
Facilitating Self-Esteem and Social Supports in a Family Life-Skills Program

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A preliminary study of a statewide life-skills job-readiness program in which 116 female Temporary Assistance to Needy Families recipients participated found that significant gains made in curricular areas were positively correlated with self-esteem and social supports. The responses to a qualitative survey and ethnographic data revealed these women's strengths and the ways in which gender may have facilitated positive outcomes.

Previous evaluations of welfare-to-work efforts have stressed the need for comprehensive programs that address the various needs of the primarily female participants. They have documented the importance of including preemployment, life

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skills-based components (DeBord, Matthews, Canu, & Parris, 1997; Kunz & Born, 1996; Rangarajan, 1996, 1998; Woods & Paulsell, 1995) and of recognizing and building on participants' strengths to enhance social supports and motivation (DeBord et al., 1997; Neenan & Orthner, 1996; Southward & Baird, 1997).

BACKGROUND

Social Supports and Self-Esteem

That many women are involuntarily assigned to TANF welfare-to-work programs exacerbates their life stressors and sense of disempowerment. Social supports can be used to buffer such stressors and empower women. The literature, however, notes that for women, affective (emotional) supports are more important than instrumental (tangible or concrete) supports (Bailey & Wolfe, 1996). For example, Sansone (1998) found that welfare participants who perceived themselves to have higher levels of both *belonging* support and *self-esteem-enhancing* support had lower levels of dependence on welfare and fewer barriers to participation. Similarly, Wijnberg and Weinger (1998) found that practical (instrumental) support, such as help with child care or job leads, was rewarding for those who provided it but was not sufficient for those who received it without the addition of emotional supports "that may enable single women to cope in the long term with the demands and pressures of their dual roles" (p. 215) as working mothers.

Emotional support is also linked with enhanced self-esteem, which often is compromised for women because of the stigma associated with being on welfare. Furthermore, low self-esteem exacerbates these women's lack of optimism about their abilities and any program's utility in moving them from welfare to work (Elliott, 1996; Kunz & Kalil, 1999). Some evaluations have confirmed that the principal mission of first-step life-skills classes is to build self-esteem (Pavetti, Olson, Pindus, & Pernas, 1996), on the theory that self-esteem improves motivation (DeBord et al., 1997), enhances resilience in facing challenges

(Pavetti et al., 1996), and encourages positive attitudes toward achieving self-sufficiency (Olson & Pavetti, 1997).

In summary, research has found that although job-related skills are important, preparing individuals to be workforce ready also involves tackling issues of empowerment, self-esteem, and social supports (O'Brien, 1998). Therefore, a personalized approach is required that recognizes the special skills and experiences, as well as "the strengths, resilience and determination of individuals on public assistance and [structures] a program to enhance those characteristics" (Southward & Baird, 1997, p. 3). A successful approach also requires an examination of the relationships among life-skills training, gender, and the language barriers that often prevent women from revealing their own strengths.

Gender, Life Skills, and Language

Life skills (i.e., home and family responsibilities, such as serving nutritious meals, budgeting for everyday existence, and using organizational skills to balance family needs with the demands of work) have been viewed historically as women's tasks. Because the majority of women in this society are in the workforce, the dilemmas of balancing work and family responsibilities are more prevalent today than in the past for all women, regardless of their income or marital status. However, the combination of the feminization of poverty and current TANF mandates are forcing women with few resources and significant barriers to find ways to manage home responsibilities and enter the workforce.

Many women, regardless of their welfare status, have acquired knowledge, skills, and experience that would qualify as life skills but are not necessarily recognized as such. This lack of recognition mirrors societal views of housework and women's work in general. In the transition from a preindustrial society, in which housekeeping was considered a contribution to the economic well-being of the household, to an industrial cash-nexus or money-mediated society, in which work was redefined as paid labor that has market value, many of

women's life skills in the modern world were devalued (Bernard, 1982).

DeVault (1990) addressed the issue of the devaluation of women's skills by examining the problem of linguistic incongruence. This incongruence arises when the naming and categorizing of women's experiences is devalued because the "language itself reflects male experiences, and its categories are often incongruent with women's lives" (p. 96). Linguistic incongruence greatly affects women's abilities to explain the worth of their own activities. For example, it is difficult for women to describe their activities as precisely "public" or "private" or "work" and "leisure" (DeVault, 1990, p. 97) because women's activities cross several boundaries.

The notion of women's work as "invisible work" (Daniels, 1987), coupled with the inability to describe fully one's skills or experience, affects many women. However, this may be a greater problem for women who are mandated to participate in TANF job-readiness, life-skills programs, because such programs further blur the distinction between home life and work life by recognizing that some of the same skills are required for both. Although participants may view life-skills curricula as useful, they may assume that others view their skills in this area as substandard, when in fact, they may bring valuable knowledge to the program. As with women in general, they may have been socialized to devalue their knowledge and may be unable to articulate what they know and can achieve in terms that are generally acceptable according to the traditional meaning of *work*. Although contemporary feminists have addressed this problem for women in general, they have sometimes neglected the problem for economically marginalized women. As Jiminez (1999) pointed out, women on welfare are sometimes discussed as though they were children, and "rarely have the voices of poor women been heard in the debate over their fate" (p. 291).

In summary, research has stressed the importance of life-skills training as a part of welfare-to-work programs, with a focus on both concrete curricular areas and building self-esteem and social support. The literature has also noted that

although life skills have always been defined as central to women's lives, they are devalued, unrecognized, or unexpressed. This article presents some of the findings of an evaluation of a job-readiness program that is offered as part of New Hampshire's plan to implement a welfare-to-work strategy, a program whose participants have been predominantly women with young children. Taking a feminist stance, the authors describe the ways in which a distinctively female interaction style, as well as the strengths of these women, emerged as important factors that influenced the program's outcomes. Finally, they discuss the implications of these findings for future policy and program planning.

THE PROGRAM

TANF participants in New Hampshire who are deemed able to work begin the welfare-to-work process with an initial job search and assessment period. All participants who are not referred to programs to prepare them to obtain general equivalency diplomas or who have not quickly obtained employment then move into the job-readiness program. The program discussed here, Leadership for Employment, Achievement, and Purpose (LEAP), is the major such state-approved activity. The LEAP curriculum, which was developed by the state university's Cooperative Extension, consists of the following three life-skills components: food and nutrition, money management, and balancing work and family (the development of both parenting and personal skills). Recognizing that women's learning is often tied to issues of self-concept, empowerment, and perceived support (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), the program also tries to enhance the women's self-esteem and facilitate their development of social supports.

LEAP is delivered in a small-group format (4-6 participants) and in 12 sessions over a 3-week period (75 hours). It is conducted at 12 sites in the state by Cooperative Extension staff (all women) who are trained in the curricular areas as well as in the state's TANF system and in the strengths of and barriers faced

by the participants. The instructors are usually from the districts in which the sessions take place and are familiar with local community resources.

The curriculum has a lecture-discussion and applied-learning format that includes hands-on activities and field trips. Individualized attention is emphasized, as is the reinforcement of participants' strengths and ability to succeed. Expected behaviors in the workplace are also stressed, and participants are encouraged to help set and enforce norms of attendance, punctuality, and conflict resolution. The overall goals of the program are to teach the curricular content, empower the participants to find services to which they are entitled, and enhance the participants' self-esteem and use of social supports.

THE STUDY

Method

A quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design was used to measure the participants' gains in knowledge and desirable practices in the three curricular areas, as well as in self-esteem and social support. A member of the evaluation team attended the first and last meetings of each group at a majority of the sites each month. At the pretest, the participants were informed of the purpose of the research and were assured that their participation was voluntary. Demographic information, including household composition and the types of assistance received, was then collected from those who agreed to participate.

Knowledge and practices in the three curricula areas were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Social support was measured using 10 selected items from the Social Provisions Scale (Cutrona & Russell, 1987), and self-esteem was measured using Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Additional posttest questions asked about sources of support, satisfaction with the program, and changes in perceptions of barriers to employment and concerns about work.

Ethnographic data were also collected on site by the authors during the pretests and posttests. At the posttests, the authors spent time with the participants after the last class to ask for their feedback and with the instructors to collect information on the participants' attendance and the successes and/or stresses of the particular class cycles. Field notes were submitted monthly by each author and then coded and summarized to add qualitative data to the more standardized data collected during the pretests and posttests. In addition, 3-month follow-up telephone interviews were conducted to track the participants' employment status, as well as any barriers or concerns the participants had in attaining self-sufficiency.

Sample

The participants were recruited for the life-skills classes through the offices of the state's welfare-to-work program. As of May 31, 1999, the program, which began in March 1998, had conducted 32 sessions statewide and had enrolled 148 participants, 127 of whom completed the program (a completion rate of 86%). Of those who completed the program, 117 (116 women and 1 man) signed consent forms agreeing to participate in the study. This analysis is based on data from the 116 women who completed the program.

Of the 116 women, who ranged in age from 19 to 62 years ($M = 31.84$, $SD = 7.19$), 9% were married or living with a partner, 45% had never married, 32% were divorced, 11% were separated, and 3% were widowed; 65% had no other adults living in their households. Most were White (86%), and the remainder identified themselves as Hispanic (5%), African American (4%), or Native American (3%); and 2% did not report their race-ethnicity. In addition, 39% had one child, 34% had two children, 22% had three children, and 5% had four or more children. More than three quarters of the participants had at least a high school education.

Overall, most of the participants were White, had at least a high school education and a history of employment in service-sector or factory jobs, and were living with one or two young

children (almost half with preschool-age children). All reported receiving some type of governmental assistance and having minimal additional sources of financial support. Although this demographic profile may not be typical of TANF recipients in many states, it is fairly typical of New Hampshire's welfare-to-work population (*Welfare Reform Evaluation*, 1999).

FINDINGS

Life Skills, Social Support, and Self-Esteem

Although the women made statistically significant gains in all three curricular areas (Wichroski, Zunz, Forshay, Knight, & Hebert, 1999), it was evident that they came into the program with certain competencies. For example, they scored high on the pretest in knowing the importance of food and nutrition, understanding how their income might change as they moved from welfare to work, and providing their children with emotional support. The women felt less confident about their abilities to cope with stress and manage anger in their families. There were no statistically significant differences in gains by any demographic variables, except that the Hispanic group had lower gains in the work and family section. It should be noted, however, that the Hispanic group had scored higher than the other groups at the pretest, indicating that they felt more confident in this area before they started the program (Wichroski et al., 1999).

As Table 1 illustrates, there were weak to moderate positive statistically significant correlations among gains in all three curricular areas, as well as in self-esteem and social support; that is, those who did well in one curricular area tended to improve in others and were more likely to show greater improvement in self-esteem and social support. The two strongest correlations were between balancing work and family and money management and between balancing work and family and self-esteem. These relationships indicate the

TABLE 1: Correlations: Life Skills, Self-Esteem, and Social Support (N = 116)

	<i>Food and Nutrition</i>	<i>Money Management</i>	<i>Work and Family</i>	<i>Social Support</i>	<i>Self-Esteem</i>
Food and nutrition	1.00	.506**	.516**	.344**	.397**
Money management	.506**	1.00	.597**	.212*	.499**
Work and family	.516**	.597**	1.00	.402**	.546**
Social support	.344**	.212*	.402**	1.00	.403**
Self-esteem	.397**	.499**	.546**	.403**	1.00

*Significant at the .05 level. **Significant at the .01 level.

importance of self-esteem and social support, which are discussed next.

Social Support

Each of the 10 items in the Social Support Scale, chosen from the Social Provisions Scale (Cutrona & Russell, 1987) was analyzed separately and combined into a total score. The higher the score, the more perceived social support, on a scale of 1 to 3 for each item and 10 to 30 for the total score. The participants came to the program feeling fairly confident about their social supports. Most scored high on whether they had an emotional bond with at least one other person but scored somewhat lower at the pretest on thinking of themselves as part of a larger support network (a group of people to count on) and on the ability of their support network to make them feel respected and secure.

The participants' scores on all 10 items on the Social Support Scale improved significantly ($p < .000$) at the posttest, with high reliability at both testing times (alphas: pretest = .9053; posttest = .8886). The social support scores were 24.57 ($SD = 5.22$) at the pretest and 26.93 ($SD = 3.94$) at the posttest, indicating that the program was successful in boosting the participants' perceptions of their social supports.

Although there were no statistically significant differences in gains in social support by education, marital status, or region,

there were differences by race/ethnicity in that the Hispanic group reported significantly lower gain scores, yet their pretest scores were comparable with that of the other groups. This finding warrants further investigation, particularly because of the extremely small size of the Hispanic sample. One explanation worth exploring may be that this group is more likely to adhere to a cultural norm that relies on informal sources of support through family and friends rather than on formal sources, such as people in a class.

Of the participants who answered the question of whether they had increased their support network through the program, almost all (94%) said yes. Of those who thought they had gained support, 68% offered explanations (some more than one) and their responses were categorized fairly evenly between those who gained instrumental support and those who gained emotional support. Slightly more than half (53%) reported that they gained instrumental supports when their instructor and other participants shared information about community resources. Examples of this type of support are illustrated by the following statements: "I understand better how to find work and about networking"; "I now know I have more resources out there I can rely on"; "I've gained more knowledge of my benefits, programs designed for people in my situation."

In addition, 42% of the participants said that their ability to find and use emotional or affective supports had increased. Three representative statements include the following: "Knowing I'm not alone, and it feels good to have the support of the people in the class to work through just about anything"; "I've realized that I can turn to caseworkers and other people on the state team"; "I have gained several different ears to listen to me."

Finally, 10% of the participants made additional statements that reflected that they had a greater ability to find sources of support because they had more confidence in themselves—themselves a form of self-support. This ability was reflected in statements such as the following: "I have more confidence in dealing with tough situations, and I feel I can find supports within myself"; "I feel I have more confidence to figure things out on

my own without panicking first." This finding was supported by the findings on self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), consisting of 10 indicators with a possible total score of 10 to 40, was used to measure self-esteem at the pretests and posttests. The alphas for this sample on the pretests and posttests were .8659 and .8924, respectively, indicating fairly high reliability for the scale. The means on the pretests and posttests showed a statistically significant increase ($p < .000$), with the mean pretest score just above the midpoint at 26.54 ($SD = 5.77$) compared with 31.26 ($SD = 5.40$) at posttest ($p < .000$). These scores were comparable with the mean scores (27.8) found in a recent study with a similar population (Barusch, Taylor, Abu-Bader, & Derr, 1999). There were no statistically significant demographic differences in the gain scores for self-esteem.

Qualitative data indicated increases in both general self-esteem and self-efficacy, a more specific concept often tied to empowerment. Gains in self-esteem were evidenced by comments such as, "I just simply feel better about myself." Gains in self-efficacy were illustrated by the following statements:

I didn't feel sure of myself before. . . . I would let some of my children rise up to me. Now, thanks to [the program], I have learned to say "no" to my older children. I don't feel bad about saying "no," and I really feel better about myself.

I was worried about managing work and children and how I'm going to still have time for a good relationship with my daughters. Now I know how to manage.

I was worried about how I was managing my money and dealing with anger. I was concerned about how well my family was eating. Now I feel much better about using what I know. I know now I'm in control of my circumstances and can change them to make life easier.

I thought the class was going to be more hard, but it made me feel a little more smarter than I thought. It was perfect the way the class ended my being late.

I feel more able to make day care decisions than I did before. I guess I just feel more capable of a lot of things than I did before.

These and other such statements reflected enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy, combined with new knowledge in the life-skills areas, changes in self-defeating behaviors, and a greater ability to use both new and previous knowledge and skills.

Female Interaction Patterns

The ethnographic data collected on site by the authors were useful in identifying some of the facilitators of and barriers to achieving the program's outcomes. It was consistently noted, for example, that a distinctive change in atmosphere occurred between the pretest and posttest. In general, the participants appeared to be happier, more familiar and comfortable with each other, and more engaged in the program by the last session. Although these may be common features of group dynamics in general, the dramatic change was noteworthy in that many participants were openly nervous on the first day and some were negative about participating in the group, perhaps because it is a mandatory activity under circumstances that engender a sense of disempowerment. One instructor said that the members of her group told her they were angry with her when they first came to the program but felt bad about giving her "a hard time" by the time the program ended. That they could share those feelings openly with her was an indication of how well rapport had been established.

Several examples of group camaraderie and mutual support-cohesiveness were reported, for example, in the offer of rides and the exchange of phone numbers. Some spontaneous discussions of child-rearing practices and the sharing of stories and pictures of their children demonstrated the participants' interest in each other's children, as well as concerns about child and family safety issues.

Empowerment and self-esteem were evidenced by the participants' pride in initiating activities (e.g., shaping their own rules for the class) and ability to voice dissent in a positive (sometimes jocular) way. Another expression of empowerment was demonstrated in an exercise at the end of one group in which the participants were asked to come up with their own mottos. Some examples include the following: "I'm OK, you're OK"; "I can do it by myself, for myself."

The small-group format seemed to allow for individual attention from the instructor and for all to be engaged, promoting a sense of intimacy rather than an impersonal classroom atmosphere. For example, one participant remarked that she most enjoyed the "fellowship of the group" and feeling that she was not alone in her situation. She also stated, "Men fall apart—cave in—but women are stronger. I learned that here." Another participant said that she saw herself as a mentor to the younger women in her group: "I want to let them know that there is life out there for them." The following statements indicated similar feelings: "I loved sharing and listening. I'm now a better support for others"; "The knowledge of others and their difficulties and struggles helped me"; and "The [instructor] allowed us to share our experiences and get solutions from each other."

Other reports by the authors corroborated the literature on women's difficulties, articulating their strengths and abilities, especially in the area of what is thought of as women's work. The following comments by the participants illustrate this phenomenon: "I learned a lot of good things I was already doing, but I know now how to put a name to them"; "I knew most of it already, but I watched myself and others get better. I know what to call things now"; "I had a problem getting out the right words, but [the instructor] kept us going until we got out what we wanted to say." Although the importance of finding language is quantitatively difficult to illustrate, it emerged as a factor in the qualitative data on group dynamics and shows the ways in which strengths were identified and reinforced as the

women attempted to define and talk about their experiences and knowledge, as well as their problems.

DISCUSSION

The women in this study showed significant gains in their perceived knowledge of food and nutrition, money management, and balancing work and family, as well as in self-esteem and social support, from the pretest to the posttest. Furthermore, those who made gains in one area tended to make gains in others. That gains in the life-skills curricular areas were correlated with both self-esteem and social support indicates the importance of integrating both into the program design.

Although the participants came to the program with their own knowledge and experiences, an obstacle to the full recognition of their strengths is the lack of language, which hinders the ability of all women to articulate "women's" skills in a way that recognizes their value. An interactive style that allowed the women's strengths to emerge, including open discussions and permitting the women to define their own experiences, may have contributed to the gains these women made. These features mitigated what might have become a negative atmosphere, given the disempowering demands of some TANF welfare-to-work rules. Thus, a more paternalistic style of transmitting knowledge was avoided, and attempts were made to boost the participants' self-esteem through a distinctive gender-affirming interactive style.

Several limitations of this study should be mentioned, including the possible effects of repeated testing over a short time, the small number of minority women, and the lack of a comparison group. For example, the extent to which the group cohesion described here may have been gender based cannot be fully corroborated without a comparison of a mixed group or a group of men. In addition, it is worth noting that all the instructors and authors were also women. The lack of a comparison group begs the question of whether groups should be segregated by gender, for example, and whether doing so

would even be feasible or desirable. Another issue is the possible lack of consistency among groups taught by different instructors, because the presentations might have varied even though the actual curriculum was the same.

Until postprogram tracking is completed, it is impossible to assess fully the long-term outcomes for these women in terms of either the sustainability of their gains from the program or their actual movement toward economic self-sufficiency. However, information obtained on 68 (59%) of the participants at the 3-month follow-up indicated that 35.3% found jobs and the remainder had moved on to other components of the welfare-to-work program, such as on-the-job training or some form of subsidized or alternative “work for benefits” experience in the public or nonprofit sector. Of those who were employed, only half were working full time, and more than three quarters of the participants did not get employer-sponsored health care or retirement benefits. At the follow-up, most of the women continued to express their satisfaction with the program (rating it 8.38 out of a possible 10), and 58.1% said they had kept in touch with their coparticipants. On the other hand, the most frequently mentioned concerns reported were child care, transportation, and health problems, which continued to be persistent barriers to permanent, sustainable employment. On the positive side, 65.5% reported that they gained knowledge from LEAP about where to go and how to advocate for services they needed. They also said that the program helped them build positive relationships with their employers, coworkers, and/or the staffs at various state offices. A larger follow-up sample should provide more definitive data on the long-term outcomes of the program.

On the basis of the findings, we offer the following recommendations for future planners of life-skills programs: (a) Allow the women to play an active role in their own learning; The program should focus not only on the identification of barriers and problems but should draw out the women’s strengths; and (b) Pay attention to the nuances of women’s responses and cut through the lack of language available to validate certain aspects of their experiences. To do so,

instruments must be provided in appropriate languages, bilingual instructors must be used when necessary, and evaluators must include the voices of these women in their analyses.

Finally, the women responded positively to participating in the research and sharing their insights and suggestions, and participating gave them another opportunity for empowerment. Thus, the same principles of active listening that are helpful in a life-skills program are also recommended for researchers who are attempting to evaluate programs by learning more about the experiences of women under the current welfare reform initiatives. The feminist literature can be enhanced by including the voices of one of the most marginalized groups of women.

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