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"You are activated, proud of it": A Study of Learner Identified Impacts of Participation in Adult Literacy Programs

Mary Beth Bingman
Olga Ebert

Abstract: This study is based on life history interviews with ten adult literacy students. It examines how adults describe the impacts of their participation in adult literacy classes on their lives, and how the impacts they define compare with performance measures in the new Workforce Investment Act.

Introduction

How do students in adult literacy programs describe the impacts of participation on their lives? Our study examines through life history narratives the ways participants talk about the impacts of their experiences. In this paper we describe the impacts they identified and begin to discuss the implications of these findings in light of the newly enacted Workforce Investment Act.

The purposes of adult literacy services as defined in the Workforce Investment Act (1998) are to

(1) assist adults to become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency; (2) assist adults who are parents to obtain the educational skills necessary to become full partners in the educational development of their children; and (3) assist adults in the completion of a secondary degree. (Sec. 202)

Performance is defined in terms of "skills levels" and "unsubsidized employment." We believe that we can gain a more complex and nuanced understanding of the impact of participation in adult education by listening to the ways learners talk about literacy practices in their own lives.

We understand literacy as practices enmeshed in people's lives and use this theoretical approach in this study. The concept of literacy as social practices tied to context has come from work by psychologists like Scribner and Cole (1981), anthropologists including Heath (1983) and Street (1995), and linguists Barton and Hamilton (1998). Instead of viewing literacy as a skill that can be measured by level, these scholars see literacies as practices used in a context for a purpose.

This study follows an earlier quantitative longitudinal study of adult literacy participants in Tennessee (Merrifield, Smith, Rea, Shriver, 1993; Merrifield, Smith, Rea, Crosse, 1994). From 1991 to 1995, 450 people in three cohorts were interviewed when they enrolled in adult literacy programs. All had reading scores on the Adult Basic Learning Exam (ABLE) test below 6.0. Annual follow-up interviews were conducted with 194 participants from the three cohorts after one year, with 84 after two years, and with 35 people after three years.

The current qualitative study complements the statistical findings of the longitudinal study. Life history narratives are rich sources of individual meanings and help illustrate the system level

constraints influencing people's lives (Bloom & Munro, 1995). We conducted two semi-structured life history interviews with the participants, usually in their homes. We were interested in what happened in participants' work, family, and social lives before, during, and after participation in literacy programs.

The ten participants were identified from the 139 longitudinal study subjects who had a follow-up interview in 1995. Each had at least 80 hours of adult literacy instruction. We selected a sample of six women and four men, six European Americans and four African Americans based on the demographics of students in Tennessee Adult Basic Education programs. Both urban and rural programs and each of the three regions of the state were represented. One of the participants had graduated from high school and two have eventually passed the GED test. The urban participants included Bert, an African American man, age 28; Elizabeth, an African American woman, age 65; Laura, an African American woman, age 47; and June, a European American woman, age 32. Participants from small towns or rural communities included Suzanne, a European American woman, age 32; Marvin, an African American man, age 53; Harry, a European American man, age 74; Ruth, a European American woman, age 45; Kris, a European American woman, age 30; and Will, a European American man, age 53. (All names have been changed).

We analyzed the transcripts of these interviews using an iterative inductive approach. Multiple readings and coding, both manual and using NUD*IST qualitative research software enabled us to arrive at findings that are discussed below.

Findings

From the interviews we have identified three broad categories that structure the narratives of the participants: their everyday life experiences and relationships; their work, paid and unpaid; and their experiences in adult education programs. Cutting across these categories are several themes including the impacts of their adult education experiences on their lives, structural barriers to early education, and the value of education as perceived by participants.

Everyday life. The everyday life experiences described by participants were a mix of hard times and ordinary life issues. Of the ten participants, six grew up in rural areas, working on farms even as children. They were usually from big families with an average of five children. Four of the older participants left school to go to work to help support their families. The schooling of the three older African Americans was in the segregated south. As Elizabeth told us, "back then, if you was able to pick cotton and chop, when summertime come, whenever cotton chopping time come, school would shut down and we would have to go to the field." Ruth, Suzanne, and Kris left school because they felt that they weren't learning, weren't being taught. June was pregnant in the tenth grade and stopped school, and Bert had problems with other students and left school.

The discourse about adult literacy students that is often heard in the field, as summarized by Quigley (1997), describes them as "being incapable of helping themselves," as people who can be "saved" by enrolling in a literacy course" (pp. 35-36). This description is not born out by our data. Instead, people describe lives that are in most ways quite ordinary. They have had jobs,

raised children, go shopping, have hobbies, are concerned about their neighbors and communities. Their literacy skills and/or educational opportunities have been limited, but they are not people who are "other" than most Tennesseans.

No one lives in a luxurious house, but Harry, Will, and Marvin all live in comfortable homes that they own. The others live in rented houses or apartments, subsidized for Kris, Laura, and Elizabeth. Both Elizabeth and Laura have complaints about the heat or maintenance of their apartments. We did not hear this from Kris or the others. Ruth would like to be able to afford a house instead of a trailer. Of the ten, only two had moved recently. The rest have lived in the same neighborhood and often the same house for over ten years, 22 in Harry's case.

Everyone except Harry and Laura lives with family members. June, Kris, and Suzanne have small children at home. A granddaughter lives with Elizabeth. Will, Marvin, and Ruth live with their spouses and have grown children nearby. Bert lives with his mother. All except Elizabeth drive and have access to a car, though not always one in running order.

The neighborhoods where people live vary considerably from rural communities to inner city Memphis. Three women, June, Laura, and Elizabeth live in urban neighborhoods they describe as "tense," dangerous, particularly at night. Their everyday lives are constrained by fear. "You all ain't got no business over here at nighttime" (Elizabeth); "Now that's pretty bad when you can't let your kids out to play" (June); "All I know is that there are drug sellers in the neighborhood next door, and people, they come and get what ever and go on" (Laura). Some might think Ruth, Bert and Harry live in "bad" neighborhoods (a trailer park, an older Memphis neighborhood, across the tracks in a small town), but they don't think so. They describe their neighborhoods: "It's fine. The neighbors are friendly and close to the stor" (Bert); "I feel like I am in the country, but still in the city. And so anyway, I just like it here myself" (Harry). And even Elizabeth says she's never had any problems.

No one in this group reported income above the Tennessee median (\$26,990 in 1993), but only Laura, Kris, and Suzanne spoke of financial problems. Laura depends on subsidized housing and support from her daughter and ex-husband. Kris receives disability and child support, but is in debt: "I've got my rent, my lights. I've got my beds, all of us got beds, I've got that payment. I've got my car payment. I've got a loan from two years ago I still got to pay off." Suzanne and her husband struggle to support her three daughters and his three children.

For the rest, there is either sufficient income or an ability to adjust to what income is available. Elizabeth, Harry, and June all talked about living within their means. Elizabeth: "I'm doing fine. Don't take too much for me. I just make my [Social Security] check do, what I get..... You can live off just what God blessed you with, you'll be able to make it." June, who recently opened her first checking account, resisted the bank's offers of credit:

I know if I want something in the store and I got my checkbook, well I don't have the money in the bank, I am not going to write that check... I said I didn't want no ATM card, I just want a basic check account, and that's it. If I had an ATM card I'd bounce,

overbounce like crazy. So I told them they could keep that, and I'd just stick with my checks.

Though for the most part this group is and have been self-supporting and have raised families, they say that their lives have been "hard." The younger ones' financial problems are compounded by costs born disproportionately by the poor -- higher rent-to-own prices because they have no credit, paying money order fees when they don't have a checking account, being unable to pay the "up front" lawyer's fees that might enable them to address financial wrongs. These lives may be ordinary, but are not easy.

Family activities and work fill much of the everyday lives of the participants in this study. But all had other activities as well. Will, Laura, and Elizabeth are active in their church, singing in the choir or attending Bible study as well as Sunday services. Bert, Marvin, and Harry attend church as well. The other activities people mentioned doing in their free time include: shopping, visiting family, walking, exercise, fishing, swimming; on-line chat groups; watching/following sports; going out with friends or family to the zoo, a casino, clubs, parks, movies, concerts. Their hobbies included woodcraft, collecting unicorns, crochet, playing music, working on cars. Most of them also read the Bible, newspapers, romances, and magazines.

Work. Much of what people talked to us about centered on their work lives. All of them had worked at least two jobs; five had worked many (12- 29) years at one job. Three are now retired; the rest are either working (4) or hoping to work (3). The three who are hoping to work all have health problems that limit what they are able to do. For the three older men, work has been a source of pride and satisfaction. Harry talked about being a good worker and being called back three times after he retired to help train others. Marvin was able to learn "hands on" to be a mechanic and over-the-road truck driver for a local tractor firm: "Every morning I got up, I wanted to work." He left the job when his health made it impossible to continue to drive trucks and his lack of education meant he could not work as a supervisor.

For the women work has been more a necessity than a pleasure. They can imagine and hope for work that pays well and that they enjoy, but have jobs washing dishes, housekeeping or processing chickens. Ruth told of being so cold from her job at a chicken plant that she is unable to go out again to class in the winter. Laura described cleaning in dorms after a weekend parties and working in jobs where her paycheck "wasn't right." Suzanne is an the exception among the women, having had a variety of factory jobs that she has enjoyed. And Kris liked being the assistant manager at a pizza restaurant but was forced to quit due to health problems.

Only Marvin and Laura spoke of being limited by lack of literacy skills in their employment, Marvin because he could not become a supervisor and Laura due to her difficulties spelling. In general, people are able to do their jobs, reading and writing the texts they encounter, or in Marvin's case finding ways to work around it. Will described using blueprints and keeping his own notebook of specifications in his job building customized bus interiors. Marvin learned to read a map and match the road signs to the names on the map. Ruth and Elizabeth said they had no reading or writing in their jobs.

But lack of credentials, lack of a high school or GED diploma, has been a barrier to jobs for Ruth and Will and a barrier to additional training for Kris and Bert. Harry and Marvin doubt they could get the jobs they had if they were entering the job market today. Elizabeth urged her daughters to finish school so they wouldn't have to work as hard as she had, "doing everything" in a neighborhood restaurant. This group believes that regardless of the skills needed for a job - and some talked about increasing skill levels - educational credentials are necessary to get good jobs. Speaking of education, Elizabeth told us: "It's better to have it and don't need it than need it and don't have it. And more than likely you're gonna need it."

Literacy practices. All of the participants in this study enrolled in what Tennessee calls Level 1 or literacy classes. In these classes they reported learning a variety of skills such as breaking words into syllables, using standard writing conventions, and working with math. All but two talked about ways these improved skills led to new or expanded literacy practices in their lives.

Changes in literacy practices included six people who reported more reading of newspapers, the Bible, other books, and to their children. Seven reported new literacy practices in their everyday lives including opening a checking account, programing a remote control, using a map in a search for a new apartment, using measurement at work, being better able to fill out job reports. Several people described new understanding and awareness of history and national and world events. While in no instance were these reported as life-changing outcomes, people did talk about these changed skills and practices and new knowledge as improvements in their lives. The impacts were significant, particularly for those who were the most limited readers. "Life's brighter when you learn how to read," says Marvin.

Sense of self. While they reported some changes in literacy practices, this group also talked about changes in their sense of themselves. These changes included pride in their accomplishments. Harry spoke about passing the GED test: "It built my ego, and I've had a lot of praises and [they] even made a write-up with me in the paper." For some, like Elizabeth, there was a new sense of efficacy: "I feel better about myself since I learned how to read better. I feel like I'm somebody. You feel better about yourself when you learn how to do a lot of things for yourself, you know." Social situations were made easier for Marvin: "I've got a lot of friends right now that we sit down and we talk, and hey, I done looked in the paper and see the same thing that he sees, so we an discuss this matter." Ruth said she learned to speak her opinion, for instance when her supervisor changed her scheduled Christmas week off : "So I spoke up. I said, 'No, it isn't right. I want my vacation.' And I got it." It appears to us that most of these people had a positive sense of self before participating in adult literacy programs. But their participation did lead to changes in what they felt able to do, or as June put it, to feeling "activated."

Conclusions

This study contributes adult learners' perspectives to a national conversation on outcomes that tends to define literacy performances and outcomes in quite limited ways. For example, the new legislation defines "core indicators of performance" for adult literacy programs as improvements in literary skill levels, postsecondary education or training, unsubsidized employment or career advancement, and receipt of a secondary school diploma or equivalent (Workforce Investment Act, 1998, Sec. 212). Federal and state

agencies will evaluate the effectiveness of adult literacy programs using these indicators, indicators that describe literacy as a collection of skills and that narrowly frame outcomes in terms of formal education and credentials and economic impact.

The narratives of the ten people in our study suggest that the impacts of participation in adult education programs are complex and varied, as are the people who participate. But that these changes will lead to postsecondary education, secondary school diplomas, or career advancement for those who begin adult basic education at the literacy level is not evident in our study. People did change and recognized and named changes. For a variety of reasons these changes have not yet led to employment and in only two cases to the receipt of a GED certificate.

The second goal in the new legislation for literacy programs is for adults to have the skills needed for the educational development of their children. Three participants in this study did report increased reading to their children as an outcome of their participation in adult education. However, these parents came to adult literacy classes valuing education and all the parents reported being involved in their children's education, apparently with some success. Among the seven families with children of high school age or older (a total of 20), only one child had dropped out of school and nine had attended at least some college.

In her recent paper on performance accountability in adult education, Merrifield (1998) suggests the need for connecting performance goals with real life outcomes. The new legislation allows states to identify additional performance indicators beyond the core indicators noted above. Our research suggests the need for additional indicators that recognize a wide variety of changes in the lives and experiences of adult learners. These indicators should include expanded literacy practices, a stronger voice, and the excitement of learning and sharing new knowledge. As Marvin told us, "Things come natural to me now. I've come a long way."

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