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# Contradictions of Agency, Educational Discourses, and Learner Changes: Mexican Women's Enactments of Agency in Family Literacy and their Community

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Keywords: family literacy, immigrant, discourse, agency, mothering

**Abstract:** This qualitative study explored Latina women's use of hegemonic mothering and literacy discourses, encountered in an adult education and family literacy program. Findings revealed that participants were simultaneously constrained by *and* appropriated prevalent discourses to achieve goals or advance ideas that challenged normative views of women. Material and social structures also defined which and how participant goals could be pursued. Examining discourses and learner agency and constraints can assist educators and policy makers in better supporting learners to achieve their goals and to examine how social structures and hegemonic ideas shape learner lives, and expand understandings of discourses and agency.

## Introduction

This qualitative study explored how Latina women's use of hegemonic mothering and literacy discourses, encountered in an adult education and family literacy program, compromised and enhanced their agency, and capacity to promote and achieve their desires. Hegemonic discourses, dominant ideas considered as natural, are seen by many scholars as either limiting *or* enhancing a person's agency. This study found that participants were simultaneously constrained by *and* made use of prevalent discourses to achieve goals or advance ideas that challenged normative views of women. Despite new ideas, information, or support encountered in the family literacy program, material and social structures limited agency. These aspects of life defined which and how goals could be pursued. Paradoxically, participants also drew on normative discourses from their ethnic community and the family literacy program to develop a sense of self and fulfill desires. This study demonstrates how discourses, adult education opportunities, and social and material considerations can restrict and provide opportunities for learner agency and development. It contributes to the literature on learner ideas of self and learner outcomes by further exposing that learner achievements are not simply a result of educational programs or learner desire. Rather, learner achievements—educational and personal—are reliant on prevalent discourses, enactments of agency and identities, learner goals, and available material and social resources.

Schooling is a primary context in which social norms and ideas of success are transmitted (Foucault, 1980). Adult education policy and programming are instrumental in constructing learners' identities, encouraging or limiting their agency, placing and reassigning blame for lack of achievement, and influencing the ways that learners seek to be successful and/or change the structure of their society (Sparks, 2001). Even Start, a federally funded family literacy educational program targeting poor and immigrant families, conveys norms about schooling, identity, and parenting behaviors, rendering it particularly important to study how discourses

inherent in curricula and program standards, interact with participant's enactments of agency, and social realities. Many family literacy programs are based in two overarching discourses. First, the U.S. Good Mother Discourse conveys notions of literacy (Cook-Gumperz, 2006) and parenting (Gasden, 2004); the "good mother" sacrifices her desires to raise a literate child (Griffith & Smith, 2005). She is responsible for the cognitive, material, and emotional welfare of the child. Second, the autonomous literacy discourse, the primary understanding of literacy in the United States, constructs literacy as a neutral skill, independent of social context, that any person can acquire (Street, 1983). Policies such as welfare reform advocate that literacy and the accompanying benefits (e.g., employment) route is open to all who take advantage of education. These particular views of literacy and mothering do not account for social, psycho-social, or structural differences that may a) affect a person's ability to obtain the skill or behavior; b) be at cross-purposes with other communities' construction of literacy or mothering, or c) create differences in identity making (Ahearn, 2001).

This study sought to answer the following research questions: How do Latina women in family literacy programs enact agency within the program and their daily lives? How does participation in family literacy assist women in enacting agency, if at all? How do Latina women use, negotiate, or disrupt mothering and literacy discourses to mitigate differences or enhance similarities between themselves and ideals promoted in family literacy and their communities? The feminist post-structural framework emphasized how patriarchy, classism, racism, and other ideas that define a person structure a social system (Weedon, 1987) and incorporated ideas of discourse, power, subjectivity, and agency. Agency was conceived as an interlocking of power, discourses, and social positioning that is historically, geographically, politically, and culturally situated (Ahearn, 2001) and defined as utilizing skills "that enable individuals to conduct their own self-portraits and self-narratives and that thereby enable them to take charge of their lives" (Meyers, 2002, p. 5). Discourse was understood as ideas that regulate what is accepted as commonsensical in society and how power is exercised (Foucault, 1980).

### **Methodology**

The researcher used a Narrative Inquiry approach, a case study design (Patton, 2002), and analysis of narrative (Polkinghorne, 1995) as a methodology. Five Mexican mothers enrolled in a southwestern Even Start program participated in the study. The primary data collection strategy was multiple in-depth life history interviews (26) with participants. Interviews focused on past and current events in their lives to capture participants' goals and desires, self constructions, choices, understandings of changes occurring in their lives (e.g., educational gains, moves, having children), and conceptions of power or powerlessness. Other ethnographic strategies used—analysis of program texts and documents, informal conversations with program staff, participant-observation, researcher journal, video diaries—helped identify prevalent and conflicting discourses and contextualize and elucidate each woman's role (e.g. student, mother, daughter) and choices available to them. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Guided by the research questions, the researcher repeatedly read transcripts to identify narratives and prevalent discourses. These were analyzed to identify how participants creatively used, complied with, or negotiated mothering and literacy discourses.

## Findings

### *Prevalent Discourses*

*The Literacy Discourse.* The analysis revealed that normative literacy and mothering discourses were present in the Even Start program. The Literacy Discourse was prevalent in class content and materials, language of the staff, and the narratives of the women and focused on autonomous literacy skills that were considered to provide success in school and their futures. Education was thought to be empowering for these women. The participants believed that being educated would assist them and their families in having better lives. For example, Nelli stated, “I tell to them [children] that the school is very important because they can have a big house and good car and they can get money to live better.”

Participants amplified the Literacy Discourse with *educación*—moral and social values (Reese, et al., 1995). Carmen said, “when I hear people talking very politely or when they have respect to anothers ... I think this person has the education.” Their ideas corresponded to the hegemonic Literacy Discourse, but also integrated social standing and respect, notions that are not as present in the U.S. Literacy Discourse. Furthermore, while the Literacy Discourse is often promoted as a U.S. based discourse, these participants evidenced a strong belief in this ideology before moving to the U.S. or enrolling in Even Start.

*The U.S. Good Mother Discourse.* The Even Start program evinced a strong White, middle-class mothering discourse, in that the perceived duties of a mainstream mother—literacy, school attendance, promotion of intensive mothering—were transmitted via curriculum, classes, and staff. Miss Sandra spoke of the mother’s “major role” and how Even Start “lifts them up” to be an appropriate “role model.” Mothers were responsible for early literacy development, academic support for school-age children, and to make learning “fun.” While classes focused on literacy and childcare, the staff interviews and conversations focused on helping the women achieve independence, self-confidence, and dominant middle-class parenting practices (e.g., enrolling children in after school activities, less vigilant parenting).

*The Mexican Good Mother Discourse.* Participants generally perceived their primary role as *mother*, defining mothering as a full-time job requiring active participation and reflection. Duties of the mother were to act as moral exemplar, transmit ideas of appropriate behavior, inculcate the importance of being a unified family and a good citizen, and guide their children into the realities of the world (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994). They considered themselves central to the wellbeing of the family and were responsible for the care of all family members. Participant narratives gave insight to another discourse embedded in their mothering role—Good Wife. This role entailed attending to the husband’s needs inclusive of fulfilling a companionship role.

Moreover, they saw themselves as the primary support for their child’s academic success. Literacy became infused into childcare activities; Yesmenia described this, “I sit down with him to study. Or when I’m giving him a bath, I’m telling him words, ‘Spell them for me, letter by letter.’” Women considered these enjoyable activities, yet their narratives demonstrated that literacy development became central to their childrearing duties, requiring labor and time.

### *Using Discourses with Agency*

Even Start offered new possibilities to learners perhaps explaining why women agentively appropriated aspects of these discourses. Participants utilized features such as the need to develop their child’s literacy and language skills to justify their own continued schooling, to promote their self-worth and ability, draw their husbands into family activities, to see themselves as being a part of mainstream society, and to garner more power in their homes.

*Support for educational pursuits.* The women drew on the U. S. discourses to present Even Start as a “safe” and appropriate place for women to attend school; its focus on mothering and children’s literacy aligned with ethnic discourses. At other times they used them to contest patriarchal structures in their homes. Guadalupe employed a discourse of fairness—it was not “fair” to be in the house “all the time” and combined it with the Literacy Discourse, stating that by attending she could “learn the language” and “get a good job.” Furthermore, she claimed that studying was “good for the whole family.” The discourses embedded in the program assisted her in justifying and claiming her desire to go to school. However, she also adhered to the Mexican Good Mother stating that she had the “house clean” and food ready for her husband and children.

*Family togetherness.* The emphasis on children’s literacy and “fun” supported participants’ desire to engage men in family activities. Board games were introduced as a tool to build literacy skills. Staff endorsed board games as a fun family learning activity; mothers used them to draw their husbands into family time, justifying them as literacy activities, appropriating (Perry & Purcell-Gates, 2005) the Literacy Discourse to support their ideas of a nuclear family.

*Expanded power and status.* Participants drew on the Literacy Discourse to demonstrate their growing role in the family. Carmen said, “My husband he knows how to talk English, but he don’t know how to write it and read ... I am all the time helping my son with his homework.” Husbands asked their wives to correct letters and attributed children’s academic progress to mothers’ efforts. This gave women greater prestige and inclusion in family decisions, in part, because the women demanded their labor and schooling be recognized as important.

Increased literacy skills gave women a literate identity (Bartlett, 2007) garnering respect beyond the family. Library patrons recognized Olivia’s extensive knowledge of books. Guadalupe related, “When I show the [GED] diploma he [husband] was very excited. ... He say to other people, ‘Oh, my wife got a GED diploma.’” Her learning, as manifested by the GED Certificate, gave her status.

Participants also became seen as role models for other women. Carmen recounted, “she [site director] give an example for things I am doing.” Carmen’s pride and sense of achievement were apparent; she was “happy” when “all the new students” learned about her success. Carmen, by inculcating appropriate mothering and literacy behaviors, was seen as skilled and knowledgeable. The women’s narratives highlighted how enacting Even Start ideologies allowed them to be recognized as good mothers and educated women. Contrarily, this praise also further regulated them into normative mothering behaviors.

*A place in mainstream society.* The women sought to become fuller members of mainstream society. They reported that the English language skills acquired through family literacy classes helped them assert their right to be recognized as part of mainstream society. Nelli revealed, “I feel more sure about myself. ... I can talk with the teachers of my children. ... When I didn’t know English I have to call something to translate the conversation,” demonstrating how schooling supported independent interaction with the public. Learning English and mainstream modes of literacy and language assisted these women to participate in mainstream organizations and settings (e.g., confront rude store clerks, interact with native speakers, interview for jobs).

*Resisting the mainstream.* At times normative ideas were appropriated and used in contradictory ways to serve their own beliefs. For example, in this Even Start program the Literacy Discourse became a means to teach cultural heritage and first language retention. The bilingual books given to families were meant to help women engage children in literacy activities. Conversely, these books, meant to reinforce hegemonic ideas of parental engagement,

were used by participants to support what are considered non-assimilating immigrant behaviors—first language retention and pride in Mexican heritage.

#### *Constraints of Discourses, Material and Social Structures*

The study also found that participants did not ultimately escape any of the discourses; they worked within them, making changes and ruptures in normative ideas. Their actions, choices and presentations of self were restricted by life experiences, their ethnic community's understanding of mother and woman, program views of mothers and education, social institutions, and material realities.

*Discursive constraints.* Since a person gains a measure of value and prestige by playing a recognized role in society (Butler, 2004), giving up this role can mean giving up one's place in society (Ahearn, 2001). While participants contested the Mexican Good Mother Discourse, the mother's presence at home often took precedence over their individual desires. While Yesmenia disputed the Good Wife Discourse by drawing on the U.S. Good Mother and Literacy discourses she stopped going to classes as they impeded her ability to care for her son per the Mexican good mother ideology. However, she started in-home classes with neighborhood women, indicating agency to pursue her educational goals. Despite declarations of wanting more, participants put desires aside to fulfill their recognized mothering duties, demonstrating how discourses can infiltrate the fabric of our lives.

Participant narratives demonstrated how adhering to U.S. norms brought censure from extended family and friends, illustrating the hazards of conforming to a culturally different discourse. Olivia stated, "Sometimes I think I not a good mother because I don't behave like these Hispanic mothers. ... friends say, 'You don't cook for your daughters? Who feed them?'" Carmen, reflecting the Even Start message of early literacy development, was snubbed for giving learning games as gifts. Adapting to new discourses can bring a variety of consequences.

*Material constraints.* While these mothers primarily focused on gaining more power in the home by utilizing ideas from the family literacy program, their ability to do so was curtailed by financial and material need. Olivia explained remaining in a confining marriage, "money, you know, that is the reason that I am staying right here." Exceeding their mothering role could lead to social and financial censure and the inability to raise children as desired. Participants were dependent on their husbands economically and did not have local family to support them. This finding demonstrates both the precarious position of women who contest their role and their awareness of social structure.

*Structural constraints.* Choices surrounding work were similarly impacted; all participants, despite their stated desire to work, said they would wait to follow their career goals until their children finished school. This may in part be due to the mothering discourse. However, it could also be due to the limitations of their immigration status; for example, for four of the participants their undocumented status denied them access to jobs. This finding reflects the multiple factors that can impede adults' ability to take engage in learning opportunities or meet specified measures of success, such as employment gains.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

In this study women agentively drew on the Literacy Discourse and mainstream mothering discourses as expressed in the Even Start program to support their personal and family goals. They appropriated aspects of these discourses to present a particular identity. Often their desired identities and goals extended boundaries of what they could do or who they could be in their Mexican immigrant community. The findings illustrate how hegemonic discourses can

expand possibilities for persons who live outside of the purported ideal. Participants appropriated discourses for their own purposes or claimed aspects as already existing in their ethnic discourses. This perspective ascribes agency to adult learners. Furthermore, the women's agentive use of discourses disrupts the binary between two discourses (e.g., Mexican immigrant mother and White, middle-class mother) establishing that spaces are opened up as women negotiated specific contexts in personal ways, indicating that a diversity of practices should be legitimized.

Findings also demonstrate the regulatory power of particular discourses, for example, linking their educational efforts to their children's academic accomplishments reinforced the importance of the mother's literacy and labor in creating children's school success. This study can inform adult educators and policy makers as to how discourses shape educational programs and legislation, thereby driving particular or simplistic views and outcomes for learners. It also erodes the idea that education is an untroubled path to success. With this understanding curriculum and programming could be revised to better meet learners' goals within their material, social, and discursive boundaries. Also providing adult learners with opportunities to analyze social structures and discourses.

Learners' agency can be limited by multiple factors—available and conflicting discourses (Butler, 2004), needing to belong to a community (Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989), and material factors (Hennessey, 2000). A theoretical implication of this study is the loosening of the totalizing hold of a discursive analysis to incorporate a feminist material lens (Hennessey, 2000), thereby recognizing the social and material constraints on adult learners that affect which and to what extent learners can employ discourses. Practically, this study can assist practitioners in understanding learner conflicts, possibly avoiding the outcome of ascribing adult learners with deficit qualities, such as, dropping out of school as lack of motivation. Practitioners need to be aware of competing claims for women's attention and labor, addressing decisions, such as Yesmenia's dropping out, with flexible routes of educational access. Furthermore, these findings could help shape assessment practices; programs may find it hard to report gains in particular areas (e.g., students placed in jobs) when ethnic discourses or social institutions impede students in achieving these measures.

In sum, this study offers insight into how adult education can provide immigrant women a place to negotiate and understand new discourses that contest their home culture and opportunities to expand a sense of self. Examining discourses and learner agency and constraints in tandem can assist educators and policy makers in supporting learners to achieve their goals, and expand theoretical understandings of discourses and agency giving rise to the possibility of an educational project that assists learners in examining how social structures and hegemonic ideas (race, poverty, mothering) shape their lives.

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