Learning Community: Popular Education and Homeless Women

Lorna Rivera

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In this essay, I present the voices of homeless women to illustrate the empowering impact of popular education on their lives. Popular education is a methodology of teaching and learning through dialogue that directly links curriculum content to people's lived experience and that inspires political action (Beder, 1996; Freire, 1985, 1990; Williams, 1996). On the basis of 5 years of ethnographic research in a shelter-based popular-education program, I describe how popular education approaches inspired a sense of community among a group of 50 homeless women of color. I also examine some of the barriers to literacy faced by women who returned to school during a time of crisis. I argue that in order to address the social injustices that oppress poor women, we should invest more in popular-education programs for women. In 2001, 54% of participants in the adult education and literacy system (AELS) were women (Murphy, 2003, p. 5). Many of the homeless women I met initially blamed themselves (and other individuals) for their poverty-related problems, but popular education helped them understand and address the root causes of their problems. According to Clover, Follen, and Hall (1998), "Feminist popular education seeks to understand and challenge the processes, functions, as well as structures which are responsible for particular social and gender inequalities" (p. 12).

In my research, I observed how the women's participation in popular education enabled other positive changes in their lives (beyond the acquisition of basic literacy skills). The women engaged in healthier lifestyles, invested more in their children's education, improved their socioeconomic status, and increased their civic participation. Furthermore, the popular-education program at the family shelter addressed the women's material needs: It provided housing and legal advocacy, shelter, a food pantry, child care, health care, and other social services that supported the women's personal and community goals.

Popular Education at the Family Shelter

When I first visited the Family Shelter's site-based popular-education program, I met a group of homeless mothers who said they were returning to school to improve their economic opportunities and to provide a better life for their children. I had a personal interest in their experiences—my sister had dropped out of high school and had recently obtained her general equivalency diploma (GED). I was inspired by my sister's transformation, for I saw how her return to school had enabled other positive changes in her life. For this reason, I was drawn to the women at the Family Shelter and I sought to learn more about them. The fact that the women were homeless and were members of racial/ethnic minorities further stimulated me to question the relationships between social inequalities, illiteracy, and poverty. Many of the women had dropped out of school and some had no formal schooling experiences at all, so I wondered what social forces had limited their potential. In addition, I wished to know why they believed so strongly that education would improve their lives and increase their social mobility.

I was impressed most by the women's positive attitude and determined belief in the life-changing power of education. For example, Delila explained how she was "desperate" to return to school: "Something would have happened if I didn't find a school. Do you know I was so desperate? It's like you have an addiction or something. You know, how you want it? If you don't get it, you're gonna die? That's how I felt about school." Another student, Renata, said that she wanted to be a "role model" for her kids: "I decided to go back to school so I could be a good role model for my kids. And I say that because how can I teach them something or tell them something I don't know? How can I tell my kids to go to or finish school if I didn't?"

The women also returned to school because they believed that getting the GED would increase access to decent jobs, allow them to get off of welfare, or enable them to enroll in a good job-training program or college. This constellation of reasons is found in much research about why adults return to school (Beder & Valentine, 1990; Fingeret & Drennon, 1997).

Popular-education approaches build upon learners' strengths by using culturally relevant, meaningful materials with which to teach literacy skills and social action (Auerbach, 1992). Studies of adult learners suggest that culturally relevant, participatory literacy practices are most empowering for women and immigrant adult learners (Auerbach, 1989; Fingeret, 1990; Jurmo, 1989; Reder, 1987, 1990; Sparks, 1998; 2002; Wallerstein, 1983). While there is a growing body of literature about popular education in the United States (Benmayor, 1991; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995; Williams, 1996; Young & Padilla, 1990), few adult literacy programs identify their approach as popular...
education, and much of the current literature about popular education focuses on the work of nongovernmental organizations in developing nations (Torres, 1995).

In 1947, the Family Shelter was founded by an international order of Catholic nuns who worked as nurses and social workers in the poverty-stricken Central neighborhood of Boston. In October 1990, at the request of former shelter residents, the Family Shelter began its own on-site popular-education program. The design of the popular-education program was influenced by the Catholic sisters' studies in liberation theology and the principles and practices of the Catholic Action, which emphasized a "historical process of reflection and action" and a mission to help others see reality, articulate experience, judge, interpret, act, plan, decide, organize, evaluate, and celebrate (Berryman, 1987; Rivera, 2001). From the beginning, the volunteer teachers recognized that a traditional GED program made little sense for the women. They used popular-education methods because they wanted to help the women gain literacy skills in a meaningful context.

The classes at the Family Shelter were rooted in a model of pedagogy that involved problem-posing and consciousness-raising activities based upon the problems or "generative themes" in the lives of the low-income women. According to the program's philosophy statement, "When a curriculum is centered around shared student concerns and experiences, trust is built among students and teachers, and the classroom becomes a community." Teachers identified the following successful instructional elements:

We use learner-centered approaches to provide our adult learners with an opportunity to have control over at least one aspect of their lives.

We use adult learner's life experiences as the basis for curriculum and learning activities.

We develop curricula that address the diversity of the group such as age, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and others.

We use varied educational materials which recognizes a variety of learning styles and multiple intelligences.

We engage in ongoing assessment to measure and identify student progress towards their learning goals. As a group, teachers meet regularly to facilitate the sharing of curricula, instructional materials, and reflection on our practices.

Individually and as a group teachers engage in ongoing staff development focusing on areas such as literacy instruction, welfare and homelessness issues, accessing community resources for adult learn-

ers, and integrating health issues into the curriculum.

Popular-education approaches inspired the women to reflect, to analyze, and to take steps toward political action. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire (1990) argued that in order for one to break through the "cultures of silence," the issues discussed in educational activities must be related to the daily lives and reality of the learners (Schnapp, 1998). He referred to these issues, or problems, as the "generative themes" of people's lives. In the popular-education process, to find generative themes the teacher learns from students about the issues that mean the most to them. Once these generative themes are found, they become the basis for discussion, reflection, and action (Association for Community-Based Education, 1988; Schnapp, 1998).

I observed how the women became excited about learning when the subject matter taught them something about themselves, their children, or their community. This was best expressed by Delila:

If I am learning, if there is a subject that interests me, I don't get bored. But, if there is a subject that's gonna be boring I can get sleepy. I just get distracted so easily. I'll find ways to let my mind go easily. So that's the problem with me. We need something that's going to interest us, something that's going to involve us. Not something we have to do because we were told to do it.

Delila's comments also illustrate her resistance to authoritarian methods in the classroom—she will not do something just because she is "told to do it." Another adult learner, Chauntal, said she liked the popular-education program because she felt "respect" from the teachers, unlike her response to former teachers who had disrespected her. She explained how her former teachers advised her to speak properly:

I was told this so many times, like the proper way of speaking. You was corrected if you said something wrong. Especially one instructor, Jack, he would jump down your throat and would want to rip out your tongue. If you were speaking wrong, they would correct you and if it was wrong, you'd have to write the proper ways. For instance, on one of my tasks you had to write, "How do you get to City Hall?" So, I wrote, um... "I take the 23 to Ruggles, get off at Ruggles. Catch the Orange Line to State Street." She [the teacher] wrote, when she sent my task back, these notes. She said I was using slang. "You can't catch a train." So, what I had to write was—"take" the train, "take" the Orange Line to State Street, get off and walk a couple blocks. But I was like mad, you know? I was like, you can't take a train either, OK!
Chauntal's conflicts with her teachers regarding her use of slang demonstrates how the language in schools represents the language of the dominant classes. Bourdieu (1977) argues that schools present the cultural knowledge of the powerful social classes and play an important role in legitimating and reproducing dominant cultural capital. Cultural capital is "the different sets of linguistic and cultural competencies that individuals inherit by way of the class-located boundaries of their family" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993, p. 76). According to Bourdieu (1977), students from the dominant classes have an advantage in school because what they already know, their cultural capital, has more value and ensures their success. Minority students (especially women of color) are often silenced. In Chauntal's example, her culture was not respected and she felt like a failure. Still, she resisted and challenged her teacher when she told her, "You can't take the train either."

Another student, Florence, described negative racist experiences in her previous schooling:

Florence: I loved school, but it was like, I had a conduct problem. I had this thing about me being dark.

Lorna: You being dark?

Florence: Yeah, it was like they used to call me "overcooked" and um "burnt up." It was like kids being kids. Back then when I was in school that was my only problem and I get kicked out, I used to always get kicked out for blaring out, you know. They'd get me angry to the point and I said I can't cry 'cause if I cry they're always going to mess with me. So, I had a very bad conduct problem just because of the color of my skin.

When adult learners participated in a historical walking tour of Boston's Black Heritage Trail, Florence was especially touched by the experience. She told me that the trip had had a profound and disturbing impact on her:

Florence: It bothered me for days! It bothered me for days! It wasn't even that night. Lorna, it bothered me for days. I cried.

Lorna: What was it that bothered you?

Florence: It was like, I can't believe my black brothers and sisters did so much and they're not getting the credit. I can't believe when we was owed that land and we still haven't got it. You understand what I'm saying? We was owed a lotta things and we haven't got it. How come Europeans have the right to do all these things to us? What we're not doing right? Where's our birthright? I mean, there's just so many things in life that I can't figure out. You go read about it, they give you a whole bunch of mumbo jumbo stuff that you don't even understand. That's not what I'm looking for. I wanna know where my heritage come from. Where am I from? Now they have me thinking I'm from Africa!

In this example, the Black Heritage Trail field trip led Florence to question, "Where am I from?" and to critique the "mumbo jumbo" she had been taught in school. The goal of popular education is the development of a critical consciousness and an understanding of one's "own being in the world" (Weiler, 1988). I observed how teachers used homeless women's writings, newspaper articles, editorial cartoons, music, pictures, videos, skits, and field trips to present a variety of problems and social issues affecting the women's everyday lives. The women discussed why these problems existed, the history of the problems, their causes, and how to address them.

Early Schooling Experiences

Multiple factors have been linked to a student's dropping out, including recent migration, having been retained in a grade, and family poverty (Dodson, 1999; Fine, 1991). Other studies examine why some high school dropouts, especially those who are members of racial and ethnic minorities, may resist participating in adult education because they have had negative experiences in school (Cervero & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Quigley, 1992; Sparks, 1998). Recent research by Reder and Strawn (2001) challenges the concept of "school resister" and the notion that most high school dropouts have had negative schooling experiences. They argue that efforts to increase recruitment and retention of adult learners should not "assume that negative experiences are a common barrier" (p. 4). The early schooling experiences of the women I studied were varied, although the majority of the women said that they really liked elementary school and described themselves as good students. They had fond memories of elementary school, but when they went to high school, they faced many poverty-related problems. This is consistent with much research on urban high school dropouts (Fine, 1991; Way, 1998). The following women describe how family problems interfered with school:
Yvette: Math and reading was my favorite subject and I had certificates and awards and all that from math. All my awards was for math, you know. Because I was a math crazy freak right then! I don’t understand why I am doing so bad on it now, you know? But back then, it was my favorite subject and I used to get awards from it. I’m talking about from third grade, all the teachers loved me. I mean, I could remember all their names now. And they used to love me and as I was growing up they would just tell me, “Oh yeah, you’re gonna be good at this, you’re gonna be good at that.” And then when I got to high school, you know, that’s when all the problems start getting . . . And the fact that there was a lot of tension in there and then I was having problems with my mom and all that, it was not easy for me when I got to high school.

Leticia: In elementary school, I always won merit awards, the little medals with the flag in the middle right here. I have like 10 of them. I was A and B student in middle and elementary school. High school, that’s when I started getting the B’s and the C’s and D’s and then it went kapoof. That was it. And I used to be in this little gang, this little crew, Spanish crew. Called the P.C. Crew, Puerto Rican crew. There was about 15 of us girls. And we was always against another set of girls . . . So it’s like, um, it depends who you hang out, you know, who you be with in school. Like I hang around with the wrong crowd in school. You know, they got me into trouble.

Building a Community of Learners

When I first began my work with the women at the Family Shelter, I imagined that I would not have a hard time relating to the women, because of my own personal experiences. But I found that the homeless mothers initially treated me with great suspicion and that they did not trust one another. One adult learner, Georgia, expressed her disappointment openly during the program’s orientation session when she realized that the popular-education classes were for women only. She said, “I have problems with women. All my friends are guys.” Another student, Margarita, said that she “ain’t never had a girlfriend.” In an interview Tashawna described how difficult it is for her to trust other women because “women have a problem with other women”:

As far as me and women, and I think it goes for a lot of other women, I think women just have a problem with women, period. It’s not just the fact that, I may have a problem with them, I mean, I think they have a problem with their selves, you know? A lot of women that I met in my lifetime, right? They claim that, you know, they’re my friends. But, in the long run, they’re not really my friends. Uh-uh. No, all the time you know, they’re jealous and they’re envious. I guess they wished that they could be as strong as I am . . . I deal with everything myself. I do everything. I mean, there’s no man involved. You know?

In a writing class I observed, Grace (who was not on welfare, but received disability benefits) said that she thought welfare mothers should “get off their asses and try to find a man to support themselves.” Her comments infuriated the other women. Octavia, Soledad, Norma, and Yolanda immediately began talking in Spanish, saying, “Who does she think she is? Does she think she’s better than us?” Florence and Yolanda argued that they “don’t need a man” and that they could take care of themselves and their children. The discussion continued and class time ended, so the teacher asked the women to write about their feelings regarding welfare recipients. Octavia wrote:

I’m tired of just because I live off AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] people think I am less than everyone else, cause I know I’m not. And the reason why I said this is because I have a friend that is always talking about mothers on AFDC and it gets me mad. She was on it too and now just because she has a job she criticizes everyone else that lives off AFDC. When I pass my GED test and accomplish my goal and find the job I want, I will never criticize no one that is going through the same situation I was in.

Octavia is aware that there are other women in the “same situation” as she, and she will not criticize them. When Leticia first joined the program, she also had negative feelings toward some of the women. She said, “I don’t think about the other girls. I worry about myself. Because there’s girls here who’ve been here for 2 years, and they still haven’t gone for nothing. You know? I don’t think about them. I think about myself getting the work done.” She also criticized some of the women: “They’re scared. They have low self-esteem. That’s the way I see it. You know? I come here, I don’t expect all the teachers to help me. I don’t expect all the students to help me. You know, if I feel I need to work on my own, I will. So I don’t worry about nobody else that comes to this class.”

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

A few women who held traditional views about school refused to participate in activities that they did not see as directly related to the GED. Some of these activities included workshops with guest speakers about health, housing, and welfare, field trips, arts activities, conferences, neighborhood events, and holiday celebrations. However, these women's attitudes changed over time as they worked together on class projects and developed a sense of community with others. I observed that even the most reluctant women, those who claimed not to care about others, such as Tashawna, Cynthia, and Leticia, later assumed mentoring roles in the program. For example, Tashawna had outstanding attendance in the program, and she took on the responsibility of calling women who were absent to see if they were in trouble. Since several women did not have telephones, Tashawna would visit them when they missed school. Leticia and Florence helped develop a teacher's guide about welfare reform, and they coordinated workshops in the community about welfare rights. At first, Cynthia rarely spoke in classes, often sitting quietly in a corner, but she later coordinated a peer-tutoring project and developed a computer-skills manual for other students.

I observed that some women attended the program for only a short time and then disappeared. The women who were "regulars" worried about one another, thus if one didn't "make it" in the program, the others worried whether they would do so. Repeatedly, I observed women walking into the classroom in the morning, uttering a sigh of relief, and exclaiming, "I made it today!" or yelling, "I'm here!"

The women's relationships strengthened over time as they discussed commonly shared problems in classes and as they worked together on group projects. For example, a group of women were asked what they "expected" from each other:

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

Florence: Same here.

Leticia: Me too. I expect support.

Tashawna: But some students are not that way.

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

Florence's comment "'Cause somebody learned it to teach you, so you teach somebody else" embodies the spirit of popular education. Florence's comments to the other women suggest that the women are collectively responsible for the teaching and learning in the program. I observed Delila telling a group of new women, "It's very hard to work and accomplish something if you don't work together." Yvette, who had complained about how other women aired their problems in classes, later said, "Coming here gives me more strength to see that I'm not out there by myself. It's not just me."

Because the homeless mothers had weak social networks outside of the program (shelter was a last resort for many of them), they began to develop a community of support within the context of their popular-education classes. The teachers described the women as a "community of learners," and the women reinforced this notion by helping one another with schoolwork, by offering parenting advice, and by exchanging goods such as clothing or furniture. Tashawna described the popular-education program as "like a family" and "different than a regular school": "I feel like I don't have any family and I don't have any friends. You know, and it's hard. You know, but I've been making it all my life since, um, since I was 15 years old. I just been depending on Tashawna, you know. And I feel like if you depend on yourself and do things for yourself, you can make it. You know, things are gonna be all right because you know it's you that's doing it." Leticia expressed similar sentiments, and said she went back to school because "I'd look at my son waking up. I'd be like, 'Oh man I ain't got no money.' That's another thing that makes me think, 'Oh, let me get this GED.' I gotta get a job. I gotta do this. I gotta do that. I need this for my house. I need that for my house. So it's like I motivate myself. You know? I don't
have nobody there to push me."

In research about working-class women who enroll in adult literacy classes, Luttrell (1997) found that some of the women expressed resentment toward their mothers, attributing their "school failures" to their mothers. Indeed, one woman, Delila, argued that her mother did not see the value in education:

Some people if they didn't have education then they don't think education is important, and my mother never went to school. Like mostly, in my family the only person who finished high school was my brother. And, she wasn't happy about him . . . If you don't know that education is important, and I see a lot of parents like my mother, who don't know what school is and how important it is for the children's future. They just let their children screw up their life and they just sit home and don't do nothing about it.

The women in the popular-education program overwhelmingly believe that education is important. Their own struggles in school inspire them to be role models for their children. The popular-education classes increased the women's ability to advocate for their children and to become more involved with their children's education. For example, I observed how women offered advice on how to deal with their children's teachers and principals as well as how to find a good kindergarten. In addition, many of the women's children were in special education classes and they worried about their progress. Chauntal told me, "I'm fighting the school system to get him [her son] into a school that's full day where he's gonna benefit, where he's gonna learn something because he has learning delays you know?"

As I stated earlier, the women return to school for the sake of their children. Delila was not able to help her son with his homework until she gained the literacy skills she needed to understand the material. She said:

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

As the women and their children studied together, education became a common bond for the family. The women and their children learned together and supported one another's educational goals. Indeed, numerous studies suggest a strong link between parental involvement and literacy practices in the home and the academic achievements of children (Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Ripke & Crosby, 2002; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Valdes, 1996).

Over my 5 years of ethnographic research with the women at the Family Shelter, I heard them say repeatedly that they wanted their children to have opportunities that were not accessible to them, such as college. Delila said, "I don't really care about my life that much. What I care about is the future of my children. The only thing I say is if I finish school, if I had any support from anyone about school, I wouldn't be here. I want to give my kids that support that I didn't have."

Barriers to Literacy

The homeless women already faced many barriers to participating in adult education classes (such as family violence), and welfare reform created additional barriers by restricting access to adult basic education. Before welfare reform, Massachusetts's welfare recipients could participate in educational activities, and these counted toward the work requirement; but under the new "work-first" law, access to education was severely restricted as welfare recipients were forced to forgo education and find employment as soon as possible. Several studies have documented significant drop-out rates and declining enrollments in adult education in the aftermath of welfare reform (D'Amico, 1998; Hayes, 1999; Imel, 2000; Kates, 1999; Knell, 1997; Pachikara, 1998; Sparks, 1999). Many of the adult education programs that had the greatest decline in enrollments were intensive (20 hours a week) community-based programs that offered classes during the morning hours to accommodate the schedules of mothers with school-aged children (Reys, 1997; Sparks, 1999). Some of these were popular-education programs like the Family Shelter's that, in addition to providing literacy instruction, were aimed at increasing political empowerment and social change. Thus, those who had the greatest need for education, like the women at the Family Shelter, were no longer allowed to go to school.

Moreover, the punitive welfare reform legislation posed a great American contradiction: Education is supposed to be the primary means for social mobility, but those who lack a high school diploma
At first, the majority of the women supported the discourse about individual responsibility. They internalized the dominant ideology about personal failures. Some women said they were homeless because of "mistakes" they made, and they blamed themselves for their poverty-related problems. The models of some drug rehabilitation programs also reinforced individual responsibility by encouraging some of the women to believe that they make "choices" every day. For example, Billie said, "I choose to have a roof over my head, I choose not to be in the streets," but she (and other women) later learned how social forces limit their personal choices.

In my research I found that the majority of homeless women at the Family Shelter had experienced family violence that had led to their homelessness and that interfered with their participation in school. An overwhelming majority of the women saw this violence as a fact of life: "People always messing with you" (Rivera, 2001, p. 157). The popular-education program's health literacy curriculum focused on domestic violence, and there were weekly "Loves Herself" classes and a social worker who conducted support groups on site. Yvette described how there was a lack of "understanding" in her former program:

I was going to school from 9 to 12 and working from 1 to 6 to then come home and try to take care of my kids. . . . I couldn't even concentrate on my school because I would go from school to work and come home to my house to cook, to clean. I couldn't even do homework. And over there was not an independent study like here and we have a lot of help and support. Over there was not like that. Over there it was mainly teens. There was not womans. You know, there was not no understanding. Like right here, this is a shelter. They understand the procedures that people go through by being abused and all that. Because they deal with that every day. So they understand that from a student.

Yvette's comments suggest the need for more comprehensive support services in adult education programs that serve poor women. Currently in Massachusetts, all state-funded programs have strict attendance and accountability measures, as well as long waiting lists that range from 8 months to 2 years (Comings, Sum, & Uvin, 2000; Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education [MCAE], 2003). Most of these adult basic education programs cannot hold space for students who drop out and later want to return. The teachers at the Family Shelter regularly readmitted women who "stopped out," and they had flexible attendance requirements.

In conclusion, the impact of popular education on the women went beyond improved basic literacy skills. The popular-education approaches at the Family Shelter were better suited to help women such as Yvette because the women's personal, academic, and community goals were addressed simultaneously and on an ongoing basis. The women could attend school while their children were cared for on site, they could obtain food and clothing, and they could obtain permanent housing and health care. The women described increased self-esteem; they became stronger advocates for their basic rights related to welfare, housing, health, and education; and they became more involved with their children's education. Because they had weak social networks outside of the program, they developed a community of support within the context of their popular-education classes. For these reasons, we should invest more resources in developing popular-education programs for low-income women. Popular education enabled the women to break through their prejudice against themselves and to take action to change unjust social policies and practices.

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Lorna Rivera, PhD, is an assistant professor in the College of Public and Community Service at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, where she teaches courses in sociology, community studies, and adult education. She is a former adult literacy teacher and works with Women Expanding-Literacy Education Action Resource Network (WE LEARN) and the Boston Adult Literacy Fund.