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# **“For a Moment I Feel Free”: Homeless Women and a Garden-Based Learning Program**

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Keywords: garden-based learning, homeless women, hope, self-efficacy

**Abstract:** Loss of one’s home, conditions of shelter life, and abuse that often precipitate homelessness result in diminished self-efficacy and hope. Adult education programs for homeless women often follow a remedial rather than a developmental model. This mixed method study investigated a unique program in garden-based learning for homeless women to better understand how this type of adult education program contributed to the women’s hope and self-efficacy.

At least 754,147 Americans are homeless on an average day (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2007). Families with children comprise 40% of the homeless population (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2004). Most homeless families are headed by single females and reside in shelters. While homelessness results from an intersection of social and economic conditions that often place intractable limits on personal choice and individual responsibility, adult education is a valid part of the solution to the growing problem of homelessness. However, many homeless women feel hopeless and helpless to control the events of their lives, are doubtful that their actions will affect the outcome of those events, and lack the self-efficacy necessary to believe they have the ability to control those outcomes. Increasing their sense of hope and self-efficacy may be a prerequisite for their successful participation in adult education programs.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Most adult education programs for homeless women, when they exist at all, are designed to provide the skills that lead to economic self-sufficiency. The predominance of this type of program does not take into consideration the research that suggests lack of hope and self-efficacy can be obstacles to success in educational programs that are intended to lead directly to jobs. The purpose of this study was to determine if participation in a garden-based learning program would positively influence women residing at a homeless shelter with regard to their levels of hope and self-efficacy.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

Theoretical frameworks underlying this study are self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986), hope (Snyder et al., 1991), and garden-based learning (GBL). Self-efficacy is one’s judgments about how well one can organize and execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations containing many ambiguous, unpredictable, and often stressful elements (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). Increased self-efficacy leads to improved academic work (Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989), predicts success in obtaining employment and housing among homeless individuals (Epel, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 1999), promotes abstinence from substance abuse (Bandura, 1999), and supports effective parenting (Coleman & Karraker, 1998). Hope is defined as a cognitive set that is composed of a reciprocally derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed determination) and (b) pathways (planning of ways to meet goals) (Snyder et al., 1991). Hope contributes to effective goal setting and determination to pursue goals (Tollett & Thomas,

1995). Garden-based learning is an instructional strategy that is based on experiential learning and utilizes a garden as a teaching tool. GBL serves as a venue for not only teaching about horticulture but also other subjects such as math, science, and history in a non-threatening environment. Furthermore, “hope for the future is at the heart of all gardening” (Schintz, 1985, p. 11) and participation in gardening has a positive effect on self-efficacy (Hoffman, Trepagnier, Thompson, & Cruz, 2003).

### **Research Design**

In this three-phase, sequential mixed method study, two survey instruments that purport to measure hope and self-efficacy and semi-structured interviews were used to investigate the ability to modify these factors through a GBL intervention. A mixed method study “give[s] voice to diverse perspectives, better advocate[s] for participants,” (Creswell, 2003, p. 216) and improves understanding of the effects and experiences of participation in GBL for homeless women.

Before this study was conducted, several a priori data analysis typologies were identified through expert opinion and a review of the literature as being relevant to homeless women and GBL. In the expert’s opinion, relevant typologies were adult education pursuits, future employment, permanent housing, abstinence from alcohol and drug abuse, and effective parenting. Typologies derived from the literature were the intellectual/cognitive, physical, emotional/psychological, and social benefits of GBL. These themes were incorporated in interview questions and one survey instrument. Quantitative data were collected in phases one and three, analyzed using SPSS, and then compared to uncover changes in individual hope and self-efficacy levels. Qualitative data collected in phase two were analyzed using the typological analysis model (Hatch, 2002).

Participants in the study were eight homeless women who were residents of a homeless shelter in a large urban area in south Florida. They ranged in age from 22- to 43-years old, most had at least 2 children, nearly 88 percent had a GED or high school education and some post-secondary education, and all had work experience. Domestic violence and substance abuse were the primary causes of their homelessness. The women participated in a 12-week garden-based learning program that was provided at the shelter. Master Gardeners from the Palm Beach County Extension Service were instructors and the women grew both decorative plants and plants that were used for meal preparation.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data analysis are presented as three sets of themes. The first two themes, those relevant to homeless women and those related to garden-based learning were developed prior to the collection of the data. The final set of themes emerged from the qualitative data during the analysis.

While not statistically significant, quantitative results based on the instruments suggest participation in GBL has practical significance for homeless women with regard to hope and self-efficacy. Qualitative data indicate GBL has a positive influence on self-efficacy and hope among homeless women. In the following sections, the findings from the quantitative and qualitative analyses are integrated by “comparing, contrasting, building on, or embedding one type of conclusion with the other” (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007, p. 108).

#### *Themes Relevant to Homeless Women*

*Adult education pursuits.* No women explicitly associated GBL with other adult education pursuits, but seven indicated that participation in the garden-based learning program contributed to a sense of self-efficacy about their adult education pursuits, which is consistent

with the findings of Shell et al. (1989) that self-efficacy and outcome expectancy beliefs are positively related to academic achievement for mature students.

*Future employment.* Only one woman mentioned future employment in horticulture, but all agreed GBL helped them feel more successful about finding a job. These feelings of enhanced self-efficacy are relevant because the higher the level of an individual's perceived self-efficacy the wider the range of career options they seriously consider, the greater their interest in them, and the better they prepare themselves educationally for the occupational pursuits they choose (Hackett, 1995).

*Permanent housing.* Seven women agreed GBL caused them to feel they would be successful in finding permanent housing. For women who have already been homeless once, and who believe they are unsuccessful at making good choices about men and/or alcohol and drugs, thoughts of trying to survive on their own in permanent housing can be daunting. Mastery experiences in the garden-based learning program provided the women opportunities for acquiring the cognitive, behavioral, and self-regulatory tools needed to create and execute appropriate courses of action for managing their life circumstances.

*Abstinence from alcohol and drug abuse.* While none of the four women who self-identified as substance abusers specifically mentioned participation in gardening as a way to maintain abstinence, there was a strong correspondence between the quantitative and qualitative data in that three women reported working in the garden helped them feel more successful about avoiding substance abuse and contributed to feelings of relaxation, a major factor in relapse prevention (Marlatt & Gordon, 1985).

*Effective parenting.* Three of the four women who strongly agreed gardening enhanced their ability to care for their children were most active in GBL and had plants in or around their apartments. Two women who had previously lost custody of their children and one who only had custody of her two oldest children on the weekends cited gardening as a way to spend quality family time together. According to Coleman and Karraker (1998),

Parental self-efficacy beliefs have emerged as both a powerful direct predictor of specific positive parenting practices and a mediator of the effects of some of the most thoroughly researched correlates of parenting quality including maternal depression, child temperament, social support, and poverty (p. 47).

#### *Themes Related to Benefits of GBL*

*Intellectual/cognitive benefits.* All the women reported they were successfully learning about gardening and environmental topics. Furthermore, their learning was not confined to gardening, horticultural, and environmental topics. Florence said, "It's teaching me how to take good care of myself and be strong." For Chris, participation in the garden-based learning program "creates the quality of patience and there is an anticipation of things to come." In Patty's experience, participation in the program "gives you acceptance and patience and teachability. It's a whole bunch of things that you can learn." Participation also contributed to a sense of successful agency and planning of ways to meet goals as the women went about the routine chores of planting, maintaining, and harvesting in the garden.

*Physical benefits.* Physical benefits for the women included being in the sunshine and fresh air, and the availability of fresh, healthy foods. These physical benefits are particularly important to homeless women because many of them are in poor health due to malnutrition resulting from the conditions of homelessness and in some cases, substance abuse. Those who have been victims of domestic violence have also endured physical abuse, which in many cases has lasting effects on their health. These physiological states can have a negative impact on self-

efficacy and increasing health and physical status is a means for enhancing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995). Recreational opportunities providing for participation in healthy activities to promote fitness may also "be a source of personal empowerment for people living in homeless shelters" (Harrington & Dawson, 1997, p. 19).

*Emotional/psychological benefits.* Some of the greatest benefits were in the emotional/psychological realm. Gardening provided a respite from the struggles of daily life, served as means for dealing with frustrations, and was a way to have fun. Interestingly, these emotional and psychological benefits could be obtained even when a woman was not actually working in the garden. Florence spoke of how she felt energized simply walking by the garden after a long day and Chris related that just sitting in the garden gazebo was "meaningful and peaceful" for her.

*Social benefits.* Gardening also helped the women relate better to others and improve their communication skills while providing opportunities to socialize with each other and the program facilitators. Relationships with the facilitators are particularly important within the context of homelessness since MacKnee & Mervyn's (2002) study of factors that facilitate or hinder an escape from homeless found that relationships with non-homeless individuals were beneficial in three ways. First, having someone from mainstream society reach out to help them prompted feelings of "respect, encouragement, value, and trust" (p. 298) in homeless individuals. Secondly, creating new relationships with mainstream people helped facilitate a transition into society. Third, mainstream individuals served as role models for values and morals, and made it easier "to aspire towards mainstream dreams such as having a nice home, a loving partner, a car, friends, children, and stability" (p. 300).

#### *Emergent Themes*

*Gardening as metaphor.* Gardening and plants were frequently mentioned as a metaphor for life. Florence viewed a houseplant as "a symbol to me of our life here, and future life." Chris echoed this sentiment when she said, "You see these beautiful things around you, and it reminds you that my life is good and my life is beautiful." For Leslie, the garden symbolized freedom. When asked how she felt about working in the gardening, she replied "For a moment, I feel free." These metaphors demonstrate how the women interpret reality and their experiences in ways that expand their range of options and lead them toward growth and development.

*Gardening as memories.* Two relationships between gardening and memories emerged from the interviews: the women's memories of gardening as children and gardening with their own children as a way to create pleasant memories. Several recalled gardening at school or with parents when they were children. Nadine had gardened with her mother and looked forward to gardening with her own daughter. She said, "I think it'll be good for me and her to have something to remember and do." Debby had been involved in gardening at school and said, "I liked it and I always thought about it." Leslie had gardened with her father and said,

My father, he know everything about tree, the plant, the season, everything...we had tomato...We have *Rosa*, rose. I love roses. They are different color, all around, like red, white. My father put the, uh, the one tree, the one piece with the other plant, together.

[Translator says, "Oh, yeah. In English, they call that 'grafting'."]

Recollection of these pleasant memories of a time when life was happier and less difficult served to build hope for a return to a normal life in the women.

*Gardening outside the garden.* Many of the women chose to practice their newly acquired gardening skills in areas outside the garden. Florence had a little houseplant in her apartment and Nadine said, "We got some stuff growing in the front of our yard, like peppers

and stuff in our yard out of the little potting plant things.” Debby was looking forward to purchasing a pot in which she could plant seeds from a “little package of Baby’s Breath” she had received in the mail and Patty had already bought a big flowerpot so she and her children could plant some flowers in front of their apartment. Chris spent “three or four days a week on a regular basis tending to my own gardening and upkeep of the area surrounding my apartment.” This transfer of learning to useful contexts outside the classroom is an essential goal of adult education.

### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

This study provided relevant information on the benefits of a unique educational intervention for homeless women. In contrast to typical adult education programs for the homeless, this intervention was not based on an economic model and featured a developmental rather than remedial approach to learning. Historically, investments in adult education programs for homeless individuals have been viewed as a means of helping them achieve economic self-sufficiency. This goal of economic self-sufficiency is related to the expectation that investments in education should result in some tangible economic return for society because sponsors of these programs support the point of view that an individual’s economic self-sufficiency contributes to the economic development, social growth, and maintenance of society. The predominance of this viewpoint leads to the development of adult education programs that do not take into account the perspective of homeless individuals or research on factors that help or hinder an escape from homelessness.

While societal and political values are involved in adult education program planning (Cervero & Wilson, 1999) and there are value conflicts over the priority of various goals of homeless adult education programs and the appropriate means to use to achieve these goals, a learner-centered focus is a mainstay of adult education practice. Based on this principle, the ideal adult education program for the homeless would lead to not only job skill acquisition but also prepare the learners for living and learning in a changing and complex society, and encompass the development of hope, self-efficacy, and empowerment among the participants. To be truly effective, such programs should also address the factors that led to the participants becoming homeless such as psychological problems, substance abuse, lack of education and subsequent low-wage employment, marital and family issues, and sexual and physical abuse. The result of such a comprehensive program would be both the acquisition of a specific level of skills and knowledge directly related to the learners’ needs as well as increased feelings of self-efficacy and hope, which are essential ingredients for escaping homelessness (Epel et al., 1999; MacKnee & Mervyn, 2002).

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