



the women took part, individually, in a collage project
had hoped they would participate collectively as well
many did not finish the process
interesting...how much in our lives is left unfinished
unfinished, incomplete, you get an F

(Journal entry by researcher, November 18, 2006)

Empty spaces.

I have spent a considerable amount of time reflecting on my research, on what I felt “went wrong”; reflecting on how I could have made this work better, how I could have ensured that women did return to complete their collages. Even in October 2007, a year and a half after we started the research project together, some participants wondered about the collages we started:

“Do you still have my pieces, the ones that I cut out of the magazine?”

Unfinished.

MY RESEARCH PROJECT

My project was to meet with adult literacy learners to explore how literacy practitioners and ABE (adult basic education) instructors can better support women who are parents to help their children do well in the formal education system. In this project, I used an arts-based research method to explore how one group of women have experienced the formal education system and to contrast that with their children’s experiences.

My research question to the women in my project was: “Name what your children are going through at school and help me (a literacy practitioner) support you to help them do well. I am doing this because I am also a parent, and I hear you say that some of our children are experiencing bad things at school. That hurts me, you and our children.”

The Unfinished Collage: Examining the Impact of Violence on the Lives of Literacy Learners and Their Children



Many of the women who started the collage process in June 2006 did not complete their artwork. They were not able to return to the program, for numerous reasons, to finish the research process with me. The many things that get in the way of learning for literacy learners who are parents are connected to the reasons for not being able to complete the research process with me. These barriers are real. Their unfinished work signifies many things for literacy learners who are parents.

Some of the barriers learners face came to life during my research project. This illustrates exactly why it is so tough for us to move forward on this issue. The participants in my research were very clear and eloquent about how hard it can be to overcome these obstacles. I often wanted to shift the discussion from negative to positive, but I realized that this discussion was necessary in helping us to understand how everyday violence, systemic issues in particular, affects our experiences in literacy programs.

Some of the identified barriers included

- Lack of affordable transportation
- Lack of affordable childcare/options for childcare
- Housing concerns
- Exhaustion
- Lack of confidence
- Stress
- Health issues
- Anxiety
- Judgement/shame
- Addictions
- Issues related to gender/being a single mother
- Classism/privilege (status, language)
- Racism

HOW DID WE DO THE RESEARCH TOGETHER?

We used collage. A collage is made from objects that are pasted together or attached to create art. Each woman worked on her own individual collage. We used magazines, old books and other art supplies to create our art. Arts-based research methods are useful when working with literacy learners as there is often little, if any, use of the printed word throughout the process of data collection. The process of doing art also provided us with the opportunity to dialogue and share as a group, which gave me a rich source of data collection that I did not fully anticipate. I used both sources of data, the collages and the information shared at our meetings, in my final analysis.

WHO TOOK PART IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

The participants in my research were mothers who are learners in the adult literacy program I work in (Parkdale Project Read, Toronto). Some of the women were familiar with Dr. Jenny Horsman's research on the impact of violence on learning (1999) and had been involved in her research in some way or another over the last few years. I did not go into detail with them about the research on violence and learning from a philosophical point of view. In my work, I see violence as prevalent throughout our lives; it is a "given" that systemic violence has touched our lives in some way, shape or form, particularly considering our location in terms of socioeconomic status and as mostly racialized women living in urban Toronto.

My research began in June 2006, when we gathered as a group to begin the collage process. As we cut out images that reminded us of both our own experiences of formal schooling and our children's present-day experiences, we also talked about schooling: our experiences in school and how those experiences affect us as mothers. A few of the women talked about school not being a great place for them; some of them had only attended for a very short while as young children.

One woman talked briefly about her experiences in the residential school system. This was very emotional for her, and the other women supported her well. As the women listened to her story and asked questions, much learning took place about the history of the residential schools and their impact on the lives of Aboriginal people in Canada.

Violence.

One mother shared that her 17-year-old son was currently out of school. He had been suspended three times and could not return. Once he had missed so much school, he got behind, and she couldn't help him. She didn't understand the system, and now he was out. She didn't think he would go back. This was hard for her because it was so similar to her own story. She shared how she was kicked out of school for one year when she was 16 years old, and that was why she never finished.

How history repeats itself ... systemic, endemic.

Another mother talked about her daughter's experience with the school system and how she has overcome many hurdles over the years. She shared how her daughter had been diagnosed with ADD (attention deficit disorder) and placed in "learning integration" or special classes. A few of the women nodded, mentioning that they had also been in "special ed."

Repeats itself over and over and over.

The mother talked about how they later learned that her daughter was misdiagnosed with ADD. Before this diagnosis, her daughter was regularly "getting into trouble" at school and was suspended a number of times. She was named as being "disruptive" in class, told that she "couldn't learn" and wouldn't succeed in school.

Can't learn. Shame. Violence.

I shared how I was experiencing some of the things I went through as a child through my son being in school. I named the racism I experienced as a child and how it hurt to see my son, just a little boy, experience the same things 30 years later. The women agreed, and I heard myself talking about it in more detail. They listened and supported me. I didn't anticipate that sharing and its impact on the research. It worked well within the context of ethnography: highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY VIOLENCE?

Violence is "any way we have of violating the identity and integrity of another person" (Palmer, 2004). Experiences of violence can include spousal abuse, child abuse, fleeing homelands because of oppression or war, and marginalization through issues of poverty, class, race, lack of education and/or culture.

Violence, regardless of its specifics, is inherently an abuse of *power* — whether it is manifested as physical assault, sexual violation, shaming or humiliation. As Shayna Hornstein writes elsewhere in this book, violence's impact on people is both immediate and enduring.

understanding (Wall, 2006). The women trusted me and continued to talk about even more difficult issues. The naming of racism was important in moving the discussion to a deeper place, a place where many women felt compelled to go.

History is still repeating itself.

As we browsed through magazines, cutting and pasting, we talked about the racism that wove through each of our stories. We talked about how some of the issues that come up, like racism, sexism and classism, are so ingrained in the system and how impossible it can feel to work against them. Despite being angry and frustrated, the women were generally optimistic that they could do things for their own kids to make the system better for them in the long run. I realized that as a mother of a young child, I could learn so much from the women in my group. Our collective experiences were so similar, and there was support in identifying and naming them. Through that discussion, the women identified some very concrete needs and areas in which literacy practitioners can provide support.

There was such excitement at our first meeting. It was a great opportunity to connect with the women who took part in the research.

I planned to meet with my learners at least two more times over the few months. I also hoped to speak with them one to one about how they could continue to help me with this project. However, some women simply did not return to the program. That is a reality of literacy programs, one that I knew but did not fully anticipate.

WHAT CAN WE DO IN OUR PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT LEARNERS WHO ARE PARENTS?

The women said they would like support in the following areas:

- Deciphering notes and letters that come home from the school
- Understanding report cards
- Helping with homework
- Communicating with teachers, principals, etc. "They don't hear."
- Understanding school policies around attendance and suspensions
- Finding time to volunteer at the school or to take part in school trips, events, etc. (some women felt left out because they are not regular volunteers at their child's school)



I am sitting here waiting for my learners to come to the 2nd group... Well, it is now 12:36 and no one has come. This is just an illustration of how the barriers for women, particularly mothers, are in place in terms of getting in the way of participating in this process, the same way that they get in the way of learning. (Journal entry by researcher, October 27, 2006)

I didn't anticipate that exploring the experiences women have had with school and comparing it to their children's experiences now would be so difficult. It has been interesting exploring these experiences. Even though I had set the project up as a dichotomous thing — that the women's experiences and their children's experiences would be different — what I found is that, despite the different times, different places and different teachers, their children were experiencing school very similarly to the way the women did. This is real and immediate. The women are dealing with their children's schooling on a daily basis and will continue to do so for years to come. This daily interaction is so compelling that it made it difficult for us to explore the complexities of our own education and our children's through art. The unfinished collages are incredible examples of precisely how im-mediate and traumatic the impact of negative schooling is even years later.

SOME FACTS ABOUT RACISM, POVERTY AND EDUCATION

- Having access to education greatly improves a person's job opportunities, income, health and general quality of life. In turn, living in poverty makes it less likely that someone will complete school or be able to access higher education.
- Sixty per cent of people who receive social assistance are unable to read and write well enough to function in Canadian society.
- Children of families with the lowest income levels are about half as likely as those in the top income level to attend university.
- Many racialized students experience discrimination and alienation in elementary and secondary schools as well as in colleges and universities. Further, they have few teachers and other role models from racialized communities who they see working within the various fields of education.
- Black students are disproportionately placed in basic non-academic level and special needs programs (<http://www.colourofpoverty.ca>, 2007).

I knew it was a "given" that violence has touched their lives in some way, shape or form. I just knew it. Why didn't they come back? Why didn't they finish? Is that why?

(Journal entry by researcher,
November 18, 2006)

This is not a positive finding. It is another example of the barriers to participating in the learning process and to completing the process. School was not fun for most of the children of these women, and the women were experiencing their own negative school experiences all over again through their children. I could relate to this. With the exception of one mother, whose son was doing well academically despite a few negative experiences, many mothers reported that their children were not "succeeding" or "excelling" at school. They were surrounded by negative experiences in their interactions with teachers, administrators and other authority figures in the school system. Some of the children had left school as teenagers, repeating the cycle that their mothers went through. This caused great worry and anxiety among the women, as they knew first-hand how difficult it was to struggle with low literacy and not finishing formal education.

This is what it does to us...institutionalizes our minds and our bodies.

Since all of the women in my group were members of racialized groups, women of colour from all cultural backgrounds, it is important to name the violence they are experiencing, both in the past and in the present, as systemic violence. Naming systemic racism, classism and sexism as violence is integral to ensuring that the women understand this violence is not their fault. It is not an accident that their children are having the same experiences with education, in some cases almost 40 years later.

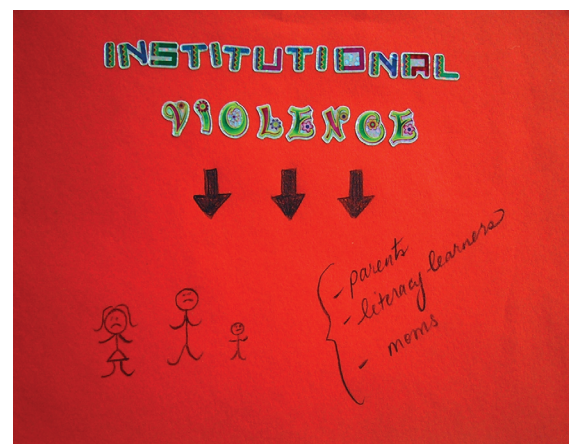
My story is about so many things.

In naming the systemic nature of violence, and linking it to many of the experiences I was having with my son and his school throughout this project, I began to explore how I fit into this process as researcher. I knew that school was a formative piece of our lives, of forming how we see ourselves. As Cooper writes in *The Transformative Nature of Culture-Based Literacy Provision in Native Literacy Programs* (2006), "School is where we learn about where we belong in the world. Our identities and personalities are shaped in large part, at school" (p. 4). If schools don't treat us or our children fairly and equitably, then that sense of belonging and identity is damaged. This is clear from what the women shared in my research project about both their own experiences and those of their children.

To what extent was this understanding, along with my experiences as a mother, "data" to include in the process? Cooper (2006) identified that "as researchers we cannot help but bring our worldview into the process and with these worldviews come judgments about differences, however well-meaning the researcher may be" (p. 36).

Not always clear.

I reflected on how my own experiences contributed to the research, examining how my lack of "objectivity" provided a perspective and a way to understand the data. My own lived experience provided a "way of knowing" that supported the research and made it more clear, more real. It was no longer just "data." My lived experience was the supporting "documentation" that the women's experiences were real, valid and important. This ethnographical approach is becoming more and more common as we begin to value our own experiences and their contribution to the research process.



The violence and everything in between.

SO WHAT DID I FIND OUT?

There were a few distinct findings in my research that will support our work as literacy practitioners seeking ways to support parents in our programs. First, when I initially asked women to begin the collage process, I asked them to explore how they have experienced the formal education system and to *contrast* that with their children's experiences. I made an assumption that the women's

experiences would be different from their children's experiences. I knew many of the women had had negative experiences of education, and that had led them to our program. I assumed, however, that the next generation would have a somewhat difference experience of school, and that there would be some progress for the women to report on. Unfortunately, the women's artwork and the sharing we did showed me that little had changed. Our children are not experiencing the school system, or education in general, any differently than their parents did.

It feels like prison.

The second finding has to do with the assumptions we make as literacy practitioners about how literacy learning influences parenting. I am critical of the classism that exists in the field of education, specifically in adult literacy and ABE, where we as practitioners often have very middle-class ideas of how parenting should look and what adult literacy learners need to know about parenting. But literacy learning also affects parenting through community, in this case through the sharing of strategies to employ when the education system is not supporting our children well. The women shared strategies that were practical, and they found community through supporting one another. These strategies did not come from the literacy learning in our program, but from their own network of sharing and their lived experiences as women and as mothers.

The most striking finding in my research was the shift in the balance of power around what I learned from the women in my group about my own parenting practices. I found that I was experiencing the same things as the women in my research project. Our children were having bad experiences at school, and they were having those experiences not because we were not parenting well or were "bad parents." These experiences were intrinsically linked to systemic issues of racism, classism and sexism in the education system. The system was doing exactly what literacy practitioners sometimes do when we assume that parents who are poor, have not had access to education and are of a particular culture or race are not good parents. These situations may not always be healthy or supportive for our children, but they are part of our lives. We can parent well through adversity. We have been doing it for generations.

A work constantly in progress.

The final finding is linked to the "unfinished collages." I see them as an important lesson about how learning is ongoing: it is lifelong. The collages were not completed during the life of this research project, but they will get done. Our inability to complete the collages was linked to the ongoing work we are doing as women and as parents in overcoming the systemic issues that plague our

Some of the advice and strategies the women provided included

- "Teachers need to take it easy on the kids, but be firm."
- Be loving and caring.
- Coach and encourage your children.
- Kids need to trust you and talk to you.
- Teachers must encourage parents to talk to them.
- We need to be regular volunteers at school so that we are part of their education.

lives. The barriers I have identified earlier in my report are real, and they constantly get in the way of our learning and our lives. Racism and classism were named most often in our discussion. According to Galabuzi (2006), racialized communities are experiencing a disproportionate level of poverty in Toronto. Based on the report *Poverty by Postal Code* (2004), produced by the United Way of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Council on Social Development, members of these communities are three times more likely to be poor than others because of the barriers and challenges they face in the job market. The systemic nature of these barriers can overwhelm us at times. It can wear us down. It also, however, keeps us going. The women shared their commitment to continue to fight for their children and support them no matter what.

Always in transition.

As literacy practitioners, we must acknowledge that these barriers are real and support learners to find ways to overcome them, even if only temporarily at times. Supporting learners through practical needs like deciphering notes that are sent home from school, understanding report cards and navigating for parent-teacher interviews is important, but our role as change agents around the systemic issues is key. We are literacy practitioners working in community programs, and we must do this work as is consistent with seeing education as a place for resistance. Tackling the systemic issues and supporting parents through these issues, even by simply providing a safe space in which to discuss them and strategize, is integral. Community is where change occurs.

A short video I made to accompany my research can be viewed on the DVD and website created for the *Moving Research about Addressing the Impacts of Violence on Learning into Practice* project. This video is a collage of photos and quotes that illustrate how the women and I experienced the research project. Due to the arts-based nature of this research, it made sense to produce something that represented my experience of the research process.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to dedicate this research to my son, Malik. I remain committed to making change in the field of education to ensure that he, and others, gain full access to all the system has to offer. I would also like to acknowledge the support of Michael Kennedy and Mary Brehaut, support group members. Thanks to my colleagues in the literacy field who believe in this work and support it, and to the women who participated in my research, and to their neverending work of being mothers.

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