





*Facilitating Reflection
about
Self-Concept*

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Introduction

In 1999, after 12 years in the field of Early Childhood Education and Development, I accepted a position working as the adult literacy coordinator at the Learning Centre in Hanna. One of the responsibilities of my position was and continues to be to coordinate the adult literacy volunteer tutor program. I embraced the change and felt a renewed sense of finding the perfect employment opportunity to complement my interests and experiences.

Eager to participate in all opportunities for professional development, I found a manual for *Writing Out Loud* (Morgan, 2001), a program that offered participants a way to achieve both personal and academic growth through creative writing. I had been searching for a way to connect learners to one another and to offer a support circle to the women who shared the bond of being intimidated by the written word. I felt the program would suit learners' needs perfectly so I enrolled in an online course and became certified as a *Writing Out Loud* instructor. As a course practicum, I facilitated an ongoing writing group with learners in my program.

To introduce the VALTA topic to learners and support staff in the Learning Centre, I created two bulletin boards outside my office. The theme of the first board was, *Are you in the right frame of mind to learn?* I used clip art, and a copy of an aboriginal medicine wheel, a display on holistic learning, suggestions for optimizing personal study space, and the thought-provoking question *"Is violence an issue?"*

Who are you was the heading for another bulletin on the topic of self-concept. The silhouette of a woman surrounded by questions encouraged reflection. Both boards also held handouts and telephone numbers for support services in the area.

Through the weekly writing group,¹⁹ the participants created a strong bond with one another as they developed trust and shared personal life stories. Writing prompts were simple and left room for as much or as little freedom as participants desired. It soon became evident that each of the participants had compelling stories to tell. Many of the themes were the same: recalling feelings of embarrassment, shame, or inadequacy in some area of their life. I quickly recognized that in many ways I wasn't able to address the needs of the learners. I had not been trained to respond to the learners who had experienced violence in their lives. Learners

¹⁹ I wish to acknowledge the women from the Hanna Literacy Program *Writing Out Loud* group for opening their hearts and souls on this journey of reflection and discovery.

sharing stories of past or current abuse in their lives left me feeling unsure of my own role or wondering how I could serve as a support to those in my program who were so clearly reaching for it. I wanted to be able to foster learners' abilities to move their lives forward in positive and productive ways.

I began searching for something more to offer learners.

Coincidentally, a pamphlet for the *Violence and Learning: Taking Action* Project crossed my desk. I enthusiastically responded to the application and was invited to join. I recognized the VALTA Project as an opportunity to expand my knowledge on the ways in which violence, or experiences of violence, can affect lives and learning for many individuals, even in the years after the experience.

As I participated in the VALTA workshops and online course, I continued to work with the writing group and to explore ways to apply what I was learning in my program.²⁰ As the course progressed, I was more intent about responding more thoughtfully to the situations learners shared with me. My interest in fostering their abilities to move forward in their lives led me to do a *Changing Practices* research project about self-concept.

The Research

When contemplating the topic for my *Changing Practices* project I started by considering the needs of those who came to the program to improve their literacy skills. As a coordinator, I had quickly learned that my role is multi-faceted. Individuals who join literacy programs often bring concerns in their personal lives that can make it difficult to learn. They often lack confidence that they can stick to a program and meet their goals, so the coordinator assumes the role of cheerleader, enthusiast, and supporter.

Time and again I revisited the concern I had regarding the way learners felt about themselves. They didn't really seem to believe in their own capabilities, which was made evident by their repetitive use of phrases such as: "I can't," "I won't ever," "It's no use,"

²⁰ I also applied the knowledge I gained through the VALTA Project into other areas of my life. I led a weeknight violence awareness workshop with eight junior high boys. They discussed the impact of violence on their lives and on society in general, and created posters and planned how to form a group to speak out against violence in their world. I also facilitated a weekly writing group within the school system for students referred by the school resource counselor. This provided the opportunity to address issues of violence and learning with the 15 children in the program. While none of the children were directly involved in my *Changing Practices* project they benefited from what I had learned as a member of the VALTA team.

“It’s hopeless,” “I’ve been told” and “I know I’ll fail.” I wondered how anyone could have success in a literacy program if they didn’t truly believe in themselves.

It’s weird how it can change. One day I think I am so smart—look at me—I brought up five kids, but then another time I think to myself—you’re just stupid and you’ll never learn—someday people will find out how dumb you really are and then what?

Here’s some advice I guess for people when they think kids don’t matter. They do. Kids turn into adults like me who feel bad most times because of those things that weren’t supposed to matter back then. I remember and for a long time I thought I was rotten and that was why I wasn’t loved. I was un-loveable. Hmph, takes a long time to change your mind.²¹

One of the questions that kept returning to me was “Had past negative experiences of the literacy learners in my program—experiences they were now sharing in the writing group—influenced their self-concept?” I felt strongly the answer was yes. In my readings I found:

It is ultimately our ability to withstand or understand the treatment we receive as children that determines what we think about ourselves as adults. (Vanzant, 1998)

Inside each of us rests a silent message about what’s expected of us. We may never say it out loud, we may rebel against it, refuse to do it, but somehow we always know what it is. And it has a powerful effect on how we run our lives. (Sher, 1994)

I was led to wonder what I as a literacy practitioner could possibly do to help the learners see themselves in a more positive light. Was it even possible?

Clarifying My Question

I started to plan my project with the question, “How can I change literacy learners’ self-concept?” While *self-confidence* is defined as the “faith in one’s own judgment or ability” and *self-esteem* is defined as “self-respect or an exaggeratedly favourable opinion of oneself” (Webster’s, 2001), *self-concept* has been described this way:

The totality of a complex, organized, and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes and opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence.

²¹ Quotes with side bars are from participants in the *Changing Practices* project. See the discussion about consent and confidentiality on page 106.

In the beginning, I was fairly confident that I could do my project on ways that I could change the self-concept of learners in my literacy program. It quickly became evident that no one can change another's self-concept, and that the project participants would be responsible for any changes within themselves.

I also wondered, "Is it possible for individuals to change their own self-concept?" In my reading I found:

There is a growing body of research that indicates that it is possible to change the self-concept. Self-change is not something that people can will, but rather it depends on the process of self-reflection. Through self-reflection, people often come to view themselves in a new, more powerful way, and it is through this new, more powerful way of viewing the self that people can develop possible selves. (Franken, 1994, p. 443)

This led me to think about ways to encourage and support literacy learners as they engaged in self-reflection. My question became, "What are some ways to encourage reflection in literacy learners about self-concept, and possibly foster changes in self-concept?"

Planning the Project

With my question in mind, I planned to bring together a group of women learners on a weekly basis. Although reflection about self-concept was the focus of my project, I also wanted to explore ways that using creative activities could encourage women to take a closer look at self-concepts and the influences that had helped shape them. I felt that by using a variety of creative learning methods the women would feel more relaxed and interested in the sessions than they might if I used just one method such as writing. As well, creative approaches can invite learners to bring their whole selves to learning. As Jenny Horsman (1999) notes:

I felt quite comfortable about introducing creative approaches, since I grew up with lots of materials and opportunities to try different activities. I was encouraged in my art and I sang in choirs for many years. But I am aware that not everyone is comfortable with singing or some of the other activities. So, I thought about how to introduce activities so that people would feel able to try them.

Engaging the whole person in creative learning processes can open possibilities for learners to move from the "stuck" place of trauma, and of being unable to read, to create more effective programming for literacy learning.

I also wanted to provide opportunities for project participants to explore new settings in order to broaden knowledge and language. Change in settings would also be a chance to see how women carried themselves outside of the regular meeting room, and to allow them the security of the group while engaging in a new activity.

I also hoped that the project would be a way to share power in the literacy program. In working with learners, I had noticed that they frequently exhibited a blind trust or a position subordinate to me. I felt this way of relating to me reflected their self-concept. In many instances learners in literacy programs have felt powerless in their lives. I felt certain that the most detrimental thing I could do was to make a learner uneasy with herself. By supporting the person and recognizing and supporting the development of a positive self-concept in each of them, I hoped that learners would have a better chance of finding success within the program. So I knew I needed a way to share the power in the program. I wanted the participants to know we were in the project together, and that I was learning too.

Involving Participants in the Project

I originally thought I would create a project group with an entirely new group of learners—specifically with those who had experienced violence in their lives. Then, at one of my meetings with my writing group, I spoke about my project, thinking that one or two of the women would be interested in participating. As it turned out, they had all had relevant experiences, including living through war, the personal tragedy of rape or knowing the pain of parental or spousal abuse. While the experiences were as different as the women themselves, the effects were similar: violence had shaped all of the women's lives.

I decided it was beneficial to the project to involve the women who had already developed trust with each other and me. We would be able to skip the step of getting to know each other and developing the relationship where we would feel comfortable speaking of the ways violence had influenced lives and shaped self-concept. I invited women from the writing group to take part in the *Changing Practices* research project.

Before starting the project, I conducted private conversational interviews with the potential participants. I wanted to take the time with each woman to explain the research I was doing, as well as provide each with the private opportunity to decline taking part. One individual did in fact choose not to join; she felt that participating would jeopardize her personal safety.

Gathering Information

The initial conversational interviews were an opportunity to learn how the women felt about themselves and what shaped their feelings. I did not have a set of interview questions, but approached each conversation with some general topics in mind. I started the conversation and followed the women's leads. The conversations provided a starting point for the women and me so that later we could look back to see if there had been shifts in self-concept. I did not tape record the conversations as I felt the women might be uneasy with the tape recorder. Instead, I wrote notes.

I listened to him (my ex-husband) all the time because I knew he was smart. But I never agreed with him on the soul things. My soul cannot only just feel, but it can see, hear, and experience. When I lived with my first husband I never thought about these things.

Once the project was underway, I took notes during and after sessions. I observed and noted responses to activities and changing ideas, concepts, and behaviours of both the project participants and me as the researcher. In observing, I drew from my training and experiences as an early childhood educator. I tried to describe what I saw without making inferences or drawing conclusions. I noted such things as body language, social interactions, whether affirming statements were used, the delivery or degree of comfort when speaking out in the group, the ability to offer new ideas, and participants' ability to speak to their own personal needs.

At the end of the project, I used a series of exercises to invite women to reflect about their involvement in the project. I also asked women for copies of their writing and drawings.

Consent and Confidentiality

When I met with each participant before the project started, I explained that she could review information I collected from her during the interview, check it for accuracy and change what I had documented before I used it in any context.

Throughout the initial interviews, I continually asked for verification of what the women were sharing and allowed them the opportunity to clarify or make changes. At the end of the interview I read everything back to the participant word for word. Each participant gave me permission to use the information.

I also asked participants for consent to use information as I collected it during the project. For example, if I took notes about something a person had said or done, I asked for permission to

write it down and use the information. I offered all participants anonymity, and assured confidentiality to every individual who chose to share information with me. On occasion within this report, and on the author line of the booklet created during the project, some participants' names are included at their request. In all other references to the participants, anonymity has been maintained.

Analysing Information

To analyse the information I had collected, I read the interviews and my notes, trying to get a sense of where people were coming from, if they were changing, and if there were shifts in how they viewed themselves. I found it helpful to devise a list of questions that could be applied to all the information I had collected. These included:

- Who is speaking?
- What are they saying?
- Are they being consistent?
- What are some possible reasons they might feel the way they do?

My responses to the questions helped me to look for patterns and draw conclusions. I also compared notes from the interviews and observations at the start of the project with those made toward the end. I also looked for similarities among the women, and whether there were some concepts or changes that they all shared. When I noted inconsistencies, I reflected about why they were there.

Facilitating the Project

I arranged to use a meeting space in the Learning Centre on a weekly basis. I found comfortable seating and tried to make the space inviting to the participants. I also arranged for another staff person, who was doing a work placement program at the Learning Centre, to participate as a co-facilitator. I had taken facilitator training and knew the value of having a co-facilitator who might see things that I missed and could spell me off as needed.

I assembled the materials and planned the exercises I would use with the group. I knew I would follow some of the principles of the *Writing Out Loud* program, including the free writing exercise that would begin each session. As well, I planned to use other methods and exercises I found or developed that were appropriate to address the topic of self-concept.

In my project planning, I had anticipated that each session would follow the same format that included:

- Welcoming time for re-connecting
- Time for free-writing to release concerns brought to the group session
- Interactive time to share with one another
- A planned application designed to uncover the various components of self-concept
- Quiet time to collect thoughts individually.

Every session closed with a return to the group and a positive send-off with the assignment of listing and sharing things for which the learners felt grateful. In keeping with my interest in sharing power, I planned and prepared activities for each session, knowing that the plan might change according to participants' responses and interests.

Each session also included an awareness of the group-operating principles that the participants had created when the group was first established. Principles included preserving the privacy of group members, respecting others' opinions, preserving the confidentiality of what was shared, and being able to choose to not participate in an activity.

In the next section, I describe how I used creative approaches to encourage self-reflection, discuss how the women responded to the approaches, and share some of their reflections. Later in the paper, I report on my observations about changes in learners' participation and in their self-concept.

Using Creative Approaches

To stimulate reflection I used approaches that included movement, singing, poetry, writing, drawing, painting, beadwork, and group interaction. I used various exercises to draw the learner in, open up conversation, and use the whole self as a means to share information.

Movement

In its definition of dance/movement therapy, the American Dance Therapy Association describes movement as a process that supports emotional, cognitive, social and physical integration. Publications about *Brain Gym* (Dennison and Dennison, 1994) describe how

movement enhances learning. As well, for those unaccustomed to sitting, a two-hour group session can be a long time to sit in one place. People will be less likely to enjoy their time if they are uncomfortable.

Stretching, bending, swaying from side to side and reaching our arms upward were a few of the moves we tried within the group. Holding hands can be a wonderful connecting movement for drawing individuals closer to one another for a particular encounter, but it can also be an exercise that not everyone is comfortable doing. Gauging the group and how comfortable they felt with one another provided an indication of whether or not the group was receptive to the exercise.

I had anticipated that the women might be hesitant to become involved in movement in a group setting. Feelings of embarrassment, awkwardness, and sometimes just the newness of the exercise can lead to hesitation. Once the women understood that they did not have to participate and were made to feel comfortable with the exercise, they took part to the best of their ability.

At least one participant was hesitant to try the movements and worried that she would not be able to “do it right.” She did manage to take part although it was evident she would not be eager to either continue or take it up at a later date. For others, the movement exercises were pleasant, as made evident by their laughing and smiles, positive comments, and improvisational movements aside from those I introduced.

Singing

The popular notion that music has the power to influence general self-concept is firmly established in the educational community.... There is no shortage of anecdotal evidence or philosophical statements describing the effect of music on self-concept. The Tanglewood Declaration states, “Music and other fine arts, largely nonverbal in nature, reach close to the social, psychological and physiological roots of man in his search for identity and self-realization.” (Choate, 1968, p.139)

If we begin to use singing more fully in literacy work and to explore its potential for enhancing literacy learning the result may lead to surprising success in learning. (Horsman, 1999)

Many of the women in the project were initially hesitant to open up and share their feelings through even casual conversation, so singing may have seemed unnatural for some. We sang in the

meeting room with the lights turned off and several candles burning. I think the darkened room proved inviting for those who worried about feeling embarrassed. We sang songs such as *Tower of Strength*, introduced to me at one of the VALTA Project meetings:

I am a tower of strength within and without, I am a tower of strength within (2x)

Let all burdens fall from my shoulders, all anxieties lift from my mind (2x)

Let all my shackles be loose, ah hah. Let all my shackles be loose. (2x)²²

Factoring in the group experience, I felt it was quite likely that only a few women would take part in singing. Surprisingly to me, while not all were clamoring to be heard, all of the women took part, although some more softly than others. Upon reflecting on this exercise afterwards, the women expressed enjoyment at being able to use their voices in this manner, in a safe circle where they were fairly comfortable they would not be judged.

I liked singing here—in this small room with the door closed but I still can't sing in public, I open my mouth but the sound can't come out.

•

I sing everywhere, to my son, to my house, I don't care if I am good or not. So what? I love to sing.

The singing experience also led to discussion around times in the past when a few of the participants were told their voices were not good enough to be heard. This exercise helped the women to recall past experiences in their lives that may have contributed to their present self-concept.

It was nice to hear everyone. I sang quiet but I am not used to it and I never ever had a lesson—ever—so this was new to me. My Mother could sing—she sang real nice but when I tried to sing she'd say "Put the cat out" so I stopped. Well I don't think she tried to be mean but she said some people can draw—some people can sing—course I couldn't do either.

²² The original source of this song is unknown. Moon Joyce, a Toronto-based singer and educator, learned the song from Clare Mee, in London, UK. Moon introduced the song to Mary Norton, who passed it on to the VALTA participants.

Writing

We believe that writing and supportively sharing our stories can be an insightful and pleasurable means to self-discovery, personal validation, literacy skill development, connection to community, and increased emotional and physical well-being. (Writing Out Loud Instructors' Mission Statement in Morgan, 2002)

Writing and writing prompts can stir fresh ideas, trigger memories, create thoughts and help individuals to identify feelings and discover emotions. The writing process can be creative and cathartic. From their experience in their previous writing group, the women in the project were very familiar with writing. They wrote to the best of their ability, in their own language, and without focusing on spelling, grammar, or sentence structure. For those individuals who could not write, I or my co-facilitator wrote word for word as they dictated.

Each session in the project began with a free-writing exercise to explore thoughts and feelings with little direction from me as the facilitator. Participants could then choose to share or not share personal reflections with the group. For some participants, the free writing provided a release of weekly tensions and for others it provided a chance to daydream or further explore poetry. Free writing was limited to a designated time so the group had time for sharing before moving on to the more specific exercises.

One such exercise was “The Mirror.” I asked participants to look into a mirror and then respond on paper about the face looking back at them: Who was she? What were her hopes, dreams, desires? What kinds of things inspired her? Frightened her? Worried her? Discouraged her? This exercise prompted the women to connect with personal feelings they might have otherwise not recognized.

As another writing exercise to generate reflection, I handed out slips of paper with quotes on them and asked the women to respond about how the statements made them feel. Did they agree or disagree with the statement? Why or why not? The women could write their responses or speak about them. This exercise encouraged conversation and discussion, and was particularly useful when I wanted to address a specific topic or theme.

Everybody has their own opinion of others, when they look at me they might say, Maybe she is nice, maybe she is so stupid, different people will have different opinions and it doesn't bother me because I have peace with my soul. When I look in the mirror I see a human being with a nose like my father's. Nature wanted me to look this way and I appreciate nature very much.

Writing was a useful tool for the women to connect with their thoughts and express their personal reflections on the topics, thus providing a closer look at the way they viewed themselves.

Today is one of the days when I will come to writing class. I like to come here because here I meet very interesting people, where we express our opinion on different things. Here is a nice friendly environment for expression of your thoughts and to let everybody know it. It is very important that your voice be heard. I like to listen to what people like to say with their life experiences. Also in the class I like surprises—like we have to write about something I even wasn't having the chance to think about in my life. Is it not a nice surprise and good exercise for your brain?

I think that I started to see things with a different point of view and more attentively and curiously. For instance with flowers, I will not think that it is just a flower, I will now think that it is our planet earth showing her expression of love to us in the form of a flower with a big welcome to all siblings who live here. So when I look at the flower I understand it and give thanks to her for this gift to us, and in return of this love I try to care about her whatever I can. This is just one example of it. I like this group for helping my mind to stretch and exercise. What can be better than that?

—Natalia

Poetry

Poetry is a chance to play with words, to explore meanings of language and express oneself. Yet, for many of the women, the challenge of writing poetry felt daunting:

You've got to be kidding, I am no poet. I can't rhyme anything. My grandma always wrote poetry on our birthday cards but I never could figure out how she did it. Poetry? Yeah right!

Many of the participants shared the misconception that poetry must rhyme in order to be considered of value, and for this reason many had never given poetry a valid effort past the school experience. When poetry was presented in a new light—simply that of thoughts put on paper, that poetry in fact does not have to rhyme—the challenge became much more attainable.

I invited the women to write some comments on the way they felt about themselves. The earlier discussion had created questions for the women to consider: “Why do you suppose you feel this way

about yourself?" "What experiences have made you feel this way?" "What types of situations have reinforced those beliefs?" Some questions were addressed as a group, and some were left for individual consideration.

After the women had each written their lists, they shared their "poems" with one another. The freedom and the opportunity for them to place a new value on their work offered the women the chance to honor their own thoughts and words:

The rose cannot change her petal
All roses are beautiful
And nature wants her petal to be just the way it is
—Natalia

Drawing and Painting

Using art can offer a freedom to learners who have never before completed a piece a work without it being judged or graded. Having the private space to use materials in a creative way can be an entirely new experience for many. I was certain that art would allow the women to think differently about their own abilities. For those with a language or literacy barrier, pictures, drawings and diagrams may provide an easier route to expression than words.

Like singing, however, drawing and painting can be a foreign task for those who don't feel confident, or if others have experienced negative responses to their artwork or ability.

As with the other activities, people needed to feel comfortable in order to take part. Once we acknowledged that in art every line is unique and there is no right or wrong way to create, the women were able to freely use the time and materials to express themselves. In one drawing activity, I asked the women to draw themselves. Self portraits can be revealing and useful for reflecting on the way people see themselves. During the sharing time that followed, participants had a chance to talk about why they held certain beliefs about themselves that they saw in their drawings.

Draw? I can't draw to save my life!

You know I was never any good at painting—that was my sister's thing. I actually loved to paint until my parents made comments like that, so I stopped trying altogether.

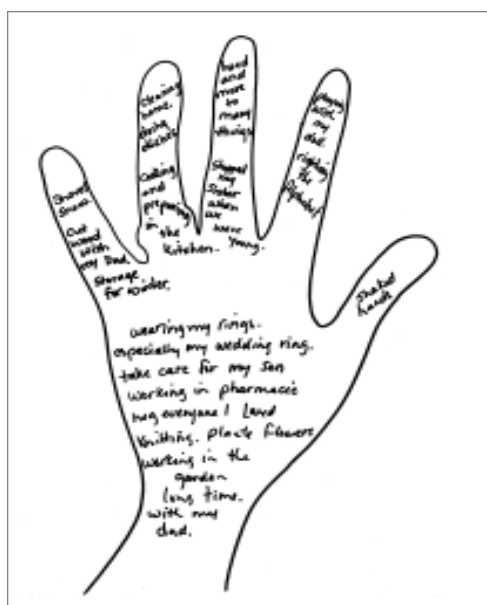
It's not that good, but hey I tried. I guess I look like that—I know I have hair like that. Well it's not that pretty but that's ok—that's me. I am appreciative of my life. Even through the bad things that have happened to me—I have learned that I can appreciate the things that are good.



One of the women drew a large heart but it was not intact. After drawing activities like this one, it was crucial to have time for women to either share their feelings with the group, or to sit quietly without having to explain their emotions. In my role as the facilitator, I needed to have a sense of how the group members felt to ensure that the appropriate action and response followed.



In another drawing exercise, participants outlined one or both of their hands on paper and listed all the things their hands had done over the years. This was a way to reflect on life situations, recall memories—both pleasant and unpleasant—and to begin sharing particular feelings. For some participants, this exercise also reinforced special capabilities that may have been forgotten, such as working in a pharmacy. In one example, the participant spoke of shoveling



snow, cutting firewood with her father for winter, taking care of her son, slapping her sister, planting flowers and shaking hands, among other activities.

In a painting activity, I invited women to paint the answer to the question, “What does this group mean to you?” Participants’ paintings encouraged conversation and discussion about the support network they had established with one another.

Beadwork

As with the other creative methods, I felt that beadwork would provide a hands-on opportunity to engage the women in conversation about their private selves. I brought in a selection of beads and lacing and provided instructions to create a necklace, bracelet, or anklet that held special meaning for participants. I suggested that they choose beads as follows:

- One bead for the center to represent their spiritual self
- Two beads placed on either side of the centre bead to represent family
- Four beads on either side of the family beads to represent friendships
- Three beads on either side of friendship to represent community or other supports.

In planning the exercise, I was aware that women who did not have family stability might not want to include beads to represent family. I was ready to encourage women to create significances other than the ones I suggested.

Participants chose beads in an assortment of colors, sizes and shapes and selected coordinating lacing. Once completed, the beadwork bore special importance to the one who created it. The women shared the reasons behind their choices of beads:

Oh I plan to wear this for a long time. I like bracelets and this one is special.

Now I know all about my bracelet and when I look at it I will think of my family far away.

It's a good idea—I remembered a special friend and put her friendship on here.

Guided Discussion

I often encouraged discussion before or after other activities, but sometimes a guided discussion was an activity in itself. As an example, I asked participants to write down one positive quality of each of the other group members on small slips of paper. Then the slips of paper were given to each participant, who read them out in a sharing circle.

Many with a poor self-concept may be unable to accept a compliment or praise due to the internal voice fighting the idea.

This internal voice can be the result of years of feeling inadequate or not good enough. I wanted to use the exercise to open up a discussion around how it felt to take part in the exercise itself, and to demonstrate that others may notice or feel things about the women that they did not necessarily recognize or feel toward themselves.

The exercise was foreign to some as they were unused to hearing positive things stated about themselves in this manner. Two of the women were embarrassed by the activity, and perhaps even suspicious as to whether or not the comments were “true.” Their embarrassment was evident through body language, covering their face, blushing, and repeating phrases such as:

Oh I am not pretty! You think I have nice eyes? Hmm. My grandpa always said I had eyes like a raccoon.

Sweet? Well maybe here I am sweet, but not at home...my husband wouldn't think I am so sweet.

Although these were the reactions of some, by the end of the session each of the women seemed genuinely touched by the results.

We spoke about the appropriateness of delivering compliments, and of the difficulties someone may have in receiving a compliment, particularly if she has a poor self-concept.

Well, I am surprised to hear such nice things; maybe now I will think differently. I never knew someone might think of me as pretty.

Awareness of Comfort Zones

Through movement, singing, poetry, writing, drawing, painting, beadwork and group interaction, project participants were able to explore new learning methods, see and reflect upon how an experience felt, and feel different emotions.

While some activities were uncomfortable for some group members, participants became aware of their personal comfort zone through the experience. Talking through and sharing fears, ideas and beliefs about personal comfort zones was helpful to participants who may not have considered why they held certain assumptions about these activities. Discussing feelings of discomfort alleviated some of the tension in those who felt fear when an exercise was

presented. Acknowledging the “right to pass” without any further explanation allowed the women to refrain from sharing and not feel a need to defend their choice.

Opportunities for New Experiences

Along with the scheduled meeting times, there were opportunities for the group to meet in a variety of settings. We shared biscuits in a country tea house; had supper on a cattle farm; celebrated occasions such as birthdays, Christmas and Valentine’s Day with theme parties; enjoyed coffee in a home setting; and traveled together several hours to take part in a women’s wellness conference. Each of the opportunities offered participants a chance to explore new settings and broaden their knowledge and language base. The change of setting was also a chance to see how the women carried themselves outside of the regular meeting room, and to allow them the security of the group while engaging in a new activity.

Two of the women were initially hesitant to take part in the outings but then attended and spoke positively about the experience. Each time they had expressed hesitation I reviewed in detail what the activity would involve; what they could expect to see, feel and hear; how they were expected to dress; and if there was a cost involved. The private conversation usually ended with a statement such as “I trust you so I’ll go; I am not used to this but I trust you.”

Attending a Conference

When the opportunity arose to take the group to a women’s wellness conference in another community, the timing was perfect. The group had been together long enough that traveling together for two hours was feasible and I was confident that the women were ready to venture into uncharted territory. In preparation for the trip, I spoke individually with the women and then to the group. I was curious to know their expectations. What were their fears? How did they foresee the day unfolding? What were they looking forward to? What did they hope to come away with?

Many of the women exhibited a general trust that I was leading them into a positive experience. Few revealed apprehensions. I was somewhat surprised by this. I myself had apprehensions about the day and I found it curious that they did not. My own apprehension included concerns about how the women would feel being away from home. Would they feel comfortable? Would they tire easily of each other after an entire day together? Would the experience be positive for them? I wanted to offer the experience to the women to stretch their comfort zones even further. Was I making the right call?

The community where the conference was held is smaller than Hanna. I was expecting a relaxed, intimate conference but really knew little of what to expect, having never been there before. Arriving at the conference I was surprised and delighted to see how grand everything was. Women had arrived from near and far and the atmosphere was electric. A beautifully decorated hall was set for over 100 people. Linens, lights, flowers and sound welcomed us as we entered. The conference had already exceeded my expectations and it hadn't even yet begun.

First on the agenda was the welcoming and an address on women's health issues. Next was a presentation on *Brain Gym*²³ which included an explanation of ways in which stress inhibits learning—this was directly relevant for the women in the project group.

The *Brain Gym* presentation also included participation in exercises that the speaker demonstrated. Most of the exercises could be performed while seated, although one or two required the audience to stand and interact with one another. The movement activities in the larger group setting of the conference seemed to be a stretch for some of the women in the project group. The quick exchange of glances told me that they were uncomfortable with the idea of movement in this setting. I was thankful the women had at least some familiarity with movement through the exercises we had tried in our sessions.

Following the presentation, we were treated to a delicious lunch where door prizes, giveaways and casual conversation provided a break from the formal presentation. Gauging the mood and body language of the women, I was pleased to note that despite four hours of conference activities, they were still alert, interested and responsive to their surroundings.

The final speaker was entertaining and inspiring. She spoke on inner beauty, self confidence, assertiveness, bravery in the face of despair, blessings, and suggestions for following a light-hearted approach to infuse joy into daily living. She also spoke of “wondrous western women” who had overcome hardship and found creative solutions, and of the leadership skills and strengths they needed to succeed in their lives. It was fascinating how the presentation connected with the project participants. Many of them waited afterwards for a chance to visit with the speaker and purchase a copy of her book.

²³ *Brain Gym* is a series of movements that can be used to encourage whole-brain learning. For more information, refer to Dennison and Dennison, 1994.

Reflections and Questions

Leaving the conference, the women were exuding a new confidence; they had taken part in an opportunity that they had never dreamed of. One of the participants in particular had not been aware that such opportunities existed—certainly not for her. She noted:

I had never heard of such a thing as a women's conference—I didn't know what a conference even was—and that women could actually get together to talk about—well, women things. I was surprised too that the speakers were women—I thought they would all be men.

Hearing this affirmed that within my role as coordinator there lay a clear opportunity to offer the women and other members of the group diverse learning opportunities and chances to see, feel, and experience more of the world around them.

On the ride home, the women shared an excitement about the things they had learned. They tried out various *Brain Gym* activities in the van, and giggled about the antics of the last presenter who at one point had stood on a chair to gain attention. Amidst the laughter and gaiety I found myself wondering, what do you do with information gained but without the context to use or to sustain your enthusiasm? The women were returning to unchanged home situations although they themselves were perhaps changing. I worried that the opportunities I was providing to encourage the women to look at themselves in a positive light could, for some, have the opposite effect. Would the women begin to feel that areas of their lives were lacking? They were asking about future conferences and if we would be going to any more.

In discussion with the women, my fears were allayed. They didn't feel any negative emotions after the conference. In fact, someone expressed that she felt hopeful that her life would hold more opportunities like the conference—opportunities to which she would now be open.

Ending the Project

As a wrap-up to the project, the participants continued to meet once a week past the originally scheduled ten weeks. They continued to draw strength from the group as well as one from another. A sense of closure was needed for those who had opened

their hearts and souls and shared their innermost feelings. In a series of mini exercises, I asked participants to reflect on the project and what it meant for each of them to be involved.

I searched for a way to acknowledge the women's contribution to the group. I decided that a significant way to recognize the women would be to document their thoughts in a publication for later use in literacy programming. Using the women's words, we created a tiny book of feelings called *I feel better about myself*. Each of the women received a copy of the booklet and a small gift at the end of the last session.

What Was Learned from the Project

Importance of the Group

As noted earlier, participants reflected about what it had meant for them to be involved in the project. A number of the women wrote about the importance of the group in general, and as a place to share and be listened to.

Women also wrote about changes they had experienced from being in the group.

I would miss the group so much if it stopped.

•

I don't think we can stop now—we are just getting good!

•

You start to feel important when people want to listen to you.

•

I feel better when I have someone to talk to.

•

Before and After

Before this group I had dreams

Before this group I had an imagination

Before this group I had opportunities to express myself

After being in this group some of my dreams came true

After being in this group I used my imagination

After being in this group I have used the opportunities to express myself

—Natalia

Before and After

Before this group I had no friends, no fun, I never talked about myself, I never wrote my thinking. No talking to somebody about my troubles, no time for myself, I wasn't able to make a joke.

After this group I met new friends, I had fun, I learned to talk about myself, I was able to talk to someone about my troubles, I met a couple of hours every week with a group of ladies. There is now, with open hands, new vision, new hopes, open hearts, laughing, and I can make jokes.

—Sharar

Changes

Through ongoing recording and comparisons of my observation of the women as they took part in the group activities, as well as their involvement in the project on the whole, I was able to recognize and document small but notable changes in each of them.

Awareness and Easing of Comfort Zones

Subtle yet telling changes taking place were evident in the easing of comfort zones; the women were more likely to try new ideas presented to them with less resistance than at the beginning of the sessions. Over time, the women became more relaxed with the group members and with myself as facilitator. As evident from body language, participants were assuming a more relaxed posture, choosing to sit nearer one to another. Sharing personal items such as pens and cough drops, they also began to share personal stories much more freely than they did in the beginning and began arranging times to connect with one another outside of the group.

Changes in Self-Concept

Women's writing and discussions point to ways in which their self-concept changed.

It was hard for me to ask for help. I did terrible in school and I hated it anyway so I quit. I always thought it wouldn't matter and it didn't for a while, but then all of a sudden my job changed. There was more reading I had to do so I had to quit. I felt awful and I was afraid people would find out. I was so embarrassed before but now I learned that I am not alone—there are lots of folks who have reading problems and I actually feel better about myself because I understand now that it is just

another skill. Like I learned to sew so I can probably learn to read and just because I can't read doesn't mean I'm stupid.

I tried not to think about myself if I could help it—I guessed I was dumb—oh everybody knew it about me, my teachers, my brothers, they all treated me terrible—worse than the dog I bet. Sometimes I remember but mostly I try to ignore it (the memories). I used to try to ignore me—it was easier that way. When you ask me to think about me I have a hard time—I never mattered—or at least that's how I felt. I mean I probably mattered to my Mom maybe when I was really young but she couldn't see the things that went on and she was old anyway. There was no point in complaining because no one really believed it or cared. I thought I was supposed to be mature now and forget everything. Now I know that someone else will listen and feel for me, even though I can't change anything and to think about it still upsets me—but I know that someone cares and that gives me hope that I can feel better about myself.

Reflection

For some women, the process of reflection and using their imagination was also a shift.

I never used to think about anything—now I have so much to think about! The learning group gave me an opportunity to think about everything in an imaginable way, to be more understandable I give you an example. One day I was exploring the town on my bicycle. I saw an ordinary fence that was glowing like gold because the sun was shining on it. It amazed me because it made me think of how gold is a treasure, like the treasure of paper from wood. In group we write on paper and print in books which are treasures too. I never would have thought like this before the learning group.

—Natalia

Before group I would never turn my mind to think about things. When I came to group I started to think this way.

What Now?

As I write, four months have passed since the project ended. Four of the women have returned to the writing group eager to continue their journey into self-discovery and learning. One woman felt overwhelmed by the project process, frightened that the group was moving more quickly into a new level of comfort that she did not

share. When a much larger and longer conference came up, she was definite that it was too much for her to attend. She has yet to return to the Learning Centre.

Although this woman's hesitation at this point may be viewed as a step backward, I feel that not all progression involves action. Periods of reflection can be a time of certain growth and often distance is needed to see what is most closely at hand. Another woman who took part in the project has relocated, and unfortunately due to her personal situation is no longer able to maintain contact with the Learning Centre, although she has passed word through public agencies that she is doing well. She misses her time with the project and hopes to one day connect with another writing group.

Two of the women involved in the project are excitedly making plans to attend a three-day provincial literacy conference with literacy tutors, learners, and volunteers in attendance. The opportunities for these women and the doors that will continue to open for them are promising.

Reflections on the Research Process

As the researcher I often found myself with more questions than answers, perhaps indicative of the growth one experiences in undertaking such a project. Questions such as: Where is my energy best spent? Will my work be meaningful? To whom? How will it help the women of my program?

Some of these questions were answered along the way and others may be answered as time passes and individuals begin to feel differently towards themselves as a result of the project. Fortunately I recognized the questions as part of a natural process of learning. I also had resources to turn to, as well as the guidance of the VALTA Project leaders for insight. The leaders assured me that reflection was in fact necessary as I would uncover perhaps new ideas for direction or contemplation that would ultimately benefit my research.

Applying What Was Learned

The research from my project suggests that coordinators of literacy programs can support and sustain the development of positive self-concepts with literacy learners. The importance of encouraging a positive self-concept is advocated by others in the literacy field:

....offering each learner a positive image of herself as valuable and of worth can make such an incalculable difference, then every respectful interaction in the educational setting is of crucial importance. (Horsman 1999)

The recommendation for literacy and adult basic programs is to foster and recognize non-academic outcomes of attending a program, outcomes that build self-esteem, encourage awareness of and reflection on life and learning experiences, and increase agency. Since people with higher agency develop more varied and more useful learning strategies, working with learners on increasing agency and self-worth is a useful strategy for improving learning strategies. (Niks, Allen, Davies, McRae and Nonesuch, 2003. p. 82)

Coordinators' and support staff's awareness of the barriers which learners face in their lives can benefit both the program and the learner. Experiences with violence, dysfunctional family or social connections, past and present failures, learning disabilities, state of mental health, and a distorted self-image can all contribute to a learner's poor self-concept. While coordinators can do little to change the way a person feels about himself or herself they can do plenty to encourage learners to develop positive self-concepts. Often opportunities exist for learners to move forward in their lives, although they may not recognize the opportunities for themselves. (Appendix A at the conclusion of this chapter includes some questions that coordinators and learners might use to explore self-concept.)

I would like to imagine that literacy programs are consistently examining the barriers to learning for those entering their programs. I would also like to believe that they are also considering the self-concept of literacy learners as they tailor the type of programming made available to these individuals. Changes can come about in those who have a renewed sense of self-worth and coordinators can foster self-reflection about self-concept. The statement, "You can't learn if you're no good," made by a learner in the Hanna Literacy Program, needs to be addressed by literacy practitioners everywhere.

You CAN begin the process of learning if you have the appropriate supports to believe in yourself.

When light falls on the dark corner of our minds where we keep our oldest assumptions—the whole world looks different. Just understanding what troubles us, realizing that each of our difficulties has a name, a cause, a logic to it, is liberating. Nothing can make you feel as helpless as ignorance, and the truth can set you free. (Sher, B., 1994)

Conclusion

My intentions for the project had been to offer women opportunities to see themselves in a new light; to learn and experience new things; to learn to recognize their positive qualities; to grow and stretch—possibly beyond their comfort zones—to explore their thoughts, feelings, and emotions; to recognize and respond to their own voice; to respect themselves and their life experiences; and to place a higher value on themselves after being a part of the group.

Through all of the project interactions I was confident I had accomplished what I had set out to do. I had offered the women the time, space, resources and materials to explore their thoughts and feelings, in a controlled setting, with appropriate boundaries and supports. I am hopeful the women will now find a way to apply the practices and methods we tried to their individual lives, without the group, and to use the overall experience to move forward in their lives.

Being a part of the group, I learned firsthand that although we come from all walks of life, we are much the same. Our desires, wants and needs are often very similar. We want to provide for our children; we wish for good health and well-being for ourselves and our loved ones; and we all want to be recognized, valued, heard and respected. We all want to have the opportunity to learn new things, we all want to feel safe, and yet we want to have others recognize our strengths. I have learned that no matter what the life circumstance, we are all women first and we all want to have a voice.

I have met brave women who are exploring the outer edge of human possibility, with no history to guide them, and with the courage to make themselves vulnerable that I find moving beyond words.

– Gloria Steinem

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Appendix A: Questions to Prompt Reflection

A. Intake Inventory

- Why did you come to the literacy program?
- How can the literacy program help you?
- What are you interested in learning?
- What grade did you complete in school?
- Did you enjoy school? Why? Why not?
- What do you hope to learn here?
- What are your goals?
- How long do you think it will take you to reach your goals?
- Name one thing you have trouble doing.
- Name one thing you do really well.
- Think of a particular skill you want to learn. Will you learn best by: watching, listening, doing, reading?

Invite participants to complete one or more of the following sentence starters:

- I am
- I know
- I feel
- I never
- I love
- I worry
- I wonder
- I hope
- I wish
- I am thankful for

B. Questions to Be Used Once a Relationship Has Been Established between the Coordinator and Learner

- Describe yourself.
- Describe the way others see you.
- Draw a picture of yourself.
- Identify one negative quality about yourself.
- Identify one positive quality about yourself.
- What is the worst thing anyone has ever said about you? How did it make you feel?
- What is the best thing anyone has ever said about you? How did it make you feel?
- List three of your strengths.
- Why is it important that you do well in the program?
- What can the coordinator do to help you reach your goals?

