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**Women Reading for Education, Affinity & Development (WREAD):  
An Evaluation of a Semi-Structured Reading Discussion Group  
For African American Female Adult Literacy Students**

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**Abstract:** Women Reading for Education, Affinity & Development (WREAD), a reading discussion group geared toward African American female adult literacy students with self-defined histories of trauma, was an outgrowth of research identifying links between trauma, women's struggles with literacy, and the need to be conscious of emotional health concerns in adult education classrooms. The structure of the group was grounded in theories of relational-cultural theory (RCT), critical pedagogy and black feminist theory; and combined thematically arranged literary materials (i.e., poetry, texts and films), critical group discussion and cultural activities. The use of a mixed-method, feminist qualitative analytic approach illustrated how educational interventions like WREAD can lead to literacy gains, improved psychological self-awareness and positive group connections among women with difficult socioemotional histories.

**Purpose of Research & Theoretical Foundations**

Anecdotal and research examinations suggest that a disproportionate number of female adult literacy students are trauma survivors (Horsman, 1999; 2004). More specifically, events like rape, domestic violence and homelessness, have often played a direct role in women's literacy attainment as issues such as isolation, low self-esteem and depression challenge their ability to engage with the academic realm (Horsman, 1990). The stigma faced by women who have been isolated due to their literacy and emotional struggles also creates additional challenges (Horsman, 1999). These findings highlight the need for innovative approaches to adult literacy education that consider the destabilizing nature of trauma and emphasize creating educational spaces that both support scholarship and provide a sense of safety (Alderson & Twiss, 2003; Magro, 2006/2007). Though Horsman (2004) asserts that adult literacy teachers should not become therapists, she and others stress that educators must be willing to create bridges between the academic and the affective if they are going to constructively serve the female students who disproportionately attend their programs. Empathic teaching strategies that set compassionate boundaries and help to facilitate well-being may help learners who have survived difficult events negotiate intense feelings and engage more directly with content-based materials (Alderson & Twiss, 2003; D'Amico, 2003; Horsman, 2004)

Women Reading for Education, Affinity & Development (WREAD) was a reading discussion group designed to address the need for emotionally responsive adult literacy practices. It also added to the literature by explicitly focusing on African American women and exploring how intersectionality impacted educational engagement and healing. WREAD was also unique in that it integrated theoretical principles from relational cultural theory (RCT) (Miller, 1986), critical literacy theory (Freire, 1973/1993) and black feminist theory (Collins, 2000) to structure the group as well as outcomes and evaluation.

**Theoretical Foundations**

The utilization of Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) principles in WREAD was embedded in its understanding of the relational context of trauma. RCT builds upon clinical,

feminist and developmental theories in its attempt to explain the importance of relationships in women's lives (Miller, 1986). As a challenge to traditional models of development that are based on men's experiences and valorize separation/individuation, RCT underscores female interdependence and the growth-promoting aspects of relationship (Miller, 1986; Jordan & Dooley, 2000). Within the RCT paradigm, trauma becomes a form of interpersonal disconnection. Though this can be a source of anguish, it can also become the basis for enhanced mutuality and self-awareness if affirming dialogue within a group context is supported (Miller, 1988). According to Herman (1997) intervention with women experiencing trauma must occur "within the context of relationships" (p. 133) as this is the only way that the relational damage caused by trauma can be adequately addressed. Group work not only meshes with RCT's communal focus, but it appears that through the processes of validation, empowerment, self-empathy and mutuality women experience a diminished sense of isolation and an increased capacity to respect and honor their strengths (Fedele & Harrington, 1990).

Critical literacy theory offers a challenge to more functional notions of literacy and highlights education's more emancipatory aspects (Freire, 1973/1993; Papen, 2005). More specifically, critical literacy theorists like Paulo Freire, (re)politicize literacy practices and focus on their capacity to dramatically alter individual self-perceptions and stimulate sociopolitical change (Freire, 1973/1993; Papen, 2005). This understanding of literacy moves beyond the deficit paradigm and honors education for its ability to both provide knowledge and support social consciousness raising (Papen, 2005). WREAD's use of critical literacy theory built on the work of scholars who have underscored the importance of personal experience, critical analysis and attention to race, culture and gender-based oppression in teaching and learning in adult literacy (Mezirow, 2000; hooks, 1994). Indeed, women who have survived trauma might find these types of practices especially valuable, since the focus is on learning and self-awareness, not "overcoming" their difficulties (Kilgore & Bloom, 2002).

WREAD incorporated black feminist perspectives through the primary use of texts by African American female authors. Black feminist theory underscores the need to include the lived experiences of black women in learning environments in order to make the curriculum relevant and to enhance student engagement (Sheared, 1999). These writings also facilitated dialogue around central themes, encouraged personal reflection and allowed learners to examine the multilayered nature of their experiences as women of color who have experienced trauma/violence. Reading the works of African American women and supporting discussion around identified themes also honored the knowledge(s) that participants brought with them to the classroom and utilized their insights as a source for transformation (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984/2000). Increased understanding of their experiences as trauma survivors and women of color also allowed learners to examine their experiences within a larger, sociocultural context.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Group members were recruited through their participation in a community based literacy agency's adult literacy program. African-American female adult learners (ages 18 and above) with a self-reported history of trauma/violence and documented reading levels between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade level (which corresponds with the "literacy" through "medium" reading levels on the Test of Adult Basic Education [TABE]) were eligible for the group.

### Structure of the Group

WREAD met twice a week for 2.5 hours. The readings and discussion were organized around distinct themes (i.e., erasure, exposure and renewal) to motivate participants and facilitate the introduction of emotionally difficult topics. These themes were reflective of a movement toward recovery from trauma that promoted safety and also supported remembrance, the expression of grief and healing relationships with others (Herman, 1997). Participants read three books that aligned to the chosen themes: *Passing* by Nella Larsen (theme of erasure), *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat (theme of exposure) and *The Prisoner's Wife* by Asha Bandele (theme of renewal). The use of interactive didactic techniques and audiovisual presentations were employed to support participants' engagement, as these strategies were found to be helpful for improving reading fluency and comprehension with struggling adult readers (Burns, 2006). Community outings supplemented these learning activities in order to enhance comprehension and promote connections between reading, knowledge, healing and the larger world. Students also created collages and art pieces that encouraged them to creatively reflect on their past experiences, strengths they possessed, goals they had for the future and ways they believed they had grown over the course of the group.

A mixed-methods approach, that incorporated feminist qualitative techniques, was utilized to collect and analyze data, given that it generated the descriptive details necessary to develop rich understandings about WREAD's impact on participants (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Kleinman, 2007). Feminist perspectives also pay particular attention to the gendered nature of experience and oppression as well and underscore the resilience of oppressed populations (Kleinman, 2007).

The research outcomes centered on the educational, psychological and interpersonal effects of the group, and included (a) changes in participants reading skills (b) shifts in perceptions of their traumatic experiences and (c) the meaning of the relationships formed in the group. At the beginning and end of the intervention, participants completed the reading section of the TABE survey test and an adapted version of the 31-item Trauma Relevant Assumptions Scale (TRAS) (Buck, Kindt, Arntz, van den Hout & Schouten, 2008), a visual analogue scale which assessed the valence and rigidity of beliefs associated with the self and traumatic experiences. Semi-structured pre- and post-group interviews provided basic demographic information and background on participants' traumatic histories and supported reflection on how they perceived their learning, past experiences and relational development. Detailed facilitator field notes and transcriptions from audio-taped group sessions were also reviewed in concert with participants' academic portfolios. The notes and transcriptions were examined using a qualitative analysis program (e.g., Atlas-ti) that helped to structure the data for theory-building (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009). Quantitative analysis using SPSS-19 allowed for the assessment of changes on the TABE and TRAS across the course of the group.

### Results

WREAD met for 7 months and a total of 7 women were involved with the group. The average age of the participants was 48 (range: 27 to 60) and their average reading level was 2.7 years (range: 1.7 – 4.5). The participants described a range of traumatic experiences including: sexual abuse, rape, domestic violence, substance abuse, homelessness, multiple family deaths, chronic illness, depression, serious injury and incarcerated family members.

All of the participants were single and all were unemployed; most received social security payments or other governmental assistance. On average they had 3 children, only one woman had children who were school-aged. All of the participants reported a history of being “slow learners” and of having struggles with school. Two had high-school diplomas and three had developmental disabilities. Most had attended the literacy program for about 4 years and they came to classes approximately 4 days per week. Most did not have any experience with groups that were women-centered or focused on emotional concerns.

### **Educational Outcomes**

In terms of educational outcomes, 4 of 7 participants showed gains in their reading levels at the end of the group; three showed gains of on average one grade level. Though these results were not significant, more than 70% of the participants “strongly agreed” that the group helped them improve their reading skills, pronounce words better, and understand what they read better. One participant exclaimed during the post-group interview: “I think I learned how to read pretty good! I think I learned how...for real, I really believe that my reading done went up a little bit!” One participant focused on how the group bolstered her esteem and helped her feel more confident: “I like the fact that you know [the literacy program] and this, the women's group, WREAD, it um,[pause] it really helped me to have confidence in myself...I know now, I don't have to doubt myself, just try it.”

In post-group interviews, participants also noted that the outings to museums, speaking engagements and community events exposed them to new ideas and allowed them to think about the world in a different way. One participant discussing a museum visit to see art work created by artists who were not formally trained and who struggled with disabilities, said: “I didn't think people didn't know how to read, could do a lot of other stuff...”

### **Psychological Outcomes**

With regards to their traumatic experiences, the results from the TRAS, though also non-significant, suggested that after the group, participants were slightly less positive in terms of self perceptions, but more positive about their views of the world. More specifically, three participants presented as more positive in terms of their self assumptions and five students indicated a less negative view of the world after the group. Furthermore, 60% of participants “strongly agreed” that WREAD helped them understand their personal issues better with the majority highlighting the importance of talking about their difficult experiences. Many of the participants could also relate to the characters in the books and impassioned classroom dialogues about issues like conflicted mother-daughter relationships; colorism in the black community, domestic violence and the impact of incarceration on families were the result.

Though the groups structure and thematic focus emphasized healing, it appears that having an opportunity to reveal what happened to them, sometimes for the first time, was much more important. As one participant noted: “What I liked best about the group we was able to talk about...our situations...it was very helpful to me because I kept this within...myself for a long time, so I'm glad I got it out, now I feel much better.” Another acknowledged that talking also helped her make sense of what happened to her, she said: “I really enjoyed the group because it brought a lot of things out of me where I could understand myself better...what happened and you know, and it wasn't my fault that it happened...I was able to express myself on how I felt about a lot of things...in life...” One participant described a greater feeling of control over her life while linking it to the belief in the spiritual that also permeated the group: “I know who I am

now...I know now that I have power. I really understand now that I have power and between God and me, I'm in control of my life and nobody else."

### **Interpersonal Outcomes**

Being able to speak openly appeared to be linked to the strong connections made in the group; 100% of the participants "strongly agreed" that they developed positive and supportive relationships with the other women. And all spoke about how other participants became resources in their lives. Said one participant: "I'm glad I got this class and that I'm here with my friends to talk about y'know different things among us." A strong commitment to making sure that what was said in the group remained confidential created a safe space and supported the development of connections that went beyond the group; participants reported that they ate lunch together on several occasions and called one another to check-in. In general, the group became a type of community – a place where one could cry, laugh and get advice, sometimes on the same day. One participant summed up her experience by identifying how the other women had changed her: "I don't have a lot of friends, I don't have a lot of people I hang around...and these people became my friends...I learned from them how to be brave..."

### **Overall Impact**

In general, over the course of WREAD participants used the group dialogues and the texts to gain insight regarding their pasts and move toward cultivating a sense of themselves that was not defined by their obstacles. One participant said the group helped her see her difficulties as "fixable" though not necessarily "solvable" - a perspective that allowed her to both acknowledge her pain and plan a course of action. Participants utilized the texts to reflect on how women's life choices were influenced by issues like culture, race, class, marital status, children, age and/or mental illness as well, which encouraged them to make more balanced assessments about their own challenges and coping strategies. Finally, the supportive group dynamic facilitated increased investment in asserting themselves, as the participants learned to set more self-affirming boundaries with family members or partners, and reflect more critically on their "rights" within a range of relationships.

### **Implications for Adult Education**

WREAD has the potential to positively alter educational programming at adult literacy programs and broaden the impact that these organizations have on the multiply challenged populations with whom they work. First, since WREAD is geared toward students whose complicated needs often make them difficult to serve, these students could become a more integral part of adult literacy programs. This not only allows their stories to be heard, but it will also provide a more accurate rendering of what adult literacy students require if they are to thrive.

Secondly, WREAD could also shift how students themselves perceive and engage with challenging situations. Indeed, the support they receive from the group could help them develop skills they will need to tackle similarly demanding situations in the future. This could have a beneficial impact on academic help-seeking behavior, their motivation to succeed in the classroom, and their ability to access employment opportunities. Providing these learners with the chance to both learn from and reflect on their pasts—in an environment that supports creative expression and collaboration—could also have the long-term benefit of nurturing perceptions of themselves as capable readers and producers of texts.

With regards to research implications, WREAD encourages investigations that challenge and problematize traditional teaching methods used with adults by illuminating how theory can enrich instruction and more explicitly honoring the experiences of adult literacy students with diverse backgrounds. This could result in the creation of theories of practice that more effectively educate and support adult students who experience unique struggles as a result of their educational or psychological histories. WREAD may also encourage the creation of policies that allow education and mental/emotional health concerns to be re-framed within their respective fields. Greater awareness regarding the impact that adult students' mental/emotional health has on their educational experiences could generate collaborative governmental relationships that broaden the funding streams available to adult education programs. In addition, highlighting how social and educational policies intersect could encourage teacher training guidelines that are more inclusive and reflective of perspectives that are from on-the-ground.

Overall, the interdisciplinary nature of this project encourages novel interchanges around literacy education and emotional healing in the fields of adult education, social work and women's/black feminist studies. This type of dialogue could lead to innovative practices that broaden the impact each of these fields has on the populations they typically focus on. Instructors, social workers and academics could in concert bring a distinctive lens to pedagogical practices in adult literacy, inspiring responsive interactions that support learner advocacy and spur a new level of awareness that has broader implications for women's lives. As one student said as she reflected on the larger impact of her involvement in WREAD:

...it'll be another -- another generation that may come behind us, and - and, we gotta be the one to set the example, because we don't set it, then other women going to fall into the same category what - what I went through, and what my mother had went through, and what other women had went through, so we gotta set the 'xample for them

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