Figuring Identities and Taking Action:

The tension between strategic and practical gender needs within a critical literacy program

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This article presents data from a 10-month case study of a critical literacy writing group for parenting and pregnant young adults. The author focuses on the efficacy of the program to foster the critical literacy skills of two participants. Drawing on field notes and written artifacts and using case study and discourse analysis, the author suggests that, although they redefined their figured identities in the program, the two women's ability to take action in their lives—their selves-in-practice—was contingent on other factors beyond the influence of the Program, such as familial and significant others' influences, which were definitive and integral to who the participants were. Thus, how the participants figured or positioned themselves inside and outside of the program was fluid and sometimes contradictory and greatly influenced by the symmetry between competing figured worlds, in which they participated and the strategic and practical gender needs that informed their positional identities in their day-to-day lives.

Participant success in critical literacy programs, including the one presented in this article, can often appear ambiguous, especially when participant goals are different than program goals. In this article,

I explore the relationship between a critical literacy program's goals and participant needs and the disjuncture that can arise between them. With this in mind, this article addresses these questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by critical literacy programs and program participants in the pursuit of individual and social transformation?
2. How might critical literacy programs help participants negotiate different, often competing needs, to foster individual and social transformation?

I use case study and critical discourse analysis methods to present how a critical literacy program (hereafter, *Program*) fostered critical literacy skills development, such as reflection and perspective sharing. I juxtapose these efforts with two participants'—Lynn's and Maria's— everyday concerns and issues and how these concerns and issues arose in their writing and in group discussions. This juxtaposition offers insight into the fluid and complex nature of identity development and the challenges this presents to critical literacy programming.

I draw on the work of Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (2001) to define how, as a substantiation of a specific *figured world*, the Program informed Lynn's and Maria's identities but could not alleviate the influence of other figured worlds, such as motherhood and romantic love. I conclude with an analysis of the reciprocal relationship of practical and strategic gender needs (Moser, 1989) to suggest how critical literacy programs might conceptualize participant needs to inform program design and activities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Critical Literacy
Freire's work (1970/1990; 1973; Freire & Macedo, 1987) plays a significant role in my understanding of critical literacy. His notion of "coming to consciousness" (*conscientization*) as a way of defining and carrying out action against oppressive elements of one's reality, reflected the type of interactions I wanted to facilitate. I wanted to create a program that fostered dialogic communication as a way for participants to reveal who they are and to begin to think critically about the forces that have shaped their lives and how best to

respond individually and collaboratively to those forces. By sharing their writing, participants would identify generative themes and together—through discussion and continued writing—they would create new understandings of who they are and what they wanted to do and how. I saw this pedagogical process as supporting their "right to know better what they already know" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 157) and facilitating their efforts to take actions that transformed their lives.

In drawing on his work, I realized that Freire's ideas about critical literacy programs are mainly based on his experiences in Brazil, Chile, and Guinea-Bissau, bifurcated societies in which his program participants were overtly oppressed. Through his work, Freire wanted to transform social and political structures by revealing to the oppressed and the oppressor the insidious, yet overt effects of existing power relations. As Baird (1999) noted, for Freire, liberatory pedagogy was inherently political. He wanted to effect political and economic change. Freire, however, recognized that the United Sates is not, in general, a bifurcated society, at least not to the extent that Brazil was during the 1950s and 1960s. Critical literacy programs in the U.S. tend to focus on individual and personal liberation (Baird, 1999) that is often manifested as personal development and awareness. In referring to her program for incarcerated women, Baird wrote that the "process of liberation must be grounded in [participants'] everyday realities" (p. 106), meaning not only should participant lives be the focus of study but also the focus of transformation.

Like Baird, when they write about critical literacy programs in the U.S. or Canada, scholars and practitioners (Houp, 2009; Malicky, Katz, Norton, & Norman, 1997; Park, 2011; Stewart, 2010) often write about individual empowerment and liberation as a program goal. For example, Stewart framed her community college ESL writing course as a place for participants to develop their voices as a means for emancipation. Similarly, Houp wondered, "to what degree can the pursuit of programmatic goals accommodate and build on students' lives, personal goals, and interests…" (p. 699). They and others (Bee, 1993; Malicky, et al., 1997; Park, 2011) used participant lives as a pedagogical tool to develop literacy skills, particularly writing skills, as a means for personal transformation. And like

the Program described in this article, this dual focus—develop participants' critical literacy skills *and* their writing skills as part of a larger, more mainstream educational endeavor—is designed to help participants become more economically viable.

Evident in these U.S. and Canadian critical literacy program descriptions is that the oppression women often faced was neither overt nor pernicious but hegemonic and equivocal. It was often enmeshed within meaningful relationships, so that the "oppressor" was often a loved one. As Wikelund, Reder, and Hart-Landsberg (1992) posited, transformation in such contexts might require the "potential change in or loss of [participants'] well-established and mutually satisfying social networks that contribute to their sense of independence and self-esteem as contributing members of their communities" (p. 9). As other critical theorists have noted, Freire's conceptualization of oppression does not consider this dynamic and complex manifestation of oppression, an oppression that often emanates from people's most intimate and personal experiences.

Stromquist (2014), for example, counters what she called Freire's abstract conceptualization of oppression and liberation with a call for greater emphasis on participant positionality and the relationship of knowledge to power. Although literacy, she posited, can create a sense of self-efficacy and even *conscientization*, ultimately praxis is contingent on explicitly identifying the oppressor and on taking collaborative action. Stromquist referenced the history of feminist activism to reveal the links between localized consciousness raising, skills and strategies development, and praxis to suggest that empowerment is multi-dimensional and can only begin by taking into account participants' experiences and feelings. These experiences and feelings go beyond political and economic considerations to include gendered, classed, racialized, and cultural ways of being.

Similarly, Weiler (1991), Gore (1993), Ellsworth (1989), Welch (1994), and Jackson (1997), among others, have posited that feminist pedagogy adds a complexity to Freirean liberatory pedagogy. It forefronts participant experience and feelings as content for *conscientization* and praxis. In referencing female participants' needs, Jackson wrote: "What I want, and what I cannot have without

feminist pedagogy, is a theory of education which, whilst recognizing difference, centralizes and politicizes women's oppression, and which works to break down hierarchical structures" (p. 466). Weiler, too, argued for a more situated theory of oppression and subjectivity, one that recognizes women's unique experiences.

In lieu of absolute truth and standardized practices born of androcentric theories, Ellsworth (1989) and Weiler (1991) advocated for teachers who cultivate differences using gender, race, class, and culture as sources of knowledge. They, however, problematized the role of teachers and their ability to do this in light of their positionality and power. Ellsworth and Weiler raised concerns about teachers who make claims to truth or empowerment, especially when white male teachers who work with women of color, as was the case in the Program described in this article. What is needed, Ellsworth (1989) wrote, is a decentering of teacher authority through conscious recognition of the teacher's voice as "partial, multiple, and contradictory" (p. 312). Weiler (1991) suggested that the teacher must support participants' efforts to be "theorists of their own lives by interrogating and analyzing their own experiences" (p. 462).

The decentering of instructor authority and problematizing of androcentric conceptualizations of oppression and liberatory pedagogy opens up praxis to a potentiality for which Freire could not account for, even as his work is foundational to critical theory and liberatory pedagogy. It places front and center the lives of participants as content for study and action. Helping participants navigate their own lives by making sense of their experiences and feelings and encouraging them to decide what they must do individually and collectively, proved to be the major challenge of the Program described in this article.

Figured Worlds and Identity Development
I also extended on Freire's work by drawing on Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain's (2001) theory of self-formation as an analytical framework. They said that all contexts are substantiations of particular ideological models, or of *figured worlds.*

They characterized figured worlds as
1. historical phenomenon to which participants are recruited or into which they enter;
2. situated within a time and place, with the social positions of participants defined, in part, by the nature of the interaction and the types of actions in which they are involved;
3. providing participants templates for identity development as they shape participants' language and actions; and
4. constantly evolving through the actions and interactions of participants.

Figured worlds, as narrativized worlds, are typically shaped by those empowered and, hegemonically, by those oppressed by those worlds. For example, a figurative world about terrorism and the dichotomous relationship of a Westernized "us" versus a "foreign them" has been constructed since 9/11 and most recently crystalized with the media attention given to ISIS or Daesh. The construction of the terrorist as "other," even as there are terrorists who look and act similar to us, provides a rationale for all sorts of historically objectionable actions such as torture, surveillance, suspension of habeas corpus, and equating terrorism with religious affiliation and ethnicity.

Although it presents as truth specific beliefs, actions, and practices, a figured world, to the extent to which it allows for dialogical interaction, can be transformed through participant interaction. For example, there have been recent challenges to the construction of terrorism, most recently with the counter-response in the U.S. to those who would exclude Syrian refugees as an immigrant-eligible group based solely on ethnicity and religion. However, more monological figured worlds can close down interaction and limit what is possible and acceptable.

In their ethnographic work, Holland et al. (2001) and others (Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996) showed how figured worlds informed the identity of participants in such disparate contexts as Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) meetings, the Tij Culture of Nepal, and heterogeneous romantic relationships. They concluded that the extent to which a person substantiates a figured world correlates with the extent to which that figured world informs that person's

identity and facilitates her positioning among others. For example, alcoholics with diverse perspectives and backgrounds came to define their addiction and recovery in relation to the AA's 12-step model. In effect, the model serves their needs or helps them make meaning of the world. And thus, alcoholics help sustain, and are usually advocates of, the figured world about alcoholism and alcoholism recovery perpetuated by AA. In this regard, as Holland et al. (2001) noted, "there is a profound connection between identity and practice" (p. 149) in that "building an identity consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities" (p. 145). This idea resonates with Stromquist's (2014), Weiler's (1991), and others' emphasis on the role of positionality and the collective inquiry necessary for *conscientization* and praxis. In adult education, for example, the more a participant meets the expectations of that context, the more she is likely to identify herself—to create a *positional identity*—as the type of student valued in that context. Similarly, the more she is able to draw on experience to make meaning of the world, the more a participant will come to understand her experiences and feelings as legitimate knowledge for acting in the world, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Through our actions and interactions, we become subjectified selves, or *selves-in-practice,* or we become the people we are. The term *selves-in-practice* captures the idea that identity is temporal, "'not an object, but a constant becoming…something we constantly renegotiate during the course of our lives'" (Wenger, 1998, in Merriam, Courtenay, & Baumgartner, 2003, p. 172). Who we are as selves-in practice and how our experiences inform our positional identities have to do, Holland et al. (2001) wrote:

> with the day-to-day and on-the-ground relations of power, deference and entitlement, social affiliation and distance, within the social-interactional, social-relational structures of the world. Narrativized or figured identities, in contrast, have to do with the stories, acts, and characters that make the world a cultural world. Positional identity, as we use the term, is a person's apprehension of her social position in a lived world; that is, depending on the others present, or her greater or lesser access to space, activities, genres, and, through those genres, authoritative voices, or any voices at all (p. xx)

Positional identities can develop unreflectively as one negotiates a self-in-practice within a particular context. And, depending on the figured world(s) substantiated within a particular context and where it falls on a continuum of dialogical and monological discourses, the potentialities of positional identities can extend from static to fluid, from narrowly defined roles to more diverse and even improvisational roles that provide a space for one to act as a self-in-practice.

Holland et al's. (2001) and others' (Roth & Erstad, 2015; Rubin, 2007; Urrieta, 2007) work, however, did not consider how these substantiations inform participant identities, and in turn, selves-in-practice, in distinctively different figured worlds where figured identities are conceptualized differently. They did not consider how the aggregate of figured worlds on which a person draws to define herself informs her actions and thoughts in a specific figured world. In drawing on our and others' performances in different figured worlds and those social positions we value, we figure our identities and give representation to those types of people we are trying to be. However, because of the multiplicity of identity and the complexity of oppression, the process of figuring ourselves can come with a cost when who we figure ourselves to be is antithetical to the identities valued in a figured world.

METHODS

The Program

The Program was housed in a neighborhood settlement (social service) house in a large urban center in the Midwest United States. I recruited participants from the alternative high school (established for high school returners; often referred pejoratively as *dropouts*) and from other adult education programs (Basic, GED, and ESL programs).

I sent flyers to all students and teachers and held three information sessions that coincided with the times of the other educational programs. At the information sessions, I shared examples of the writing of participants from other programs I had facilitated, and I talked about the structure and goals of the Program. I identified the goals as two-fold:

1. To augment and support the writing instruction participants were currently receiving in their other academic or adult education courses by providing opportunities to write extensively about their lives and topics of interest, discuss their writing, and revise and publish it (develop writing skills).
2. To provide opportunities to write about and share topics, issues, and concerns important to participants and their families and communities as a way of thinking collaboratively, critically, and creatively and identify beliefs, values, goals, and actions for living (develop critical literacy skills).

The Program met for two hours on Saturdays for 10 months. During the meetings, we (1) discussed the writing done during the previous week as well as field note narratives for the previous session; (2) wrote about our experiences during the week or about any other topics of interest; (3) voluntarily shared aloud and discussed our writing, including any writing we did outside of class; (4) and identified generative themes across the writing and discussed what these meant not only in relation to the author but also to everyone else in the group and within the larger society. During some weeks, I provided short reading passages related to themes from previous weeks. These passages provided different perspectives and were designed to facilitate continued discussion. Each session ended with the women having a chance to revise what they wrote based on discussion.

As a white, male teacher working with Latinas and African American women, issues of authority and positionality resonate with me. In the Program, they raised concerns about my teacher role. I saw my role as problematic, and I agree with Ellsworth (1989) "that no teacher is free of [his] learned and internalized oppressions" (p. 308). Although my teacher positionality as a white, academically-credentialed male would always be at the least physically manifested and significant, I tried to define my role in recognition of the essentiality of participant positionality. I facilitated quietly the writing and discussions of the women, and only when requested provided my perspective as outsider whose legitimacy was left to the women to decide. That is, I said very little during Program sessions, only spoke when asked to (except

when discussing logistics, agendas, and future plans), and then only provided my interpretation to specific experiences or comments.

As part of the Program, I did initiate different project-based activities to extend on interests or concerns the women identified. These included (1) buying children's books with grant funding and talking about emergent and early literacy development; (2) buying disposable cameras to document community events and issues; and (3) periodically inviting the women's family members to participate in sessions as a way of fostering larger discussions of family and community life.

Participants

This article focuses on Lynn and Maria, the two women who attended the program most regularly. Their writing and the two events described later cannot be generalized, but together provide an image of some of the struggles teenage mothers and pregnant teens face. Lynn, a Latina, was 19 years old when the Program started. She was enrolled in the settlement house's alternative high school. She was returning to high school after having had a baby. Her son was 18 months old when the Program began. Lynn lived with her mother and two brothers. She was gregarious and had a good sense of humor. She was quick to respond to the other women's writing, and while often willing to critique what others said and did she was always encouraging and supportive. She joined the Program for the opportunity to develop her writing skills.

Maria was 18 and had arrived in the U.S. from her Central American birthplace a couple months before the Program started. She was enrolled in the settlement house's GED program, with the goal of getting a GED and enrolling at a community college. She was newly married to a Caucasian American and had a 1-year old son she had left with her mother in Central America. Maria joined the Program to improve her English and prepare for the GED.

Maria was shy at the beginning of the Program, but over time, demonstrated a greater willingness to discuss controversial subjects with the other women. As the only non-U.S. born participant and

new to the city, she often shared experiences growing up in a rural area and wrote humorously about life in an American city.

The other 10 women in the Program had similar backgrounds in that all but one were teenage mothers, all had left school when they got pregnant, and all were seeking to extend their education as a means of increasing employability. Only one of the 12 participants was married.

Data Collection and Analyses
Field Notes and Program Narratives. My graduate assistant (GA) and I collected data during the 10-month-long project using case study methods (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2009) and critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2010). We did not audio- or video-record meetings at the request of a couple of the participants. Instead, we wrote field notes and, after each session, used the notes and the women's writing to write a narrative description of the session. We shared the description with the women at subsequent sessions, eliciting feedback. The enlisting of the women in data review served two purposes. First, it clarified our understanding of the previous week's writing and the events discussed. Second, it facilitated the women's effort to appropriate a language of critique around their lives and others' interpretations by hearing how "outsiders" to their experiences understood what they said.

I used a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 2009) to code field note narratives, focusing on topics and perspectives that referenced figured worlds, such as talk of being a mother, daughter, student, *etcetera*. I began the coding process by identifying segments in each narrative that were bounded by a specific topic, such as, for example, a discussion of a work-related experience, a discussion about the role of fathers in children's lives, *etcetera*. It was not uncommon for segments to overlap. By identifying segments, I was able (1) to categorize or code narratives by topics and subsequently categorize topics by theme; (2) to identify the significance of a topic by how much of the class session it took up; (3) to identify the prevalence of different topics over time; and (4) to begin to analyze the nature of interaction around different topics in order to understand how the

topic evolved over time, including the generative themes and possible transformation of thinking revealed.

Participant Writing.   I collected nearly 150 pieces of writing ranging in length from 17 to 386 words. Lynn contributed 34 pieces; Maria, 39. They accounted for about half of the writing, which can be attributed, in part, to their regular attendance. The woman with the third largest body of written work had 23 pieces. In this article, I present two pieces of writing about two events, one involving Lynn and the other, Maria. I selected the writing and events because they (1) took up most of the session in which they were introduced, and they were discussed across multiple sessions; and (2) they reflected the topics of motherhood and lover/spouse relationships (the predominant topics and themes) across time and participants.

Along with field notes, my GA and I typed the women's writing and shared it in subsequent class sessions. We asked the women, in some cases, to further elaborate on what they wrote. Drawing on Gee's (2010) conceptualization of meaning as derived from not only what one says or writes but also from the context in which it is said and written, I used critical discourse analysis to identify implicit and explicit themes and topics as they related to author identity and understanding of figured worlds *within* the context of the Program. Again, using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 2009), I read each woman's writing and identified text that reflected the women's effort to identify themselves as particular types of people and what characterized them as those types of people (identity marker). I identified these passages as the author's effort to create a specific figured identity. I also identified text that reflected the author's response to and interpretation of events in her life and the nature of her interactions with others. I interpreted these interactions and the author's actions and re-actions to different situations as the author's effort to present a particular positional identity. Topics identified in the Program narratives guided analysis of the writing and helped me to understand the rhetorical features the women appropriated in their writing, particularly as to how those features related to making specific claims about themselves. The top six topics and related identity markers identified in the women's writing included:

- *motherhood*, including motherhood as the women's most significant role and how it influenced other aspects of their lives such as intimate relationships or employment.
- *Lover* and/or *spouse*, including issues related to sex, money, child support, living situations, significant other's neglect or absence, and employment.
- *Daughter* and/or *daughter-in-law*, including household relationships (e.g., with siblings and parents).
- *Employee*, including issues of work hours, responsibilities, wages, unemployment, health care, sexual harassment, and supervisor mistreatment.
- *Student*, including school, enrollment, attendance, grades, mistreatment, disrespect, and boredom.
- *Teenager*, including past and present friends, culture, interests, and childhood memories.

These topics were often the focus of discussions each week. In drawing on them, the women both figured identities in specific ways and revealed positional identities as they described themselves in these roles. The data presented in this article does not capture the range of experiences Lynn, Maria, and the other women had. It does not speak to all the roles the women identified as important, and thus it captures only part—although a significant part—of how they figured themselves and used that figured self to act in the world.

Discourse Analysis Tools. I used two of Gee's (2010) discourse analysis tools to guide analyses: the *identity* tool and *figured world* tool. Although they are only two of the many discourse analysis tools that Gee identified, I chose them because they focused my analysis on the relationship between Lynn's and Maria's identities and the figured worlds in which they identified themselves. The *identity tool* focuses on how language is used to enact identities within the Program. Similarly, the *figured world tool* focuses on the stories Lynn and Maria were telling about the world, notably about their beliefs about relationships with others including children and significant others. I was interested in the relationship between these figured worlds and the participants' identity development efforts as a way of

identifying how the figured worlds they constructed informed their identity development and to what effect or at what costs to them.

FINDINGS

Event 1: The Collision of Figured and Positional Identities

Four months into the Program, Lynn wrote about learning that Luke, the man she loved and who was her son's father, was cheating on her. She began by recounting what happened on Valentine's Day earlier that week:

1	Now on Valentine's day me and Luke had a beautiful day. He got me a glass flower, a
2	card, and a teddy bear with chocolates. I had gave him a balloon and a card.
3	Everything was beautiful. I never had a Valentine's day so great. We spent the night at
4	Flip's house. That morning we all got out and went to Luke's house. We came in and
5	Tanya (his niece) was sitting there. I don't know what, but I seen a vase full of
6	flowers, a balloon, a card, and some chocolates sitting on top of the radio. Luke's
7	cousin Jim seen that I peeped at them and tried to hide them. I got mad and walked out
8	of the house. Luke chased me down the hall, and asked what was wrong. All I could
9	say was, "Why is that bitch giving you flowers? Luke you're my man."

Lynn went on to describe the fight that ensued and learning from Luke and his ex-girlfriend (who arrived at the apartment while she was there) that the two were living together. The description of what happened runs just over 250 words beyond the excerpt here. In the excerpt, Lynn sets up a romantic scene (lines 1 through 4) to describe how she felt. She figured her identity as part of a loving relationship, one that the other women in the Program recognized and, as it was being told, approved. The first 4 lines capture a stereotypical Valentine's Day proclamation of love and romance. Lines 4 through 7, however, introduce a conflict by moving the setting away from the place of romance to Luke's house, which turns out to be the central setting for the conflict: (1) the place where the fight occurred and (2) the place where Luke and his ex-girlfriend live.

During the ensuing episode, Lynn argued with Luke, then with the ex-girlfriend, and walked out of the apartment twice only to have

Luke chase her down and bring her back. Before she described her final exit, she wrote:

33	As much as I started to trust again, as much as I started to open up again, he broke my
34	heart. I trusted him so much. He treated me like all these little girls. And I fell for it.
35	Now I am here pregnant with someone I don't care for no more. Luke sold me a
36	dream. All that stuff on getting married, moving, getting a place together,
37	was all a lie.

Lines 36 and 37 return to the theme of romance that Lynn opened the piece with to suggest that she believed Luke's promises and that it was this romantic ideal that defined their relationship. It was a fantasy, she said (line 36), insinuating, in lines 33 and 34, however, that she had fallen for similar promises before. In line 34, she compared herself with other women who have similar experiences, but the crux of the description is that, like with other "little girls," it was her fault for believing Luke. In the end, Lynn built on the figured identity she created at the beginning of the piece, revealing herself to be vulnerable and culpable. What Lynn does is left ambiguous, evidence that she is having trouble figuring herself differently.

During the discussion of the piece, the women first consoled Lynn, related similar experiences they had had, and talked about what Lynn could do. At first, everyone suggested she leave Luke. Lynn, who had written that she no longer cared for him (line 35), said she wanted to go to Luke's apartment after our Saturday session and tell him face-to-face that she was ending the relationship. When someone suggested she might wait a couple of days so she could plan what to do, especially if he refused to break up with her, she, for the first time, expressed reluctance about breaking up.

Lynn's reluctance led the women to discuss the consequences of breaking up. The following discussion excerpt is a compilation of what my GA and I wrote and, later, confirmed with the women.

1	Lettie:	He just will keep botherin you // actin like nothin happened /
2	Denise:	Yep // it take two / He wear her down / She gotta have a plan ready /

3	Lettie:	And if he's your child's daddy // you can't break up completely /
4	Lynn:	I know / That's what makes it so hard / He got to be in their lives / I don't
5		wanna give him an excuse not to /
6	Maria:	I think Lynn's gotta be strong / What do you think will happen?
7	Lynn:	It will be hard / He won't want to break up // so I don't know what will happen /

Denise, in line 2, noted that it is hard to break up if it is not mutual. In line 3, Lettie complicated the issue by noting that because Luke is the father of Lynn's children it is impossible to "break up completely." Lynn identified the complexity of relationships involving children in lines 4 and 5: If children are involved, a complete break up is not only impossible but not in a woman's best interest. She recognized that Luke could use the threat of break up to abdicate his responsibility for the children. Together, the women redefined what breaking up might mean and concluded that a complete break up is undesirable and potentially detrimental, a perspective different from the initial response to what Lynn had written. They also implicitly identified the man in these situations as having the option of staying together or breaking up and cutting all ties.

Although it did not offer evidence of *conscientization*, Lynn's written text served as impetus for the subsequent group discussion that proffered possible critical action. The other women critiqued the experience to reveal a dynamic understanding of Lynn's relationship with Luke that went beyond what Lynn wrote and that evolved as the discussion went on. The discussion epitomized the type of dialogical communication that I had hoped the Program would foster. It revealed the women to be "theorists of their own lives" (Weiler, 1991, p. 462) in that they problematized the issue of breaking up, and they recognized, through a consideration of similar experiences, the larger strategic gender issue of the disintegration of intimate relationships and shared caregiving. Together, the women moved beyond Lynn's experience and understanding to create new understanding about the dynamics of gender roles, responsibilities, and power. This understanding complicated the nature of oppression related to intimate relationships and caregiving. The women voiced what many others had experienced: breaking up affords men the opportunity to renege on their caregiving responsibilities. The discussion revealed

a level of critical consciousness tied to potential action that figured Lynn as a different woman in the relationship, one who strategically understood the need to stand up to Luke and also to ensure that he fulfilled his paternal responsibilities.

Lynn, however, admitted that she still loved Luke. She said that she wanted him to proclaim his love for her, saying that "if he loves me," she would stay with him, echoing the sentiment in her text about romantic love. This seeming reversal, which came near the end of the discussion, of how she felt at the end of her written text and of her plans to break up, revealed the complicated nature of *conscientization* when oppression is intricately woven with significant and often loving relationships. Although it appeared that Lynn, with the help of the other women, was figuring herself differently, as a self-in-practice, she still hoped to salvage her relationship, with Luke's proclamation of love being the ultimate factor. We talked about what Lynn might say to Luke to make her feelings evident and to position her differently in the relationship. Everyone, including Lynn, thought she needed to tell Luke what role she wanted him to play in the pregnancy and that their living situations had to change if they were to stay together.

With the help of the other women, Lynn articulated a new figured identity that (1) had her giving an ultimatum to Luke while recognizing the complexity of breaking up, and (2) allowed her to profess her love for him but remain firm in her expectations. The next week Lynn refused to tell us what had happened with Luke beyond saying that the ex-girlfriend and he were still living together and that she—Lynn—and he still loved each other. It appeared that he had professed his love for her. In later weeks, Lynn stopped talking or writing about Luke completely.

Event 1 Discussion: Negotiating Practical and Strategic Gender Needs
Moser (1989) suggested that adult educators distinguish between what participants perceive as *practical gender needs* and *strategic gender needs*. Practical gender needs are those immediate concrete needs that often pertain to subordination, such as caretakers of children, men, and households and subordinates in demeaning jobs. They can be understood as uniquely individual, even as they are steeped in cultural and societal influences. Strategic gender needs are broader gender

interests arising from the organization of men's and women's roles in society, and often manifested in gender stereotypes and abusive and sometimes violent behaviors. They are related to cultural and societal understandings and are often the target of critical literacy programs. Moser's distinction can help us understand Lynn's decision-making process and, more generally, shed light on the challenges that many participants face in critical literacy programs. Ultimately, Lynn weighed her needs related to motherhood and romantic love and acted to address those needs in ways she thought were in her and her children's best interests. Lynn's experience with Luke reveals the dilemmas that can arise for program participants when they are encouraged to transform their positional identities outside the program in response to evolving figured identities. In coming to consciousness, participants identify choices that may not have been evident before, but that, when thought through or acted on, could be understood as detrimental to current existence and may, in fact, *be* detrimental. In such a scenario, *conscientization* is neither an easy nor evident choice, even as the individual appropriates a language of critique within a critical literacy context.

Event 2: Positional Identity Shift and the Affects
During the first couple of months of the Program, Maria wrote extensively about her relationship with her husband. She believed marriage bonded a couple together for life and that the couple had a sacred duty to make the relationship work. Two months into the Program, I got a call at 11 p.m. from Maria. The Saturday before the Tuesday that she called me, she had written in class:

1	I just want to live my life. I want love. If someone you live with is older than you it
2	doesn't matter how much experience they have especially if you have a child. I do
3	not want my child to grow up with a step dad who doesn't care. Sometimes in life
4	you have to make some weird decisions. I love my son. I love my son. I love my son
5	and no matter how far, how ugly, how close, if I am dead, if I am sick, if I am tired, I
6	am murder[er], a thief, nothing, nothing, nothing in this world could never ever
7	change the fact that I love my son. No man can come between the love of my son. I
8	want my son to grow up with all the love he can get. If my husband does not want to
9	share my son with me well then I am not going to force him. If his dad did not want
10	to share our son well I accept that with all my heart. I don't care anymore about
11	sharing my son with anyone. If they want to share my son with me they will show me
12	that. In every which way if a man doesn't have a child or never had a child before
13	how can he love an already made one? I don't care about experience. The fact is I
14	have experience that values more to me than anyone, my son and being a mother. If
15	you have a man who does not know what it's like to have a child, who has lived alone
16	and selfish, how can you share a child with him? I am young but not stupid. I have
17	pride. Where I came from I am poor but that doesn't change anything about me.

The other women in the Program had criticized Maria for leaving her son to come to the U.S., but until this Saturday, Maria said she did the right thing, and it was only a matter of time before her son would join her. This excerpt from a piece of writing (the first 17 lines of a 36-line text) was the first indication of conflict between Maria and her husband, as well as the first evidence of her effort to figure herself differently within her marriage. She used a series of conditional clauses that begins with *if* to figure explicitly her identity as a wife and mother and implicitly as a woman. She did this by creating scenarios ("if someone you live with is older," "if I am dead,…sick,… tired,…murderer, a thief…") to suggest the extent of her love for her son and how seriously she took her role as mother. The *if* clauses also serve to (re)create Maria's (real or imagined) interactions with her husband and how she positioned herself in those interactions. They reveal Maria's perspective of her self-in-practice and how her new positional identity disrupted her relationship with her husband.

Maria began the piece by declaring her desire to live her life and to be loved (line 1). She then distinguished herself from not only her

husband but also, through the use of the gendered noun *man* and the generic pronouns *someone*, and *anyone*, from others who might challenge her claims, her experiences (even those experiences cast as figurative [lines 5 and 6]), and her love for her son. The repetition of *if* clauses and use of nouns and pronouns frame the piece as a manifesto or declaration of who Maria is. Maria positioned herself as the focus of the piece with 14 of the 18 sentences having *I* as the subject. She defined her new identity by saying that as a mother, she has insights and feelings (lines 13 and 14) that trump age, experience, and gender, that motherhood itself conveys knowledge about love and human relationships that is unique. Implicitly, Maria positioned herself to take action to bring her son to the U.S., reconciling the idea that her husband will never love her son with what her experience as a mother told her to do.

The piece served as a counter-voice to what Maria had written during previous class sessions. It revealed a transformation not only of Maria's thinking but also of her actions. This transformation was instigated by her feelings for her son. Maria's son was a source of knowledge about human relationships that gave her the experiential and moral authority she claimed for herself in the essay. The new figured identity she claimed was reinforced by the other women, who were delighted that Maria was going to bring her son to the U.S. regardless of what her husband said.

When she called me on Tuesday night, Maria was crying. She told me she had called to say good-bye. I asked her where she was going but could not understand what she was saying. I told her I could come to her house so we could talk. What had happened, according to Maria, was that she and her husband had been arguing for over a week about her son. The arguing intensified when she came home after Saturday's class. When she got home from her GED class that Tuesday, she learned that her husband had gotten an order of protection and was filing for divorce. The order of protection claimed that Maria physically abused her husband. The sheriffs' deputies who were at the apartment when I arrived told me they were going to take Maria to a shelter for the night.

Maria said the order of protection was a way for her husband to get her out of the country at no cost to him. Since she was new to the country, Maria did not have anywhere to go and knew only a few people, mostly friends and relatives of her husband. Not knowing what to do, I took Maria home with me.

Over the next 8 months, Maria stayed with me. My GA and I took on roles we had not anticipated. We began looking for an apartment for her. We helped her look for employment, including creating a résumé and preparing for and getting to interviews. We began the process of establishing her immigration status now that she was going through a divorce and had come to the U.S. married to a citizen. Only after 8 months, however, could Maria afford to move into her own efficiency apartment in a high-rise occupied mainly by immigrants.

Event 2 Discussion: From Conscientization *to Advocacy*
Maria, like the other women, had appropriated a language of critique and of possibility in our discussions. Unlike the others, however, she acted on her critique. She figured herself differently as a spouse and mother, and took action—as a new self-in-practice—based on this perspective shift. As she addressed her practical gender needs, Maria, in turn, began to discuss and act on strategic gender needs. She became a voice in the Program that advocated for taking action against perceived male oppression. A glimpse of this transformation can be heard in the Event 1 discussion excerpt. Maria, at one point, said: "I think Lynn's gotta be strong. What do you think will happen?" During that discussion, which took place two months after Event 2, Maria encouraged Lynn to be strong of thought and action without suggesting what action she should take. Implicitly, she suggested that Lynn, by bent of who she is and what she had experienced as a woman, was capable of and should identify her own course of action. Maria encouraged Lynn, to consider what the results of her actions might be by asking Lynn what she thought might happen if she confronted Luke.

The disintegration of Maria's marriage, however, supports Lynn's and some of the other women's concerns about disrupting vital networks and relationships that define practical gender needs. Maria's experience also gives insight into some of the support mechanisms that

are needed to facilitate the types of actions women want to take based on evolving figured identities, especially when such actions conflict with existing networks and relationships. Support mechanisms such as those we offered Maria are beyond the capability of most U.S. critical literacy programs, however, because of lack of funding, limited opportunities to coordinate with other social services, and the short time period in which many of these programs operate. The support my GA and I provided Maria went beyond the 10-month lifecycle of the Program. Also, to have been able to provide these support services to all the women in the Program and for them to have taken them would have put the women in a precarious situation in relation to their already-existing networks and relationships, thus creating additional challenges in the women's lives. In Maria's case, these networks and relationships no longer existed so taking action may have been easier for her.

DISCUSSION: BRIDGING THE PRACTICAL AND STRATEGIC GENDER DIVIDE

Practical gender needs, although often embedded in subordination and hegemony, are needs that often dovetail with an individual's most intimate and nurturing relationships. These needs, manifested in identities of daughter, sibling, community member, lover, and parent, help define an individual's place in the world. It is from this place—and its constituent relationships—that an individual acts on and thinks about the world. It is the place from which an individual is an agent and sees herself as an agent, even if that agency is limited. It is a place influenced by memories, experiences, language use, aspirations, and motivations. It is within these practical gender needs that strategic gender needs are manifested and played out over and over even as an individual may not be conscious of these needs as being strategic or systemic.

 The Program, like most critical literacy programs, premised its work on challenging and addressing strategic gender needs by making the experiences and understandings of the women participants the content from which generative themes would arise and dialogical discussion would emanate to reveal new understandings. And, in this effort, the Program was successful. The Program, however, struggled to mitigate the tension that appeared inherent between the immediacy of practical gender needs and the intransigency of

strategic gender needs, supporting Stromquist's (2014) assertion that the private sphere has unrelenting consequences for participation in the public sphere. The possibilities of transformation that the women revealed and excavated in their writing and weekly discussions were more often than not held hostage by the very issues those possibilities were meant to address. That is, practical gender needs, because of their inherent relationship to who the women were and what they meant for their identities, often inhibited the women's ability to take action thus making impossible the transformation of those needs and of strategic gender needs.

Thus, the Program, informed as it was by critical theory and feminist pedagogies, still failed to account fully for the dynamic relationships of oppression to participant identities and how those relationships created practical gender needs. The dynamics of these relationships go beyond the recognition of hegemony as a tool of oppression and something from which participants must liberate themselves. The dynamics are formed by a tacit recognition among participants of the complex and often contradictory relations they have with their oppressors as exemplified in Lynn's experience and in the theorization of breaking up that arose from not only her experience but also others' experiences. The women acquiesced to the oppression inherent in these relationships not because they did not understand the relationships or could not name their oppression or conceptualize a plan of action but because of what they had vested in those relationships. And although they often spoke of transforming those relationships, when transformation appeared detrimental to their figured and positional identities, they persevered in them. Knowing this, critical literacy programs should consider how best to help participants negotiate these varying needs and weigh the costs and benefits of different ways of acting, including the option of not acting.

Based on the analysis offered in this article of Lynn's and Maria's experiences, I recommend the following as possible curricular frameworks to guide programs in these efforts:

1. Those who espouse and teach from critical literacy perspectives should make explicit for themselves and for those with whom

they work the relationships and tensions that exist between practical and strategic gender needs because of the immediacy and affective complexity of practical gender needs. They need to consider the complexity of the relationship of the two and how, knowing the immediacy of practical gender needs, to negotiate these needs in ways that serve participants' immediate needs. Such negotiations, as Lynn's story revealed, may require the realization that transformation is never a clear-cut issue and can come at a cost that some may not be willing to take.

Thus, I recommend that critical literacy programs focus, as suggested by Stromquist (2014) on both practical and strategic gender needs as distinct yet inherently related needs. Practical gender needs, however, should take precedence over strategic gender needs. This means addressing immediate, ever-present needs of participants even if the actions taken fail to address strategic gender needs. That is, programs activities should speak to the immediacy of participants' lives, as they did in the discussion of Lynn's experience (Event 1) and in my GA and my efforts to help Maria (Event 2).

In cases like Lynn's, the outcome may be only "knowing better what they already know," or developing a nascent self-awareness that reveal alternative actions, even as those actions are not realized. Similarly, for instructors, it may never be evident the extent to which practical gender needs are addressed. In cases like Maria, the outcome may be transformational, which brings with it unpredictability and risks. In these cases, practical gender needs are transformed and out of that transformation strategic gender needs are disrupted. As possibly two ends of a continuum, Lynn's and Maria's cases may reflect the extremes of participant experiences in critical literacy programs that forefront participant positionality and experience. Participants' collaborative inquiry may lead to a theorization of their own experiences and subsequent action that does not align with or reflect the theories espoused by program instructors and even by other program participants.

2. Although practical gender needs should take precedence—and may be the only pathway to addressing strategy gender needs when oppression is ambiguous and intimately meshed with identity—the importance of addressing strategic needs should not be minimized. As Weiler (1991) implied, the ultimate goal of critical literacy is social transformation. A focus only on practical gender needs may ultimately have negative affects on and even exasperate strategic gender needs (Alsop, 1993). This may have been the case with Lynn as it appears she acquiesced to existing gendered power relations, and in that acquiescence she stopped discussing her relationship with Luke. Instead, practical gender needs should be used to reveal strategic gender needs as the accumulative effect of practical gender needs *writ large.* That is, strategic gender needs are revealed in the accumulative experiences and reflections of program participants, and thus are best addressed through collaborative reflection.

Although I augmented with outside readings and critical questioning the generative themes discussed among the women, I failed to facilitate discussions that would have more strategically moved the women from identifying practical gender needs to revealing the causes of strategic gender needs. Making explicit connections between practical and strategic gender needs might be fertile ground for helping participants "know better what they already know" and more urgently make connections to larger social, economic, and political issues.

Looking back, I believe I failed to overtly encourage these connections because of my positionality as a white, academically-credentialed male teacher. Although I had coordinated and facilitated many similar types of programs, lived in the neighborhood, was the product of a teenage mother who left school when she was pregnant, and grew up in a working class family and was the first to graduate from high school, I had figured myself, was figured by others, and had positional identities that privileged me, and thus conveyed authority to me. I was conscious of my privilege and authority and tried to account for it in how I acted and what I said. Because of this, as Prins (2008) suggested based on her research of critical literacy programs in El Salvador,

I may have unduly emphasized practical gender needs because of (1) the therapeutic effect of such efforts and the desire to have a positive relationship with the women, and (2) the difficulty and complexity, as well as the lack of material resources needed, in defining and challenging strategic gender needs.

For example, Maria's reflection on her life, notably the tension she revealed between her love of her son and her relationship with her husband, served to introduce strategic gender needs that reverberated with the women in ways more complex than are usually evident in more generic discussions of strategic gender needs. Maria's piece and the subsequent experiences described in Event 2 informed the discussion that followed Lynn's experience (Event 1). During this discussion and others like it, I could have foregrounded the connections between Maria's and Lynn's experience and larger social issues as a way of encouraging the women to excavate and extend on the meanings of these experiences. I could have also made a point of inquiry the implications of transformative action and of the difficulty of acting even as one has transformed her perspective and understanding. Instructors should also be ready to support participants in whatever decisions they make—transformative or not—even as the program continues to offer participants opportunities to reflect on their experiences and, hopefully, to find the support they need if they decide to challenge practical gender needs.

3. Critical literacy programs should also enlist participants in project-based activities that give them opportunities to take action in their local communities on issues or problems of community concern. I tried to do this with the women by buying children's books and having extended discussion about emergent and early literacy development. We set aside time during sessions or extended sessions so that the women could bring their children and other family members in for literacy activities. We also initiated a project to document community events and issues using disposable cameras and interviewing community and family members. Project efficacy was hindered by participant attendance, and we ultimately revised the project

to be an opportunity for the women who were still participating to document their daily lives. These efforts led to the publication of a journal of the women's writing and photographs as a culminating project.

Project-based activities provide a safe entry into collective and agentive action that can help participants see the effects of collective action and begin to experience *conscientization* as a complex process of engagement and reflection. Making these activities central to the curriculum from the outset, with participants responsible for identifying, designing, and implementing projects based on what their experiences suggest needs to be done, might be one way bridging practical strategic needs with strategic gender needs at a micro- or community level. It also might be a way of engaging and working collaboratively on projects with those with whom participants are most intimate. The Program's emergent and early literacy development project did this to a some extent as some family members participated in family literacy activities.

However, although such projects as documenting family and community life and supporting children's literacy development reflect a type of action born of *conscientization*, they are not necessarily praxis. As hooks (1981) noted, *conscientization* is not enough, and similarly one-off activities, even as they are a form of collective action, are not enough. *Conscientization* must be joined by meaningful praxis, and praxis is contingent on the reciprocity of action and reflection, and thus requires continuity across time and participation. As Weiler (1991) noted, quoting Fisher (1987) "collective inquiry 'requires the slow unfolding of layers of experience, both the contradictory experiences of a given woman and the conflicting experience of different women'" (p. 470). Similarly, praxis requires the unfolding of layers of experience—both old and new—to reveal the often contradictory and conflicting nature of practical and strategic gender needs. For example, after Lynn's experience, we never discussed or reflected on what had happened out of respect for Lynn's privacy. Thus, we never problematized her actions, as we had with her actions during Valentine's Day, as a way of further theorizing

further intimate relationships and the role of caregiving and what be options for action. And after Maria's experience, we never considered the repercussions of her action and what those repercussions may have suggested about strategic gender needs although we often talked about what was happening in Maria's life. Both of the women's experiences resonated with the other women in the Program, suggesting the potential for connecting practical gender needs with strategic gender needs that we never realized and, thus, would be able to translate into a vision for social transformation.

Ultimately, as Lynn's and Maria's experience show, the process of transformation is itself ambiguous and idiosyncratic. Transformation takes many forms and will reveal itself in different ways. For some, it may be a new of way of thinking about something. For others, it may be taking immediate action to change significantly one's life. Either way, or any other way on the continuum of possibilities, comes at a cost, one that only the participant can evaluate and decide to take on. Thus, critical literacy programs might better serve participants by casting transformation as change and change as ripe with contingency, and not as a panacea. Thus, in asking participants to critique their "everyday realities," programs should make it a point of honoring those realities as dynamic and meaningful to who participants are and to who they want to become.

CONCLUSION

Two years after the program ended Maria regularly sent money home to her mother but could not afford to send for her son. Lynn had broken up with Luke. She relied on her mother's and brothers' support to raise her two sons. I had lost contact with all but one of the other women who participated in the Program.

Individuals are always negotiating identities within multiple contexts, so no one should be surprised when people whose lives are often in flux continue to struggle with the same concerns even as they aspire for so much more. Individuals must reckon with day-to-day realities big and small that affect intentions and delay actions. For critical literacy program coordinators and instructors contingencies and realities often are manifested as practical gender needs and usually

reflect larger strategic gender needs, with the latter often being what drives us to do what we do. Measuring program success, amidst all of these considerations, is difficult and nebulous, especially when success in these cases is often a matter of individual perspective and is not always manifested in visible or measurable ways.

One way of trying to measure success might be to follow participants over time. Such longitudinal studies might give insights into what was most valuable to participants and how they have used what they learned in their lives. My speaking to Lynn and Maria after two years was only serendipitous and not part of this or any other study. Keeping in contact with them and the other women proved difficult, as their lives evolved, they moved out of parents' homes, entered new relationships, and in some cases, left the city. In some of these cases, I suspect that it was practical gender needs we had discussed in the Program that made a change in life—good or bad—necessary. As both a teacher and a researcher, I cannot help but hope that the women's experiences in the critical literacy program contributed in positive way to those changes and that they were changes for the better. After all, the ultimate goal of critical literacy programs it to change peoples' lives as part of a process to change the world.

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