but to acquire English literacy. Phinney (1990) states that there is a large amount of children of immigrants leaving predominately Italian communities. Most of the grandchildren who do not speak Italian, have moved or are being raised in English

speaking environments. If their parents do not speak or teach them their heritage language, speaking Italian does become a priority to them. Furthermore, the lack of proximity from these women's grandchildren only increases the need for a stronger relationship with them.

In addition to their need to preserve family ties, these women enrolled to decrease the marginalization they feel in mainstream society. Their lack of English literacy excludes them from conversations, social gatherings and English sectors of the city. Acquiring English literacy will enable these women to become fully participating in citizens in society.

Aside from the reasons stated above, the women expressed a need to be in English speaking environments. They believe that services offered in English speaking sectors may offer alternatives to the ones they receive in their own neighborhoods.

The least cited reason for enrollment was the cost of the course. The women did not seem concerned with money because tuition seemed very affordable to them.

Furthermore, the participants expressed a need for environments that promote a lot of dialogue such as, group discussions in the classroom. They hoped to achieve fluency in English through the guidance of the instructor. Their home environments did not allow them to practice much English for two main reasons: they have too many family obligations or they have no one in the family to practice with. However, they also liked the writing and reading segments as well. Grammar and the acquisition of new vocabulary were cited as their the favorite components of the course.

Focus Group

The focus group revealed that through varying degrees, the women have been

able to put into practice what they have learned in the classroom. Most of them, all wish to achieve stronger verbal skills in order to fully integrate themselves in their environments.

Indeed, the women noticed an improvement in their verbal skills. They do feel more confident speaking with people, and when the need arises, they do approach English speaking conversations with less inhibition. Their comprehension level as well as writing skills have improved as well. Overall, the program has benefited the women. Aside from the functional benefits of the course, sociocultural effects of the course were depicted with the facilitation to communicate with family members and society at large. Psychosocial effects included a boost in self-esteem and self-confidence.

Instructor's Interview

Because of the unconventional nature of this class, (nonacademic) these women had the opportunity to gain verbal acquisition of the English language. The course did not cost much, attendance was not mandatory and assessments were informal. Fifteen-minute coffee breaks were given which allowed women to chat about everyday occurrences and discuss material learned in the course.

Furthermore, the curriculum was designed so that the women can think critically and develop functional skills. It was based on their everyday experiences and encouraged students to discuss topics that they felt were important to them.

In the last six months, I have learned extensively about the population under study. I learned that these women's demands and goals are no different than other students taking courses in an non-academic environment. The women are looking for

integration and personal growth whilst learning. They placed great emphasis on language as a medium to strengthen relationships and interaction among members of society. Language fluency is one of the greatest tools we have for such growth and integration. Moreover, common language brings people together, maintains family ties, and fosters relationships. I believe language is one underlining feature that most people have in common and its preservation has positive effects for any ethnic group.

I have also learned that Italian immigrant women are strong people. They are proud of their cultural identity and their roots. I also learned that Italian immigrant women have personal needs that are often neglected- especially since they still continue to be the primary caretakers of the family unit. Having been consumed with family obligations, I saw much of my mother in these women. Getting an education is important, not only to their relationships, but for their self-concept and their sense of individuality which they have neglected over the years.

Limitations of the Study

The study had a few limitations and due to the small sample size, the results cannot be generalized to other minority populations. On the other hand, this study is quite specific in its focus because it deals with women of a certain age-group coming from a European background. Second, the study relies on interviews. Undoubtedly, retrospective bias can occur, especially when respondents are reporting events as far back as three decades ago. Third, it would have been better if I had more time with the participants, but I feel that data that was collected was sufficient for the nature of this study. Fourth, another limitation of the study was with a particular question concerning the definition of literacy. All of the women did not understand the question concerning the definition of

literacy. The women unanimously refused to answer it because they did not understand the question. However, when asked the same question in the focus group, one participant answered it to the best of her ability. Lastly, another limitation concerned the group dynamics when the focus group was conducted. The women interrupt each other and at one point, conversation got heated as some criticized the behavior of others in the classroom. Also, two women monopolized the time given to us during the focus group discussion, their extensive answers did not leave much time for others in the group to respond.

Future Research

Literacy programs for immigrant women offer a great service to society. It is evident, based on these women's responses, that most of their needs were met in the literacy program. Successful literacy programs should encompass a culturally-sensitive curriculum. This can be done by drawing in on students' personal experiences and their existing knowledge inside the classroom. Cuellette's report (1998) entitled *The Success in English Literacy Programmes in Quebec School Boards* stated that students wanted to learn about real life. They wanted to talk about subjects that made sense in their environment, discuss issues that were important in the society around them and which they did not understand. Moreover, most teachers found their themes for discussion and study by talking with students, which implied that they were flexible and ready to adapt to the students' needs and interests. There is a universal need for literacy and thus programs that are culturally-sensitive must be developed to accommodate existing cultures. Cumming (1992) states that mainstream education tends to favor the culture and practices of majority populations; therefore, the challenge for literacy educators of

minority populations is to create unique, participatory educational programs that address and capitalize on the cultural values, interests and aspirations of local minority communities. In reference to multicultural classrooms' curriculum, it can be designed to accommodate students' needs if it draws on their experiences and is made up of material that is relevant to the students.

This study can be of use to immigrant women who are interested in aspects of other immigrant women's lives. It can be of use to future studies on a particular female ethnic group. Moreover, it can serve as example for students who want to write about English literacy and minority groups. In addition, the Italian community can benefit from this study; specifically, first generation Canadian children who could learn about issues of social integration relevant to members of their family. It can help educators get a better understanding of the community as a whole, and what the sociocultural needs of women are, and help them attain personal independence and guide them through their own personal development.

A study using my interviews with an observational technique such as exploring the behavior of students in the classroom can add another dimension to a study. Also, the study with the use of a less structured interview guide can perhaps determine if responses would be the same as the ones found in this case study.

In this study I developed an understanding of the reasons behind female participation in literacy courses. I was able to explore their professional journey and pull out common threads and isolate incidents defined by them. Women as literacy participants have made and continue to make significant contributions to literature on women and education.

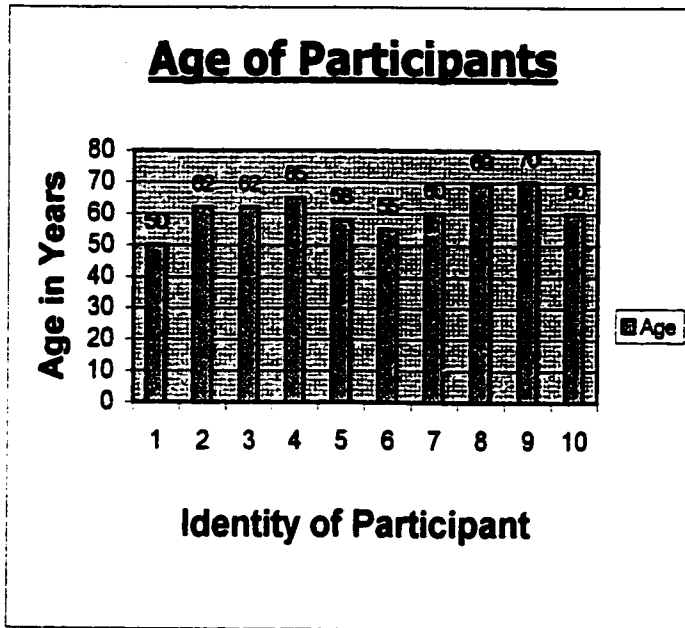


Figure 1

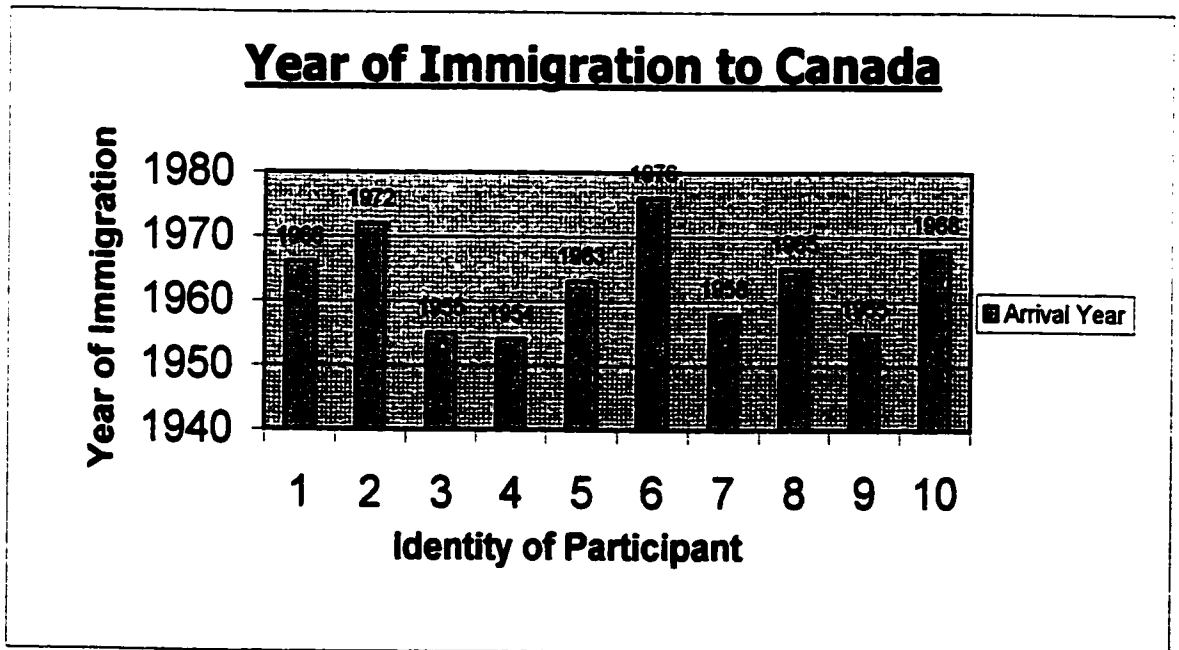


Figure 2

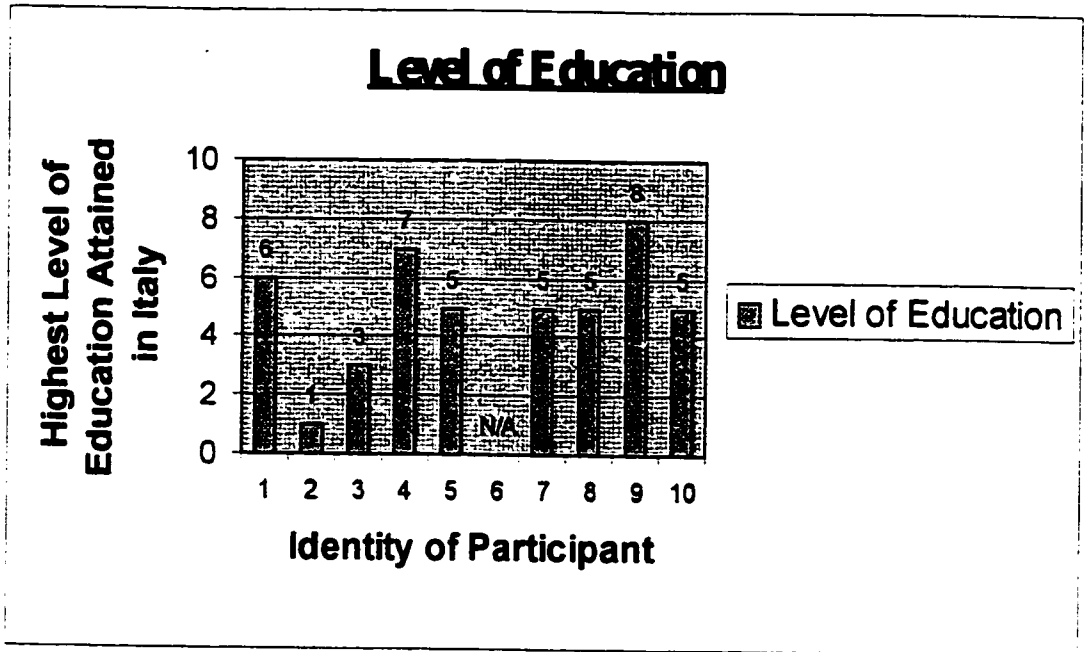


Figure 3

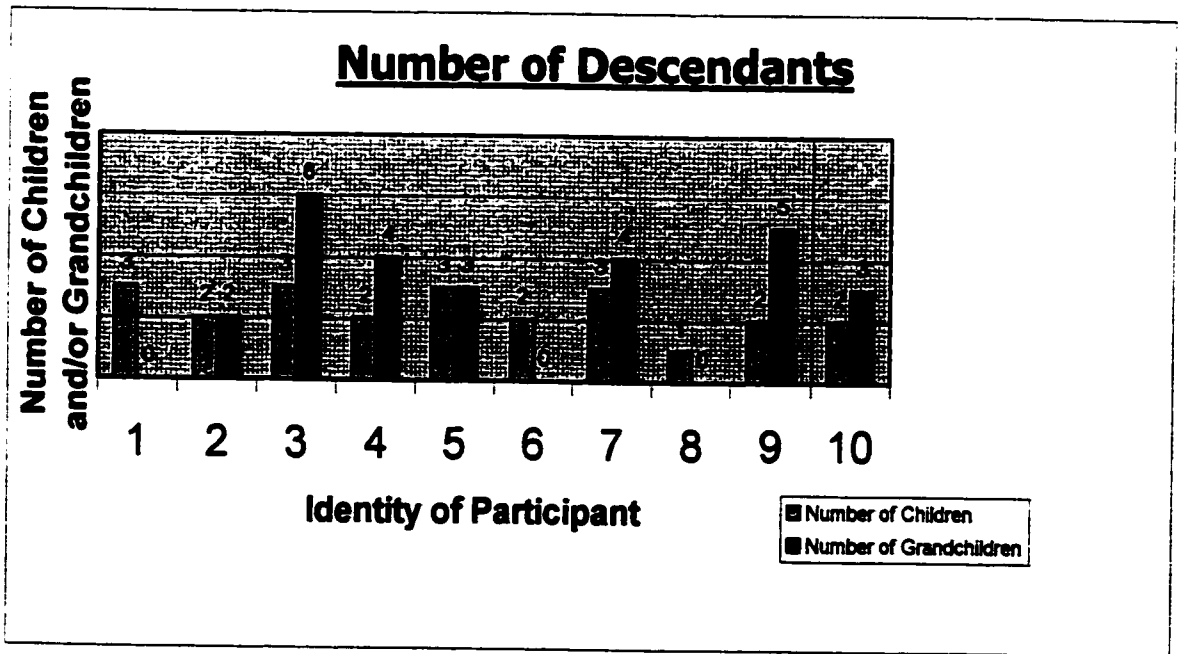


Figure 4

Languages Spoken, Written and Read by Children of Participants

Participants	English	French	Italian	Spanish
1	✓ 3/3	✓ 3/3	✓ 3/3	
2	✓ 2/2	✓ 2/2	✓ 2/2	
3	✓ 3/3	✓ 3/3	✓ 3/3	
4	✓ 2/2	✓ 2/2	✓ 2/2	
5	✓ 3/3	✓ 3/3	✓ 3/3	
6	✓ 2/2	✓ 2/2	✓ 2/2	✓ 2/2
7	✓ 3/3	✓ 3/3	✓ 3/3	
8	✓ 1/1	✓ 1/1	✓ 1/1	
9	✓ 2/2	✓ 2/2	✓ 2/2	
10	✓ 2/2	✓ 2/2	✓ 2/2	

Languages Spoken, Written and Read by Grandchildren of Participants

Participants	English	French	Italian	Spanish
1				
2	✓ 2/2	✓ 2/2	✓ 2/2	
3	✓ 6/6	✓ 2/6	✓ 6/6	
4	✓ 4/4	✓ 4/4	✓ 4/4	
5	✓ 3/3	✓ 2/3	✓ 3/3	
6				
7	✓ 4/4	✓ 4/4		
8				
9	✓ 5/5	✓ 5/5	✓ 2/5	
10	✓ 3/3	✓ 1/3	✓ 1/3	

N.B. Participants 1, 6, and 8 do not have any grandchildren. Furthermore, none of the grandchildren speak, write, and read Spanish.

Prepared by: Patricia Costantino

Figure 5

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Appendix A

Literature on Women's Reasons for Enrollment in Literacy Programs and Barriers to Enrollment

Further Information on Reasons Why Women Enroll in Literacy Programs

Several studies have focused on women's enrollment in literacy programs. These articles create a sense of the reasons why women participate in either further education or literacy programs.

Horsman's study (1990), on female participation in adult basic education (ABE) programs in Halifax, Nova Scotia showed that the participants' attendance was dependent on material conditions out of their control and was mitigated by other people in their lives. They participated for the sake of their own children (p. 15). She also found that they were negatively influenced by the label "illiterate" and had internalized and adopted the same vision of illiteracy. They also participated because they sought to find meaning in their lives, and often to pursue a dream for a better life for themselves and their children. Literacy programs also provided a venue for social interaction with other women and helped diminish their isolation. Horsman (1988a) found that women wanted both social contact and an educational event.

In Bertrand's study (1997), six South African women joined English literacy programs. They were eager to learn everything, they wanted to experience beyond their world of home and work, and wanted to know what was happening in their country and across the world (p. 100). They especially wanted to be able to communicate in English, read the newspaper and understand television programs in English. All the women hoped that improving their English literacy skills would help them get a better job so that would in turn gain more independence and control over their lives (p. 106). They also hoped to break the isolation they felt. Some women were in a new town without any family and

friends. Also, they wanted to be provided with a forum wherein problems could be discussed. Lastly, they also felt that participating would improve their self-conceptualization, organizational skills and structure their time (p. 100).

Research carried out by the University of Natal (Harley et al., 1996) cited in Bertrand's study (1997) included field visits to question learners about why they attended classes. The following factors emerged as motivators:

- Learners were concerned with getting a job and coping on the job.
- Learners sometimes felt shy and ashamed about being unable to read and write personal letters.
- Learners wanted to help their children with homework and were concerned that their children would not respect them if they were illiterate.
- Learners had problems with everyday activities like shopping, going to the clinic, post office etc.
- Learners expressed concern about being cheated in money transactions and being taken advantage of by officials.
- Learner's practices related to church required reading skills.
- Learners wanted to be able to write their name which was connected to a sense of pride (p. 25).

Mwansa's study (1996) stated that in Zambian literacy programs women enrolled for several reasons. The range of reasons were quite broad but consisted of the following: urging by a friend, overcoming feelings of shame, learning to read and write, overcoming fear and insecurity, and learning how to communicate. Participants had also cited

admiration for other people, the desire for personal independence and participation for the sake of their children, spouses or institutions to which they belonged.

Mwansa, (1996), and Lind, (1996) cited in Bertrand's study (1997) stated that in the international literature women consistently report concern with helping children with homework and increasing respect from family members as motivators to pursue education (p. 98).

Dighe's study (1996) cited in Medel-Anonuevo (1996) on the Total Literacy Campaign by the Delhi Saksharata Samiti in Ambedkarnagar, a resettlement colony in South Delhi conducted in 1991-1992 was based on one hundred women who completed the three literacy primers and were selected for the study (p. 103). Interestingly, most women did not need to be motivated by others to participate in the literacy campaign. Asha, a 45 year old women who was non-literate earlier said, "I thought when everybody is studying, even I should start studying and be part of the literacy campaign". Krishna Devi who was a non-literate earlier said, "Thought if I become literate, I'll be able to calculate and thus help my husband in business". Meera, a 35 year old married women who had studied up to class 5 earlier, joined the campaign because she wanted to improve her reading and writing skills so that she could teach others (p. 104).

The reasons and expectations for joining the literacy campaign were varied. Some just wanted to be semi-functionally literate- like signing their names, or reading bus numbers (p. 104). Others thought if they could "learn a little", it would be to their advantage while others felt constrained by their ability to keep bank accounts. Inability to teach their children and monitor their homework, was yet another reason for some. There

were, however, women who felt the need to acquire literacy skills for such personal reasons such as, the ability to read and write letters, even books (p. 104). They were also of the opinion that the acquisition of literacy skills would enable them to seek employment. Furthermore, literacy skills were perceived to be important in order to enable them to become independent, autonomously and deal with everyday issues in an efficient manner. Literacy skills were also perceived to be important for seeking employment or starting a small business. Finally, some were of the opinion that as literate mothers they would be able to teach their children how to read and write (p. 104).

These women had strong personal and social reasons for participating in literacy programs. A large number of them had a strong desire for learning and liked to attend literacy classes because they gave them an opportunity to meet others and to study collectively. Thus, literacy classes provided women learners with a social space, away from home and offered them an opportunity to meet in a group to share their common experiences about work, family and illness (p. 104). This social dimension of literacy has been commented upon by Horsman, (1990) and Dighe, (1992). According to them, literacy classes provide an opportunity to large numbers of women to break the isolation which is socially structured into their lives, giving them a chance to meet other women, and learn collectively- rather than learn singly as individuals (p. 108). These social reasons for participation are also seen in Stromquist's study (1994). It was found that unintentionally, literacy classes offered women an opportunity to meet a group of women with similar constraints and often, with similar experiences of poverty and subordination. Literacy classes provided these women in both studies with a space to which they can get

away from home (p. 111). Besides providing them with an opportunity for social interaction, there were others who felt that by coming to the literacy class they were able to “kill time”. More importantly, women had a personal reason for coming to literacy classes and this was their strong desire for learning (p. 104).

Barriers to Entering Literacy Courses

Women in General

Several articles have looked at women’s barriers to education. The following information below is an elaboration on the studies mentioned in the thesis.

Stromquist’s (1990) conceptual framework explains women’s illiteracy .She believes that physical, material and ideological obstacles work against women’s participation in literacy classes (p. 4). In general, women’s physical mobility is limited by patriarchal constraints. Social sanctions are required from the family members and the community when a women would like to attend a literacy class or participate in a group at the local level. Her limiting social contacts with the outside world also become an important determining factor in shaping her chances to become literate.

Horsman’s study (1990) on women’s participation in first language literacy courses confirmed how men’s power in the home worked against women’s literacy participation in subtle or overt ways. Some men resisted childcare, others threatened and carried out acts of physical violence to control and inhibit women’s participation. Horsman further contended that the reproductive role of women as mothers and caretakers weighs heavily on women’s time, energy and resources which in turn influence women’s participation in education. Raising children may limit women’s participation in

literacy programs (p. 10). She also contends that men, children and friends could have influence both through attitudes and through material existence.

Horsman's study (1990) examined the impact that the private world of home versus the public world of work and community had on the women. She theorized that women's lives were organized around other people which in her terms is a form of disorganization. This 'disorganization' of women's lives acts as a barrier to their participation in literacy classes and other forms of public life. Horsman determined that literacy was difficult to focus on, because the ways in which women's lives were organized or 'dis /organized' defines to such a large extent their literacy experience (p. 41). Furthermore, transportation in rural areas of the Maritime provinces in Canada is problematic and has been a barrier to women's literacy participation.

McGivney's research (1993) carried out in England confirmed the systemic nature of barriers to women's participation in further education. Women with young children were severely constrained from studying-full-time and part-time study was dependent on accommodations available with childcare (p. 10). McCaffery's study (1985) uncovered how family needs structure women's lives. Most of these women have difficulty finding time or money for their own educational needs and desires (p. 10).

Gumede (1995) cited in Bertrand's study (1997) stated that rural South Africans have the least access to literacy classes of any people in the country. In the case of urban women, even when classes are available, schools are often far from townships and transportation is inadequate, time-consuming, costly, and unsafe at night (p. 26).

Appendix B

Literature on Literacy Programs

Literacy Programs for Immigrant Women

The information below is an elaboration on studies and concepts mentioned in the thesis. Furthermore, a critique of the programs by researchers is given followed by examples of where the programs have been implemented.

Critiques of Functionally Defined Programs

Functional programs focus on preparing citizens to participate in the labor force. As was stated above in the definition section, a functional definition of literacy links literacy to individualism and capitalism-one becomes more literate in order to become a more productive worker (Campbell, 1992, p. 3). Campbell (1992) states “that in the past the idea that adults with low-literacy skills need reading and writing skills to participate as fully as possible in all aspects of life in society has served as a smokescreen for the state’s hidden agenda of productivity. Interestingly this smoke screen is disappearing as the state’s concern about the global economy ‘legitimizes’ productivity” (p. 3). She substantiates her claim with the fact that in Ontario, a community-based programs which were previously funded by the Ontario Community Literacy Grants Program will soon be funded by the Labour Force Entry/Re-entry program under the newly created Ontario Training and Adjustment Board. This shift in funding suggests that the state will only fund literacy programs which will prepare individuals to participate in the labor force. There has also been an increase in the number of educational programs or opportunities for illiterate adults. In this view, education is promoted as the great equalizer, the institution that provides citizens with the tools they need to participate fully and productively in mainstream society.

In other words, literacy is a prerequisite to equality and all individuals must be treated in a similar fashion to ensure fairness.

Rockhill (1987) argues that “in the process of establishing literacy as a universalistic formula through which equality can be realized, literacy is treated as though it occurs in a vacuum. Thus, all learners are treated the same” (p. 158). In spite of equality, many literacy programs do not differentiate between the students’ race, sex and gender and concentrate instead on providing the same curriculum to all students. This is done with the hope that these students will acquire literacy, a measurable commodity which one can get by attending a class or completing a set of workbooks. Since literacy is considered to be a commodity, it has been packaged into neat little programs by educational publishing and computer companies (Campbell, 1992, p. 4).

Several programs around the world have focused on the acquisition of functional skills. The Dighe study (1994) cited in Patel and Dighe (1997) showed that despite Total Literacy Campaigns (TLCs) training to literacy volunteers, which emphasized participatory teaching in the classroom, the literacy volunteers felt more comfortable using the formal methods of teaching literacy. Even discussions on themes of literacy primers were minimal. In other words, the main emphasis remained on imparting technical skills of reading, writing, and numeracy to the learners (p. 7).

The feminist critique centres on the life skills component of basic literacy and job preparation programs through which women are taught. There have been few systematic studies of the contents of literacy programs for women. Although it is common knowledge that materials seldom address the question of subordination and conflict either at home or in

the community. The case of the official literacy programs in India, by far the most studied country, revealed that literacy programs there have never challenged the ideal of the Indian women as a person who is “loyal, faithful, passive, submissive, self-sacrificing, and self-effacing” (Stromquist, 1990, p. 106). A study of seven primers used in North India by government agencies and non-governmental organizations revealed that the main content was housework, child care, and family planning and that, “besides questioning dowry, frequent pregnancies and one or two other social evils, these primers questioned nothing else. Not even mentioned, let alone challenged, is widespread male domination, the double burden of work on women, and different kinds of discrimination practiced against women” (Patel & Dighe, 1997, p. 7). Ekstrand’s study (1987) cited in Stromquist’s article (1990) stated that the content of other Indian literacy programs reported that the curriculum for women’s literacy primers emphasized immunizations, kitchen gardening, and breastfeeding.

A detailed analytical study of literacy primers used in the six states of Bihar, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamilnadu and Uttar Pradesh revealed that despite emphasising “women’s equality” as one of the core values of the literacy curriculum of Total Literacy Campaigns, the literacy primers in fact promoted the ideology of domestication in so far as women are concerned and failed to promote critical understanding of women’s subordination in society. The content of the literacy primers neither challenged the existing gender division of labour nor questioned discriminatory practices against women in society. Overall women’s principle responsibility remains within the confines of the home and it is the nurturing, nursing, caring role as the mother and as a housewife that is emphasized in the primers (Patel & Dighe, 1997, p. 8).

Patel and Dighe (1997) stated that the acquisition of literacy skills by a women is considered to be important, in order to increase her overall efficiency as a housewife. The basic thrust is 'blame the victim' so that women can be blamed for lack of initiative, lack of information and incorrect attitudes. There was no attempt made to a develop critical understanding among women of reasons for their caste, class and gender oppression. From an analysis of the literacy primers, it is apparent that TLCs are envisaged as a safe literacy program for upholding patriarchal values besides promoting the benign role of the state (p. 8).

Stromquist (1990) focuses on poor and rural women in developing countries. She notes that a capitalist, patriarchal society reproduces sexist relations by only funding literacy programs which affirm the existing sexual division of labor, that is, traditional definitions of women as wives and mothers (p. 105). When literacy skills are offered, they are combined with other traditional skills women are supposed to need such as child care, nutrition, and family planning. Reports of government literacy programs in Botswana and Tanzania indicate the same emphasis on the domestic role of women rather than on preparing them for formal employment; this occurs despite the identification of income generation as an objective of the literacy programs (p. 105).

Thompson (1983) cited in Campbell (1992) further believes that adult education is reinforcing inequality between the sexes by "defining women exclusively in stereotyped, domestic roles and appendages of husbands, home and children" (p. 44). The social and political structures determine the relevance of women's literacy to society and subsequently what literacy programs are relevant for women. In India for example, the state is concerned

with the effects of women's literacy on the "desirable" national goals (Ramdas, 1990). The document which outlines India's National Literacy Mission focuses on the role of women as reproducers (Campbell, 1992, p. 11). In Alberta, Canada, Foundations for Adult Learning and Development Policy (1990) views adult basic literacy as an educational process which involves the acquisition of basic skills in three areas: communication, living, and reproduction. Living skills as defined by the Government of Alberta refers to "knowledge of health, sanitation, nutrition, family planning, the environment, management of the family economy and the creation and maintenance of home" (Campbell, 1992, p. 12).

Many researchers have voiced their opinions on what they believe should make up and be included in literacy programs. Stromquist (1990) presents a program which can promote gender consciousness and emphasize gender issues. Speaking on behalf of rural women, she contends that women need information to increase their awareness of oppression (i.e., the existence of patriarchal ideology and the diffused forms of cultural subordination) and exploitation (inferior pay and treatment in the labor market) (p.107).

Furthermore, she notes that programs must balance the information women know with knowledge they need. Because of their poverty women are more interested in learning skills for income generation than for literacy and gender consciousness (p.107). However, she believes that literacy programs must go beyond nutrition, health, and family planning and move into consciousness-raising and mobilization. Women also need skills that will allow them to earn more money, address survival needs better, and gain autonomy. Women need to learn literacy in the context of real life applications of the written word in programs that do not see women as passive elements. The teaching methodology must be

participatory and democratic so that it increases self-confidence and self-respect. As Bhasin (1984) remarks, women need knowledge “not so much to read and to understand the world but to read, understand and control their world ” (p. 107). The contents of literacy programs should therefore address local realities to show how these realities have been distorted.

Stromquist states that programs must be dialogical by involving women at various levels of program design and implementation. In Cumming’s study (1991) on Indo-Canadian women the curriculum content was perceived to be relevant to the women’s intentions as its major topics were developed in consultation with the participants and stories linked to women’s personal concerns and interests (p. 14).

Stromquist (1990) presents concepts above that are analogous with empowerment and empowerment methodology as primary components of a program. Empowerment methodology refers to using women’s personal knowledge as part of their social development, locating literacy in women’s social practices, and involving women in determining their educational needs and developing their own strategies at various levels. They believe the creation of knowledge and information through material production should take into account women’s experiential knowledge in various fields, relevant to them. Stromquist (1990) attempts to grapple with the theoretical base of empowerment. She argues that empowerment in its emancipatory meaning is a concept that brings out a broader analysis of human rights and social justice. In the context of patriarchal society, empowerment is a process to change the unequal distribution of power, both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society.

In India, one of the earliest attempts to provide meaningful education to poor women was made through the Women's Development Program (WDP) of India (Patel & Dighe, 1997, p. 9). The starting point of these programs is an investigation of the socioeconomic reality by women, an examination of the problems faced by them, a process of critical analysis leading to collective action against injustices suffered by them in the home, and the work place and society. Literacy is thus not seen as an end in itself limited to teaching the 3Rs alone but as part of an overall strategy of empowerment. Patel and Dighe (1997) also found that besides a flexible and learner-centered approach, the use of folk songs and literacy games break the monotony and the repetitiveness of learning and makes learning more enjoyable and less daunting for women (p. 7).

Community-Based Programs

Community-based literacy programs began emerging in the late 1970s as an alternative to traditional upgrading programs offered through colleges and school boards (Campbell, 1992, p. 12). Consequently, these programs have chosen to stress a human development (social demand) orientation as opposed to a labor orientation. In a participatory study, Gaber-Katz and Watson (1991) named the fundamental elements of a community-based program as learner-centredness, literacy from a critical perspective, and community building. The element of learner-centredness is described as encompassing "a commitment to active learning, a process whereby learners will be involved in setting their own goals and determining their own curriculum" (p. 8).

Feminist Educators' Views of Community-Based Programs

Many feminist educators have advocated a community approach towards literacy programs. Mackeracher (1989) cited in Campbell (1992) calls for literacy programs which would “allow women to explore their own experiences, make “sense” of them, and promote this sense into personal concerns and public issues. These experiences can be best understood, not as remedial education, but as transformative participation in better basic education ” (p. 385). Ramdas (1990) states that women want literacy in their own terms. It must be practical and relevant to their lives (Campbell, 1992, p. 13). Women’s adult learning can play an important role in making them aware of their many legal and political rights and helping them shape their own lives as full participating citizens. Often this kind of education is combined with teaching literacy, life skills and community participation (Belanger, 1997, p. 5).

The community participation approach first takes into account women’s experience in their own communities and then gradually introduces them to basic education and literacy teaching. Thus, it affirms women’s existing knowledge and skills initiating a process of critical questioning and analyzing with regard to issues such as survival or discrimination within the family. Promoting the new role of women as active adult learners is not just a matter of transferring skills, but is an opportunity for women to use their skills and to deal with structures of power (Belanger, 1997, p. 9). Some projects illustrate how women’s education and empowerment can be a complementary process.

Feminist researchers are only beginning to explore what literacy means through a women’s eyes. Horsman’s study (1988a) was a seminal study because it documented the women’s words on the subject of what literacy meant to them. Horsman interviewed twenty

maritime women who were students in adult basic education (ABE) programs to explore their experiences of literacy. She found that women in the literacy program wanted both social contact and an educational experience.

Some community-based programs are at least encouraging women to write down their own stories which document the past and present day to day realities of their lives. In fact, a few programs have gone a step further and published the women's writing for public information. East End literacy, an urban community oriented literacy program based in Toronto, has become internationally known as a publisher of students' stories. One of the publications entitled *My Name is Rose*, is a photo-story about physical abuse. It was written by one woman and produced in collaboration with other students, volunteers and staff. In the writing of *My Name is Rose*, McBeth and Stollmeyer (1989) cited in Campbell (1992) mention the difficulty Rose has in naming her experience by saying "Rose did not know the words of many things she wanted to say" (p. 53).

In Bertrand's study (1997) the women who had attended literacy classes at the Museum classes, which are based on Xhosa history, provided an opportunity to remember and write about Xhosa cultural heritage. The students discussed and wrote short stories about art, games, religion and beliefs from their culture which they published as readers at the end of the term. The readers were published in January 1997 and serve as primers for literacy students at the museum (p. 83). The trainers at Masifundisi work to bring about political awareness among the students. Discussion included the achievements of the government of national unity since 1994 and how citizens can play a greater role in society (p. 96). They want their students to understand how the reconstruction and enrollment program works. Bertrand stated that the literacy trainers had a social

conscience and awareness of the issues in their students' lives (p. 102).

Critical Theory Based programs

Hooks (1988) spoke of moving from the personal to the political in a classroom by integrating critical analysis with discussion of personal experience. In developing countries, female adult educators who realize the possibilities and limitations of Freire's pedagogy are redefining Freire's 'generative word process' to create a feminist pedagogy which addresses women's specificity and differences. The generative word process entails the identification of key words which will generate a discussion of the women's "social reality and develop confidence in their abilities to both know and change the world" (Parajuli & Enslin, 1990). A literacy program in rural Nepal, which uses the generative word process, "provided a forum in which local memories of women's power and subordination in the past shaped the struggle for survival and identity in the present" (p. 54). The key word 'daurra' firewood triggered a discussion amongst women about how increasing scarcity of firewood and fodder was causing them to walk longer distances to collect it. The facilitator encouraged the women to place their experience within a cultural and historical framework.

Older women began to narrate the stories of 30 years ago when the forest of Chitwan had been cleared for resettlement. They remembered how powerful men had forcibly claimed portions of the common grazing lands and gradually diminished their access to fodder. They questioned what they had gained and lost in the pursuit of development. They asked: is this mode of development suitable to women's identities? Can you development be achieved only at the expense of commons, forests and water sources? (Parajuli and Enslin, 1990, p. 47-48)

The women composed a song and declared the need for women to join together to plant trees. The program provided a case study of how to move from the personal to the political (Campbell, 1992, p. 16).

Bertrand's study (1997) the Masifundisi Literacy Organization is a community based literacy group that is ideologically linked to the liberation struggle and continues to promote community development and empowerment through literacy. This group teaches reading, writing, and speaking skills as well as basic skills such as filling in forms and following instructions (p. 32). For instance, one trainer stated that the trainers were concerned by the fact that violence against their students was a part of their lives and they discussed strategies to deal with this situation: the Masifundisi trainers attempt to address this problem in the classroom to help women work towards solutions (p. 90).

Yes... maybe a women is beaten by a man and then we discuss that while we are learning ... what is happening here, does this situation also happen in your township or do you know somebody who's being beaten... and then while we are taking about that, some open and say why they left marriage, its because of that. (p. 90)

Culturally Relevant Programs

Cumming (1992) complements the above research with a discussion about culturally relevant programs for literacy classes. He states that mainstream education tends to favour the culture and practices of majority populations; therefore, the challenge for literacy educators of minority populations is to create unique, participatory educational programs that address and capitalize on the cultural values, interests, and aspirations of local minority communities. Cumming's study (1991) on Indo-Canadian women revealed that the women's decision to participate in formal education at this time was also shaped

by several features of the particular program of ESL literacy instruction provided, features which may not be available in other ESL or literacy programs locally, making other programs virtually inaccessible for the women. As noted above, a principle program support was on site child care by other Indo-Canadian women. Of equal importance was instruction from an experienced teacher who was a member of the women's ethnic community, cognizant of their social situations, willing to accommodate their initial, traditional expectations for teacher-centered instruction, and able to communicate with them in their mother tongue when necessary or appropriate for administrative purposes or clarification. All of the women also remarked that the location of the ESL literacy program in their neighborhood was another factor which prompted them to attend these classes (p. 14).

The Dighe's study (1996) undertaken on the Total Literacy Campaign in South Delhi showed that that some of its characteristics promoted women's participation. For example, the literacy classes for the most part took place in the immediate neighborhood of women learners; the literacy volunteers largely came from the same milieu as the learners and were in most cases known to the learners (Medel-Anonuevo, 1996, p. 111).

Quigley (1990) has suggested that the values presented through materials and trainers in literacy programs reflect the values of the 'dominant' white culture, and therefore may alienate African learners (p. 26). Reddy's (1991), cited in Bertrand, (1997) interviews in Natal revealed that people often did not know that educational programs exist. Gumede (1995) cited in Bertrand's study (1997) states that rarely are the learners asked to construct their own curriculum. Gumede stresses that women especially may be tired in the evening from working, walking, carrying out chores, and finding ways to

make ends meet during the day. The scheduling of classes may be at odds with people's preferences (p. 27).

Appendix C

Interview Questions

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/DOMANDE FATTE DURANTE L'INTERVISTA
Queste sono le domande per le Donne Italiane Del Centro Donne Italiane

For the Women: Per le Donne

1. How old are you?

Quanti anni avete?

2. When did you immigrate to Canada?

Quando e che siete venuta in Canada?

3. What was your highest grade completed in Italy?

Che studi avete fatto in Italia?

4. Have you ever been married?

Siete, o siete mai sposata?

5. Do you work?

Attualmente avete un lavoro?

b) What kind of employment did you have, if any?

Che impiego avete avuto, se avete lavorato?

6. Do you have any children/grandchildren?

Avete dei figli, o dei nipoti?

b) What language/s do they speak, read and write?

Che lingua parlano i vostri figli e i vostri nipoti?

7. Is this your first course?

E questo il primo corso che prendete?

8. Why did you want to enroll in an English literacy class?

Come mai desiderate iscrivervi a questo corso di alfabetizzazione inglese?

b) What purpose will learning English literacy serve in your life presently?

9. Did your husband, children and/or the Italian community influence your decision to enroll in this course?

Vostro marito o i vostri figli hanno, in qualche modo influenzato la vostra decisione?
La comunità Italiana vi ha influenzata nella decisione di prendere questo corso?

10. What do you think of the course?

Qual è la vostra opinione sul corso?

11. What is the ideal learning environment for you?

Qual è secondo voi, l'ambiente ideale per imparare?

12. How many hours a week do you study?

Quante ore per settimana studiate?

13. What is your favorite subject /component in the course?

Qual è la vostra materia preferita a scuola?

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What have you achieved in the course so far?
2. Have you seen an improvement since January?
3. What do you think of when you hear the words English literacy or what is your definition of English literacy?
4. What has the course enabled you to do now that you could not do before?

INSTRUCTOR'S INTERVIEW

1. What made you decide to teach immigrant women and literacy courses?
2. How long have you taught this/these course/s?
3. What are your views on literacy and immigrant women in general?
4. What factors do you think contribute to the enrollment rates in literacy courses?
5. What do you think the courses do for the students?
6. What do you think is the ideal learning environment for a literacy course?
7. What kind of barriers do women experience when enrolling in a literacy course?
8. What does your curriculum consist of?