Bridging and Bonding: A Case for Prioritizing Social and Organizational Connectedness in Non-Profit Literacy Programming

Kevin Gosine1 · Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker2 · Tiffany Gallagher2

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Abstract
The present study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the ways in which non-profit community literacy organizations can benefit individuals and communities in ways that transcend their stated missions. We employed a qualitative research design whereby data were collected via in-depth individual interviews and focus groups with program users (n = 72), staff (n = 11), and program leads (n = 8). Findings revealed that, in addition to supporting traditionally defined notions of literacy, programs presented participants with opportunities to cultivate bridging and bonding social capital. By way of the conditions created and programmatic measures employed within programs, bridging social capital often strengthened into deeper bonding ties between and amongst service users and, in many cases, staff and volunteers. Administrators and staff described efforts to create program cultures conducive to the development of social capital. The research illuminates how non-profit community entities can empower individual service users and their communities beyond their stated missions by fostering social and organizational connectedness, promoting communal cohesion and social trust, and cultivating typically unacknowledged talents, strengths and assets within marginalized communities.

Keywords Social capital · Literacy · Adult education · Non-profit · Marginalization · Community development · Community cultural wealth

Kevin Gosine
kgosine@brocku.ca
Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker
darlene.ciuffetelli-parker@brocku.ca
Tiffany Gallagher
tgallagher@brocku.ca

1 Department of Sociology, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON, Canada
2 Department of Educational Studies, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON, Canada
Introduction

Numerous scholars (e.g., Adams, 2018; Balatti & Falk, 2002; Balatti et al, 2007; Prentice et al., 2020; Trussell & Mair, 2010) have highlighted the important role non-profit community organizations play in promoting broadly-conceptualized notions of literacy (e.g. educational, financial, social, health, computer and telecommunication, and civic engagement-related literacies) and facilitating the cultivation of valuable social connections. Some researchers (e.g., Balatti & Falk, 2002; Balatti et al, 2007) have elucidated the connection between literacy and social and organizational connectivity, along with the importance of these intertwined forms of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to the well-being of individuals and the sociological health of communities. Non-profit support programs and literacy education can foster the production of social capital, a set of networks offering various resources, opportunities, and a sense of mutual obligation that benefit individuals within these networks. The benefits of social capital for individuals include a heightened feeling of belonging, expanded opportunities, and a greater sense of hope (Dill & Ozer, 2019; Griffiths et al., 2009; Prentice et al., 2020; Putnam, 2000; Small, 2009). Social capital also produces important sociological benefits. It enhances the collective intelligence, levels of social trust, and the capacity for collective action and problem solving within people’s communities (Balatti & Falk, 2002; Lee, 2013; Putnam, 2000; Sharkey et al., 2017; Small, 2009).

The present study was part of a larger, multi-phase, arms-length evaluation of a regionally-based organization that provides funding to non-profit programs within a jurisdiction of Ontario, Canada that have a poverty reduction mandate (see also Prentice et al., 2020). The focus of the evaluation phase undertaken by the authors was non-profit programs with broadly defined literacy mandates. For the purposes of this study, we adopted a wide definition of literacy calling on the richness of community-embedded contexts across the lifespan: “Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 410). Among the programs studied, mandates ranged broadly and included literacies related to reading, writing, numeracy, health, finance, technology, culture, along with employment and workplace. In this study we explore the capacity of formal literacy support to serve as a vehicle by which individuals bond with others and participate in new social experiences which can help generate additional social and organizational ties (see also Adams, 2018; Balatti & Falk, 2002; Balatti et al., 2007). In this vein, this research illuminates critical ways in which community literacy support programs can empower individuals and communities beyond stated organizational missions.
Literature Review

Non-profit community organizations, regardless of mission, can serve as vessels by which participants forge valuable interpersonal ties and build critical social networks that benefit both individuals and communities. Hence, participation in community programs can result in service users experiencing “unanticipated gains” (Small, 2009). Research examining the conditions within non-profit organizations and community initiatives that are conducive to the cultivation of social and organizational ties for marginalized service users spotlights seven key elements: collaborative activities that enable regular interaction; the minimization of competition; relationships marked by rapport and trust; minimized interpersonal power imbalances; the prioritization of inclusivity; the maintenance of judgement-free settings; and the capacity to link individuals to people, resources and organizations (Balatti & Falk, 2002; Balatti et al., 2007; Dill & Ozer, 2019; Lee, 2013; Small, 2009; Trussell & Mair, 2010).

Program Staff, Volunteers, and Social Connectedness

Relationships of trust and rapport between program staff and volunteers and service users are vital to building a positive program environment that facilitates further relationship building, individual empowerment, and opportunity creation. Positive program environments are sustained when staff and volunteers take the time to understand service users’ needs, strive to maintain a safe and judgement-free environment, minimize or abandon an ‘expert’ orientation and establish egalitarian relationships with service users, recognize and build on the strengths and assets that service users possess, devise collaborative learning, skill-building, and recreational activities, and actively connect service users with people, resources and supports (Balatti et al., 2007; Kam, 2020; Small, 2009; Whitley et al., 2008; Yosso, 2005).

In another phase of the evaluation project from which the present study emerged, Prentice et al. (2020) conducted a content analysis of written testimonials of service users, staff, and volunteers at 77 non-profit agencies in the designated region of Ontario broadly concerned with poverty reduction. Participants reported positive program environments where they were able to cultivate valuable social networks, learn critical life skills (e.g., arts, healthy living, mental health awareness, etc.), and enhance their sense of self-efficacy. By way of these benefits, non-profit community programs enabled service users to overcome isolation and weariness and helped individuals to develop “new skills and knowledge, as well as gaining confidence and a sense of gaining control” (Prentice et al., 2020, p. 4). Research by Trussell and Mair (2010) further illustrates the capacity of non-profit recreational settings to enhance the overall wellbeing of people living in poverty. By way of their participation in community programs that entailed trusting relationships with staff and other service users, information provision and referral, and collaborative learning and recreational activities (language classes, women’s support groups, self-help and outreach, crafts, scrapbooking, gardening, etc.), service users were able to combat social isolation through increased community involvement, enhanced social connectedness, and
expanded opportunities. Positive experiences in programs emboldened service users to take part in other programs which provided more opportunities to build social connections (Trussell & Mair, 2010). Moreover, within program settings marked by trust and understanding, staff are able to serve as a valuable source of social capital for service users (Balatti et al., 2007; Dill & Ozer, 2019; Trussell & Mair, 2010). Dill and Ozer (2019) found that caring staff who worked with marginalized inner-city youth were able to serve as role models, provide emotional support, and connect service users to resources that heightened their opportunities and hopes.

**Fostering Social Ties Amongst Service Users**

To maximize support, connectedness, and opportunities for individuals, non-profit community programs must not only provide program participants the opportunity to cultivate trusting and caring relationships with staff and volunteers, but with fellow service users as well. Ideally, institutional arrangements, programming measures, and staff facilitation help shape social ties that are “egalitarian, non-hierarchical, and reciprocal” (Glover & Parry, 2008, p. 210; Lee, 2013; Small, 2009). Small (2009) found that mothers who made use of childcare centers derived “unanticipated gains” from these settings, namely the cultivation of social networks that bestowed support, friendship, and links to other organizations and resources. Childcare centers *brokered* social and institutional connectedness through their programming initiatives and “routine activities” such as social events, field outings, and fund-raising endeavours (Small, 2009, p. 76). By way of such activities, mothers forge bonds of friendship and mutual support that entail knowledge sharing (e.g., regarding medical services, childcare practices and supports, etc.) and exchanging favours. In Small’s (2009) words, the centers constitute “non-competitive… safe space[s] where mothers might be willing to do things they would not in other organizational contexts,” such as entrusting other childcare center users with their children during an errand run or in an emergency situation (p. 184).

Research on non-profit settings similarly highlights the benefits and importance of devising institutional arrangements and programming that furnish service users with opportunities to build relationships with similarly situated peers. Studies demonstrate that the social and organizational ties generated within programs are especially beneficial to the most marginalized, as these connections buffered the stressors of poverty and mitigated isolation from the dominant society (Griffiths et al., 2009; Prentice et al., 2020; Small, 2009; Trussell & Mair, 2010). Neale and Brown (2016) found that homeless drug and alcohol users desired meaningful and supportive friendships but lacked the connections and avenues by which to cultivate them. The researchers stress the need for support programs to prioritize and facilitate friendship building and spotlight the role that information and communications technology can play in achieving this goal. Griffiths et al. (2009) looked at how participation in a women’s capacity-building program affected the physical and mental health of female service users who hailed from a disadvantaged community. The program “entailed activities designed to promote friendship, social relations, strong supportive networks and social cohesion” (Griffiths et al., 2009, p. 174). A post-test
survey revealed improved mental health and heightened communal participation on
the part of female program participants, with these results attributed to participation
in the program. Given growing recognition of the value of peer support, helping
professionals (e.g., nurses, social workers, psychologists) have increasingly incorpo-
rated the self-help/mutual aid concept into their work with service users (Adamsen
& Rasmussen, 2001). Self-help groups are at least partly organized and directed by
service users and “affect individual participants’ activity level, strengthening their
self-perception and sense of belonging” (Adamsen & Rasmussen, 2001, p. 909) as
well as their capacity to cope with challenges (Chesney & Chesler, 1993; see also
Garvin et al., 2004). Self-help groups can also serve as sites of consciousness raising
and social activism (Chesney & Chesler, 1993).

Non-Profit Community Programs and the Cultivation of Social Capital

When service users build connections with staff, volunteers, fellow program par-
ticipants, and people and organizations within the wider community, they are culti-
vating what is known as social capital (Adams, 2018; Balatti & Falk, 2002; Balatti
et al., 2007; Griffiths et al., 2009; Small, 2009). As elucidated by Putnam (2000),
social capital “refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the
norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19). Yosso (2005)
adds that, ideally, such networks “provide both instrumental and emotional support”
(p. 79). Embedded within social capital are information, connections, resources (or
links to resources), and various forms of support that better position individuals to
overcome challenges, cultivate skills, and realize personal fulfilment. Scholars (e.g.,
Lee, 2013; Putnam, 2000) identify two types of social capital: bonding and bridg-
ing. Bonding social capital refers to social ties that are fostered within communi-
ties and generates a “strong in-group loyalty,” which frequently correlates with out-
group aversion (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). Bonding social capital can be seen in minority
ethnic or racialized communities marked by strong social ties often reinforced by
shared experiences of oppression and marginalization (e.g., Gosine, 2021; Reynolds,
2013). According to Schiffer and Schatz (2008), “marginalisation describes the posi-
tion of individuals, groups or populations outside of ‘mainstream society’, living at
the margins of those in the center of power, of cultural dominance and economical
and social welfare” (p. 6). We add that the extent to which individuals, groups or
populations have inroads into mainstream society, along with access to power and
resources, is dictated by intersections of class, race, gender, sexuality and ability.
While bonding social capital in such contexts can be empowering in that it provides
individuals with a sense of identity and belonging, it can limit people’s opportuni-
ties insofar as they remain deeply embedded within their inner and bounded social
milieu and largely disconnected from the wider society (Gosine, 2021). Bridging
social capital, by contrast, is that created between different enclaves, organizations
and communities, thereby making individuals privy to perspectives, resources, con-
nections, and opportunities beyond their immediate social circles. Bridging social
capital provides people with a broader range of resources and connections to help
overcome obstacles, enhances their opportunities for wider societal engagement and,
ultimately, improves their life chances. Bridging social capital breaks down the ‘us-them’ bifurcation often inherent to bonding capital and promotes inter-communal social trust. As Putnam (2000) underscored, while bonding social capital helps people to get by, bridging social capital is key to “getting ahead” (p. 23).

While scholars distinguish between bridging and bonding capital for analytical purposes, Putnam points out that the two forms of social capital are not mutually exclusive and can, in fact, interlock. Put differently, “[m]any groups simultaneously bond along some social dimensions and bridge across others” (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). “[B]onding and bridging are not ‘either-or’ categories into which social networks can be neatly divided,” Putnam further elucidated, “but ‘more or less’ dimensions along which we can compare different forms of social capital” (Putnam, 2000, P. 23; see also Lee, 2013). Lee (2013) draws on the work of Putnam to formulate the concept of “bridged-bonding” social capital: social ties forged via a process whereby initially weak intergroup bridging ties strengthen into more salient social bonds. According to Lee, participation in community initiatives can “promote intergroup social cohesion,” that is, bridged-bonding social capital, insofar as it entails “high-level interactions,” “authentic personal interactions,” and “non-hierarchical relationships or equal partnerships” all of which become manifest within an “informal setting” (p. 4–5). Heterogeneous resource networks such as non-profit community organizations would seem like ideal settings for the cultivation of bridged-bonding social ties.

Social capital is not only beneficial to individuals, but also to the overall well-being of communities. Moreover, non-profit organizations can serve as community hubs where social capital and social trust are produced (Griffiths et al., 2009; Sharkey et al., 2017). As Putnam (2000) notes, “[i]n high-social-capital areas public spaces are cleaner, people are friendlier, and the streets are safer” (p. 307). Sharkey et al. (2017) present evidence demonstrating a significant inverse relationship between the number of community organizations in a given jurisdiction and violent and property crime rates. The researchers attribute this finding to the vital role that local, non-profit organizations play in fostering “ties between residents” and strengthening “local networks, levels of social cohesion and trust, and levels of informal social control” (Sharkey et al., 2017, p. 1234, emphasis added). In short, societies and communities with high levels of social capital exhibit “better health conditions, a favorable climate for entrepreneurialism, improved crime statistics, and better school performance” (Prior & Blessi, 2012, p. 81).

Small (2009) advances what he calls the “organizational embeddedness perspective,” which alerts us to the circumstances and arrangements that enable the cultivation of social capital within organizations. Broadly echoing observations of Portes and Landolt (1996), Small argues that organizational involvement can enable individuals to build valuable social networks and, possibly, ease daily living and enhance their overall quality of life. However, variation in organizational structures results in some people being part of more productive and beneficial networks than others. The extent to which desirable social capital outcomes are realized is contingent on institutional practices, programmatic measures, and the resultant opportunities created within organizations, which must not only provide participants with needed supports and information, but also recurrent and expected avenues for regular and worthwhile...
social interaction and collaboration (see also Lee, 2013). Balatti et al. (2007) illustrate Small’s organizational embeddedness perspective in their exploration of how adult education teachers facilitated the cultivation of social capital within literacy and numeracy programs. Social capital outcomes were effectuated by way of course-facilitated social networks whereby students forged connections with staff, teachers, and fellow learners which, in many instances, transcended the classroom. These networks enabled students to acquire “new identity and knowledge resources” and envision how course material might relate to their general well-being and aspirations (Balatti et al., 2007, p. 12). Balatti et al. stress the need for educators to create a safe and non-judgemental learning environment to enable the cultivation of social networks conducive to positive social capital outcomes (see also Balatti & Falk, 2002).

Purpose of the Present Study

This study was guided by one broad research question. What role can non-profit literacy programs play in terms of empowering marginalized individuals and strengthening their communities beyond the programs’ explicitly stated objectives? Put differently, when people make use of local literacy programs, what are the unexpected benefits (Small, 2009) that can accrue for individuals and communities? This article reports findings from a large-scale qualitative study conducted in a region of Ontario, Canada that illuminates the role local literacy programs can play in helping marginalized individuals to cultivate vital social and organizational ties that improve their quality of life, elevate social trust and cohesion within the social spaces in which they reside, and nurture latent talents, strengths and assets within these milieus. Moreover, the study illuminates some of the mechanisms and measures by which bridged-bonding social capital (Lee, 2013) is generated within non-profit literacy programs, along with some of the worthwhile outcomes. Following Prentice et al. (2020), who undertook a different phase of the larger evaluation project of which the present study is a part, the regional funding organization that was the subject of the evaluation will be identified throughout this article as the funding organization.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design that triangulated data from focus groups and individual, in-depth interviews with service users, staff and program leads at eight non-profit literacy programs in a region Ontario, Canada. When collecting data, we sought to elicit experiential narratives, particularly when interviewing service users. Narrative storytelling (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) enabled an understanding of participants’ everyday realities while capturing the complexities and nuance that marked the lives of people from low-income communities, many affected by multiple dimensions of inequality, as they navigate their immediate social circles, mainstream institutions, and the programs under study. Narrative inquiry as a data collection method allows for the illumination of systemic obstacles
and experiences of marginalization as lived and articulated by people who make use of community literacy supports (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2014; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The narrative retellings give first-hand voice to the lived realities of service users prior to attending programs, and while taking part in the programs.

**Sampling**

To begin the process of sample selection, the researchers reviewed a complete list of projects previously funded by the funding organization and highlighted projects with a literacy mandate (referring to our broad definition). These projects were hosted by 21 different organizations in the region. Given the historical funding time frame and the number of years that had lapsed, some of these agencies and services were not tenable to include in the sample. After the researchers reached consensus on the programs that would be included in the study, a combination purposive-quota sampling strategy was employed in that we divided the study population into programs as well as participant categories (i.e., service users, staff and leads) within programs. We invited participants from each agency, specifically from within each participant sub-category within the different agencies, to participate. Table 1 shows the number of participating service users, staff and leads from each of the eight agencies included in the research. Pseudonyms have been applied to all agencies and participants. In total, 91 participants from eight programs took part in the study (Table 1 indicates the sample breakdown by program and participant category).

We were not able to obtain participants from all three participant categories for all programs. Hence, for some of the programs studied, the voices of particular categories of participants are not represented. We did, however, manage to obtain data from a program lead administrator for all eight programs.

**Data Collection**

Over a three-month period (May, June, July, 2019) the three primary investigators, two research assistants and the project coordinator collected data from the eight sites. There were 11 one-on-one interviews of the leads and three staff from different

| Code | Agencies | Service Users (n) | Staff (n) | Leads (n) |
|------|----------|------------------|-----------|-----------|
| 1    | Program A | 1                | 0         | 1         |
| 2    | Program B | 11               | 4         | 1         |
| 3    | Program C | 3                | 3         | 1         |
| 4    | Program D | 8                | 2         | 1         |
| 5    | Program E | 49               | 1         | 1         |
| 6    | Program F | 0                | 1         | 1         |
| 7    | Program G | 0                | 0         | 1         |
| 8    | Program H | 0                | 0         | 1         |
| Totals |         | **72**       | **11**   | **8**     |
programs; and 11 focus groups (consisting of between 3 and 12 participants) of the
service users and staff. Individual interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and
focus group lengths ranged from one to three hours. Themes explored in conversations
with the leads included literacy programming (i.e., inventory and assessment
of the programming measures employed in their program; what constitutes effective
literacy programming), program effectiveness, the extent to which the needs of ser-
vice users are addressed, obstacles in reaching program goals, and funding-related
needs and challenges. In focus groups with staff we set out to learn how activities
were carried out and how they related to literacy goals, how services users experi-
enced the program, and the strengths and needs of the program. Themes explored
with service users in individual interviews and focus groups related to the supports
that they received in the program, how they interacted and collaborated with others
in the program, and how the program might better meet their needs.

Data Analysis

With the permission of participants, all individual interviews and focus groups were
audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by two research assistants (RAs). Tran-
script files were then imported into the NVivo (2019) qualitative analysis software
program in order to conduct the first round of analyses. Key phrases and concepts
were identified and validated by all the primary investigators and research assis-
tants. The final set of 22 nodes included: Agency; Background; Benefits of Program;
External Input Regarding Programming; Funding Challenges; Homelessness; Lack
of Support; Literacy; Marginalization; Mental Health; Needs (Met); Needs (Unmet);
Project; Responsibilities; Role; Rural-Based Challenges; Service User Challenges;
Stigma; Strengths of Users; Suggested Improvement; Support; Agency Marketing.
These nodes included several sub-nodes which were then summarized and corre-
sponding participant quotes were sorted into these nodes. The authors held a meet-
ing with the RAs to discuss the coded data and emergent themes. This meeting
provided an opportunity to negotiate consensus regarding the coded data and how
they might be interpreted. Armed with input from this meeting and having achieved
inter-coder agreement, the primary investigators later met to collaboratively decide
on the most important nodes and themes to be highlighted in the final report from
which this article emerged. Nodes were refined by the primary investigators into six
thematic clusters that encapsulate meaningful concepts. This article is centered on
one of those thematic clusters labelled ‘Community, Belonging and Social Capital.’

Findings

In addition to literacy in any traditionally defined sense, service users derived a
number of benefits from their participation in these community support programs.
Notably, such programs gave service users the opportunity to experience a sense
of community and inclusion as well as build social capital that elevated their confi-
dence and better positioned them to engage with the wider community and achieve
personal goals. This is invaluable for people who, owing to intersections of social class, mental health challenges, addiction issues, geographic location, and/or immigrant status, often find themselves marginalized and lacking meaningful and productive networks of support. Analysis of the qualitative data revealed three broad interlocking themes within the cluster ‘Community, Belonging and Social Capital’: (1) support programs as sites of inclusion, affirmation, and the cultivation of community cultural wealth; (2) support programs as sites of mutual aid; and (3) support programs as sites for the cultivation of bonding and bridging social capital.

Support Programs as Sites of Inclusion, Affirmation, and the Cultivation of Community Cultural Wealth

Support programs are settings where service users can cultivate rewarding, affirming, supportive, and collaborative relationships with staff as well as fellow program participants. In one of our focus groups, Alexia and Carmen, two front-line workers at Program D, spoke of how their program offered service users the opportunity to build social connections and, through collaboration and mutual support, realize untapped potential, particularly that pertaining to participants’ artistic aptitudes:

Alexia: I think, anybody is exposed to arts or in any way, shape, or form where you’re being lifted up—and people worked together to lift each other up—What do they say? They don’t have the arts so you can have more professional artists or performers. It’s there to lift humanity. And that’s what I believe is that the arts, literacy, all these things come together.

Carmen: You get to see, like, the skills and the talents that are in the community already. You know? Like that you wouldn’t have really known that were there. So, you have folks who were dancers for twenty years and want to teach a class. Or you have ladies who maybe made costumes back in the day or had employment. Whatever it might be. Or quilters. Like the amount of skills that would come out of folks that you didn’t know were there.

When Carmen talks about “skills and the talents that are in the community already”, she invokes scholar Tara Yosso’s (2005) concept of ‘community cultural wealth’, which, broadly described, refers to strengths, assets, talents, and sources of perseverance that marginalized individuals foster within their families and communities that often go unrecognized, or are undervalued, within the wider mainstream society. Support programs such as Program D provide a space, resources, and networks of support that enable service users to nurture those assets. Dawn, a lead at Program D, notes the tendency of the wider community to pathologize the program’s catchment area while largely ignoring the positive elements that her program aims to cultivate:

… what is this neighbourhood seen as? This neighbourhood is seen as poverty, addictions, prostitution. Let’s lift this up a bit because people in our neighbourhood, they have creativity, they have imagination, they need places to talk. So, if it was around the arts we’d have some focus.
Julie, a service user at Program D, explained the role the program, and one staff member in particular, played in supporting the artistic endeavors of program participants:

Yeah, you get positive feedback and encouragement. And [Steven’s] real talent, besides his art, is creating opportunities for each of the artists. So, getting them involved in the art battle and out displaying their works. You know? And like, that’s all I gotta say. Yeah. Like, you’re a great coach!

Drew, a service lead at Program F, echoes this theme when she trumpets her program’s commitment to cultivating and nurturing the talents and assets that young program participants bring to the program:

So, um, this is just one example that’s popped into my head. Every one of our kids has something, okay? And we find that something and we capitalize on it. So, if you look over there, we have musical instruments, okay? So, we have singers. We have musicians. We have songwriters. We have poets. We have artists. So our Christmas card is just one example of how we make sure we find that talent in each one of our youths and we showcase it. So we have a competition every year between all two of my centers now that, ah, whoever wants to be the feature of our Christmas card, and that’s what goes out to all of the community. And this is just one example of how we showcase each talent that every--cuz every kid’s got something. Every kid has something that is special. That they do better than others at.

Perhaps the most vital and rewarding aspect of participation in the eight programs studied is the sense of community and inclusion service users experienced. Indeed, in most cases, these programs provided service users with a sense of belonging and ongoing opportunities to socialize and build connections within the context of safe and supportive settings. This countered the isolation and marginalization that previously, or ordinarily, marked the lives of many program participants. Carmen, a front-line worker at Program D, likens her organization to a supportive family:

I think the main reason for me is that it’s a sense of community unlike anything else I’ve ever felt in the region. And I’ve worked and lived downtown for, oh my gosh, many many years! I’ve always been part of downtown. My elementary school, [name of elementary school], is right there. So, it’s definitely a sense of community and folks look out for each other here. And personally, somehow, I find it very hard for people to gather. And I find the hub of the drop-in center is just this gathering place for folks. And it becomes a family. Everybody is extremely supportive of one another. And if you go places now, everybody is always on their phones and very isolated…. It’s bingo, like you see today. It’s card games, it’s chess, it’s just sitting down having coffee, and chatting. It’s knitting and sewing. It’s just a wonderful community.

Service user Oden highlights how, in his experience, Program D’s organizational culture lives up to its “policy of acceptance and tolerance.” He draws attention to the program’s openness in accepting and welcoming a diverse array of
people and creating an environment where individuals are free to pursue their individual interests and goals. “So like, there’s so many varieties of people,” observed Oden, “and, like, nobody has to say, ‘you can’t do this here; you can’t do that; you have to be like this to come here.’ You know, basically, everybody is their own self.” Alice, another Program D service user, spoke of how taking part in the program and becoming part of a community affected her life in a positive way: “…I was always doing art in my apartment ‘cause I live on [name of street] in [regional] Housing and I was very alone—isolated. And it was through this program that I totally got out of isolation and out of depression.”

**Support Programs as Sites of Mutual Aid**

A theme that reverberated throughout service users’ narratives was the characterization of these programs as sites of mutual aid. According to Garvin et al. (2004), mutual aid “sees [individuals] as helping one another. This principle draws on a vision of a democratic society in which individuals come to understand their interdependence” (p. 2). Indeed, within most of the programs studied, the various forms of support service users received from each other seemed as important as that provided by trained staff and volunteers, if not more so. Participants described forms of mutual aid that illustrate the cultivation and benefits of bridged-bonding social capital. One of the focus groups conducted as part of this study consisted of parents of kids with intellectual disabilities. Through Program B, in which their children were enrolled, these individuals took part in a parents’ support group where participants exchanged information and helped each other deal with the challenges and stigma that come with raising a child with a disability. “Yeah, the stigma is there,” noted one focus group participant. This parent goes on to juxtapose the supportive, empathetic and inclusive environment at Program B against the society at large which participants experienced as harsh, judgemental, unforgiving and exclusionary:

[The stigma is] a huge barrier. Part of the reason that we all love this place is that there isn’t. My kid could have a bad day, or act inappropriately, or I could be late for a meeting or whatever might happen because that’s life and we all have to deal with it. We are still moving ahead here.

Hannah, a service user at Program E, noted in another focus group how the collaboration, mutual support, affirmation, and encouragement that individuals experienced in her program benefited participants trying to make positive and profound changes in their lives:

And here, we’ve had women that have gone homeless and they’ve taken the steps--and we got them off the street cuz they want to get off the street. Other women, they want to stop their lifestyle, everybody pulls together. And I think you said something--no, it wasn’t you. One of the other girls said something to one of the night ladies, and whatever it was she said, it made her want to make herself better. And this is what we do for each other. We make each other better, we support each other.
Chelsea, another Program E focus group participant, echoed this sentiment:

I think what I take away from this group, if I were to leave tomorrow and never come back, just knowing that there are good people still left in a world that’s so scary, and people that are there to support. And whether I’m here or not, they’re always willing to help somebody else that is in need. And I think just knowing that the option of that being there and the people that come together for this group–it’s really incredible to know that you have somebody.

Support Programs as Sites for the Cultivation of Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

Ideally, becoming socially ensconced within support program communities means that service users are actively developing vital forms of social capital that would otherwise be lacking in their lives (Small, 2009). The eight support programs studied provided service users with opportunities to build both bonding (intra-group ties) and bridging (connections beyond one’s social circles) forms of social capital. The programs fostered bridging capital by linking individuals to people, supports, resources, and opportunities to which they would not otherwise have access. When enrolled in programs, most participants, as discussed above, built close collaborative relationships with staff, volunteers and other service users thereby cultivating bonding social capital. As the narratives of service users, staff and program leads illustrate, these relationships very much seemed to exemplify “norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness” that strengthened as, in many instances, bridging opportunities turned into bonding ties (Putnam, 2000, p. 19; see also Lee, 2013). By way of program-facilitated social networks, service users gained access to resources (e.g. legal advocacy, art supplies, food, childcare), skill-building opportunities (e.g. art, cooking, resume writing, gardening, employment-related experience), employment and civic engagement opportunities, and services (e.g. parenting support, mental health support, health care). Hence, by way of these support programs, service users had ongoing bridging opportunities.

Carmen, a front-line worker at Program D, describes her work with a service user who had trouble adapting to conventional forms of employment. The service user’s involvement with Program D provided an opportunity to nourish his artistic aptitude and translate that into a modest source of income. The experience of this participant illuminates the value of program-facilitated social capital in providing service users with the necessary support to nurture their talents, thereby promoting personal growth. As Carmen explains:

… when we had the art garage, folks would complete things there and then they could sell it in the shop. So, that would be the obvious direct link to employment or to increase income. But just going back to my example…so, when I was working in the employment piece before moving over to the art garage, there was one gentleman who we tried to place. Like we tried to help him get traditional employment and it was not working… but he doodled on napkins. It was like tissues. And he would draw houses and we saw this, and
spoke with him, and then sort of morphed this into like… “Why don’t we try and sell these pieces?” “We’ll give you all your materials.” And then he would just draw, and draw, and draw. Fast forward a couple years later, like, he got really involved with [Program D] and he’s got canvases. He’s moved to colour.

Service users spoke of the value of being linked to external services and supports by way of their programs. Sydney, the parent of a youth service user at Program B, used the analogy of a wheel when speaking of the information and referral services offered at Program B:

“It’s like [Program B] is the wagon wheel and here’s the middle of the wagon wheel. And whatever else they send you to is the spokes on the wagon wheel. Like, they keep everything together. Like they hold it together.”

While the analogy is a little awkward, Sydney is making the point that her program served as a conduit through which service users accessed various resources and supports. Sydney went on to give the example of Program B inviting a lawyer to speak with service users about setting up a Registered Disabilities Savings Plan (the need for information regarding RDSPs emerged in the Program B parents’ support group discussed above). Hannah, a service user at Program E, spoke of a dental hygienist coming in to address the dental needs of participants’ kids. Other examples littered the narratives of service users who participated in the various programs. In addition, participants spoke of receiving job-related advice and support. In this vein, service user Leah enthusiastically described the support she received at Program A, which included resume preparation and help honing her job interview skills:

They’re great with helping me try and find something and helping me with my resume and stuff and, like, I don’t know. They’ve just always been a good support. Like, especially with the people I deal with in the [agency], I think they’re just amazing. And they’re so helpful. They really help me and, you know, she actually took the time to really know who I am instead of just another client.

Even when opportunities acquired by way of programs did not work out, service users still expressed appreciation toward their programs and the people who made an effort to support them. An example of this is Lindsay, another service user at Program A, who obtained employment at a winery after completing a course to which the program had linked her. Lindsay did not last long in the position. She conceded, however, that “[i]t wasn’t that the program failed me. It just wasn’t the right situation for me, that’s all. But they were very helpful in every other way. Like, it wasn’t their fault that I didn’t go that way. Just wasn’t the right job for me.” Lindsay went on to express gratitude for the opportunity and what she managed to gain from it: “I mean, I still finished the course and, you know, you take information away from it, it all helps. Somewhere, down the line, you never know. [laughs].”

The social connections and skills cultivated within programs, along with enhanced personal confidence, emboldened service users to take advantage of opportunities to become more outgoing and socially engaged. Chelsea, a service user at Program E, described how the ongoing support she receives in her
program enables her to overcome her social anxiety and resultant isolation and foster supportive social ties:

I heard about [this agency] through my mum. She was the cook here for about two years and I started coming with her. Just—I have a severe anxiety disorder. So I try and get myself out of my house and coming to group was one of the best ways to do it, and I could come three days a week, get out of the house, and have a support system. Every time I come, there’s somebody here to talk to, and somebody willing to help.

Hannah, another participant in Chelsea’s focus group, readily identified with the plight of the latter. Hannah spoke of how the social capital she generated by way of Program E helped her to deal with her anxiety and broadened her perspective on various social issues. Also, when she speaks of a disillusioning experience trying to obtain employment at McDonald’s, she reiterates a recurrent theme in this study, specifically the notion of support programs countering the stigma and exclusion service users encounter in other contexts:

I applied for a job at [this agency] after applying at McDonald’s and being told it was too fast paced, even though that company would advertise that “we help people with disabilities, we help the elderly, we hire these people.” They wouldn’t hire me but I walked into [this agency] as any other person would like [Chelsea’s] mom. Now I’ve been here for three years and this place is amazing. It’s helped bring me out of my shell. It’s made me more compassionate. It’s changed my influence and ideas on a number of social issues, from being negative to being positive, and trying to help each other.

Carly, a service lead at Program G, describes how a pollinator garden initiative provided service users with the opportunity to forge bridging social capital and contribute to the broader community:

So, we’re doing a pollinator garden. So, they’re going to learn about plants and they’re building bee houses and birdhouses. They’re planting the garden, and we’re giving back to the community because we’re making some birdhouses for [the city], that’s going to [name of city park]. And we’re bringing seniors and kids together to do it! Yay! (Begins clapping aloud) Yay us!

Despite the important role that literacy programs can play in fostering social capital, some program leads expressed frustration that social capital-building initiatives that fell outside of stated program mandates were rarely acknowledged or supported by funders. Yasmine, the program lead at Program E, pointed out that the funding organization only considered activity and participation that took place “Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 10am to 4 pm,” the designated days and hours of operation for her program. Many social events took place outside of those hours, including retreats and even weddings and funerals, which the program organized for service users who lacked resources. As this research illuminates, a significant benefit of the support programs studied is that they provided
service users with a sense of community and the opportunity to cultivate social capital, and after-hours activities were instrumental in this regard. According to Yasmine, however, programming that took place outside of the specified weekly timeframe was not considered by the funding organization. When Yasmine would try to make a case for these after-hours activities in reports to the funding organization, she would be told “‘that’s not part of your stats. You’re reaching. You’re stretching way too far. You’re reaching.’” As Yasmine explains:

The comment I get is, ‘you’re not making a meaningful impact on those people. Just because they arrived and they left--but you’re not providing meaningful activity. Like, a meaningful impact on a person.” And I feel like we are. And they feel like, “no, it didn’t happen between these hours and those are the hours of your [agency]…. We want the stats from your program. We don’t want stats for other things that you guys are doing to hang out together”…. I’ve literally seen friendships build very tightly after the retreat for some people. And there’ve been more than a few emotional breakdowns that have helped do some incredible healing.

Discussion

Positing a definition of literacy that transcends the basic skills of reading and writing, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has described literacy as “a process of learning that enables individuals to achieve personal goals, develop their knowledge and potential, and participate fully in the community and wider society” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 410). The findings of this study make clear that literacy community programs are best able to promote this broad conceptualization of literacy when program leads and staff can create a safe and judgement-free space where service users have opportunities to build bridging and, ultimately, bonding social capital with fellow program participants, staff, and volunteers. Importantly, insofar as programs were able to link participants to people, resources, services and opportunities, service users had ongoing opportunities to cultivate bridging social capital. This curtails the possibility that individuals will become embedded in bounded and inward oriented social circles that might limit opportunities. But, as Reynolds (2013) points out, the value of bridging ties “is very much dependent on an individual’s ability to utilise these ties to their own advantage and to access further resources, knowledge and capital” (p. 490). Our study findings suggest that local literacy programs, by and large, supported service users in fostering bridging social capital and utilizing it as productively and beneficially as possible.

Additionally, the present study found that the programs studied were largely successful in creating spaces marked by mutuality and trust. This emboldened service users to share, exhibit vulnerability, and provide required support to one another. Indeed, to employ an insight from Balatti et al. (2007), bridging capital, specifically the term bridge, implies “a two-way flow” analogous to vehicular traffic traveling across a literal bridge (p. 12). By creating spaces and contexts where service
users can forge meaningful connections with new people, such as workshops, group counselling sessions, participant self-help groups, social events, and collaborative community projects, programs facilitated opportunities for individuals to share their unique lived experiences, skills, challenges, and outlooks. This helped to build bridges of trust that most service users found empowering, and ultimately resulted in bridging social capital turning into bonding ties amongst and between service users and, in many cases, program staff and volunteers. In this way, the social ties that developed within the programs can be seen as exemplifying Lee’s (2013) notion of bridged-bonding social capital. To again use the words of Balatti et al. (2007), these social networks provide opportunities for program participants to cultivate…

… new skills, new attitudes and beliefs about self and others, new ways of interaction and new links and connections. For many, the networks are a new and safe environment in which to play out new aspects of identity and practice new skills. Within these networks, social capital outcomes are experienced. (p. 12)

Hence, as with Small’s (2009) examination of New York City childcare centers, this study spotlights the importance for non-profit community programs of actively curating opportunities for participants to build productive and supportive forms of social capital. Relatedly, the research echoes previous scholarship (e.g., Lee, 2013; Small, 2009) in illuminating the significance of conditional and contextual factors in social capital cultivation. Indeed, programs studied seemed to be largely successful in creating minimally competitive safe spaces (Small, 2009) that allowed for “high level-interactions,” “authentic personal interactions,” and “non-hierarchical relationships or equal partnerships” to develop and unfold (Lee, 2013, p. 4–5). Within the context of building social capital, it was also clear from the present study that service users had enhanced opportunities to practice and refine literacy and social skills and, armed with new skills, confidence and support, were better equipped to pursue new opportunities within the community at large. This creates potential for further bridging social capital outcomes. Of equal importance, the social capital that service users built within the support programs studied counteracted the exclusion, marginalization, and stigmatization that many reported experiencing within the wider society.

Finally, insofar as non-profit community organizations bring people together and enable service users to cultivate critical forms of social capital, research shows that they play an instrumental role in strengthening communal bonds and enhancing social trust within communities (Putnam, 2000; Sharkey et al., 2017). And, given that well-established and funded programs are part of a network of interconnected programs and agencies, they are able to “connect communities to external sources of influence, resources, and political power, all of which strengthen the capacity to achieve common goals and values” (Sharkey et al., 2017, p. 1218). Where the production of social capital by way of community organizations is concerned, Small (2009) has noted how this is particularly beneficial to low-income individuals as supportive social and organizational ties can help them to navigate poverty-related challenges and connect them to mainstream resources. And as made evident in the present study, given their unique shared experiences and challenges, people of low income or marginalized backgrounds
tend to form a particularly strong bond when provided with the conditions and circumstances by which to connect. In short, healthy and well-funded community programs are instrumental in empowering individuals and communities beyond their stated goals and objectives, resulting in a litany of positive outcomes.

Study Limitations

We urge readers to be mindful of four limitations when considering the findings of this study. Perhaps the most significant limitations pertain to sampling. Firstly, we employed a non-random sampling procedure whereby participants self-selected to take part in the research. Sampling bias is inevitable with such a sampling strategy as individuals who choose to participate are likely to have experiences and outlooks that differ from those who opt not to participate. Second and relatedly, all three participant categories were not equally represented within all of the programs studied. In two of the programs we were not able to recruit any service user or staff participants. In another program we were unable to obtain data from service users; in yet another program we were unable to recruit staff. These missing voices may represent a significant gap in the data. Thirdly, in addition to sampling bias there was also the potential for social desirability bias. Study participants, particularly staff and program leads, may have been motivated to portray their programs in a positive light. The fact that interviews and focus groups were conducted at the program locations might have heightened the potential for social desirability bias among all study participants (this possibility exists despite guaranteed confidentiality and the utilization of private settings for data collection). Finally, a theme we did not pointedly explore in this research pertains to how intersections of race, class, sexuality and gender influence the ways in which individuals experience community literacy programs and affect their capacity to build worthwhile social connections. Put differently, we did not examine how participants’ experiences differed based on the unique ways in which these identities interlocked in their lives. We posit this theme as an important avenue for future research. In spite of these limitations, the research was still able to yield important exploratory insights regarding the mechanisms and outcomes of social capital production within community literacy support programs that can inform literacy programming along with future research.

Conclusion

The present study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the ways in which non-profit community organizations can benefit individuals and communities in ways that transcend their stated missions. Specifically, we found that organizations fostered social and organizational ties, helped to build cohesion and social trust, and cultivated the latent strengths and assets within communities that are rarely acknowledged, such as the artistic aptitude of some service users which they were able to develop and share by way of their participation in programs. Moreover, the findings provide insight into the conditions crafted within community literacy programs, along with
the programmatic measures implemented, that enable the creation of positive forms of social capital, and bridged-bonding social capital in particular. Perhaps above all, the study draws awareness to the significant contributions regional non-profit support programs make to the community, and their importance in particular to the lives and well-being of people marginalized by intersections of class, race, gender, disability, and mental health. This research adds fuel to UNESCO’s (2009) call to broaden our understanding of literacy to encompass the promotion of individual growth and well-being via the cultivation of social capital. Given the importance of social capital to the lives of service users, it is imperative that funding bodies recognize and support initiatives and activities that enable residents to cultivate diverse forms of bonding and bridging social capital. Finally, this research was completed just before the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic lockdown took hold in Canada, which resulted in the closure of many community programs and the limited availability of services. Insofar as pandemic lockdowns might be part of our collective reality going forward, it is imperative that community programs find novel and innovative ways to help service users, including those who might lack consistent internet access, to cultivate the social capital needed to ensure their well-being, especially amid the unprecedented challenges that have marked the beginning of the 2020s. This is especially vital for people who make use of the sorts of programs studied, as such individuals are particularly prone to social isolation. The measures taken by non-profit community programs to support service users and assist them in fostering needed social capital amid the pandemic crisis is an urgent topic to which future research energy and resources need to be devoted.

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