

Conclusion



In this report we have presented findings from a three-year longitudinal study of adults who were learning or improving basic literacy skills in public library literacy programs in California. Our questions concerned the most profound issues in anyone's life, those having to do with competence, improvement, self concept and relationships with children.

In this chapter we will present our conclusions and suggest that the program design of the library facilitated these outcomes for these participants. All in all, we have learned a great deal about our participants and their lives and literacy experiences. The sheer extent of human striving displayed by the learners was staggering. These are motivated individuals. But even motivated individuals may find it difficult to change their circumstances without assistance from others. In the library literacy program, it was a group effort. The library provided tutoring, social get-together with activities and speakers, and free books for the children. In our opinion, the effort of the tutors was probably the key factor. It was clear that the tutors gave extensively; in fact, the amount of time and help they gave was awe-inspiring. The learners responded with effort and will.



We have collected interview data over a three-year period and we have become deeply immersed in the words of our participants, trying to understand their perspectives and experiences. In a longitudinal study such as this one, some questions can be answered as the data come in year by year. Other questions must be answered only when all data have been collected. It wasn't until all data had been collected that we were able to make some retrospective comparisons between individuals who stayed in the program and those who did not. By the third year, we knew who was active and who was not so we could look back at the first year, divide participants into active and inactive categories and look at their respective comments to see if we could predict why people had stayed in the program. At this point, our understanding of our participants increased significantly.

To summarize our project and its' main findings:

- We conducted over 650 interviews during the project. This was a large undertaking of effort and time on the parts of many interviewees and interviewers, transcribers, data coders and analysts.
- The effort of the participants during the program was extensive, for both learners and tutors. Time spent in the program was on average over a year and for most over two years. For some of the tutors, the time spent volunteering in the program was over 10 years.
- We observed that learners changed as the years went by. They grew more confident, more oriented toward learning and literacy, more elaborative in their discussions of their lives and more talkative about their children.
- Initially we found that social networks of learners were lower than those of tutors and adult norms, especially in the second and third circles, suggesting less breadth in social support. As the years went by, the learners increased numbers of people in their social networks.
- We found that tutors used numerous techniques to help their learners achieve the goals they had set. As revealed by learner comments, tutors told them they could achieve whatever they wanted, that effort was the key ingredient to success and that their efforts would help their children. Tutors also worked on behalf of the learners' children. Over 80% of the tutors knew the learners' children personally and a large percentage of these tutors did activities to directly help the children.
- We found that learners overwhelmingly said their goals were to help their children and they reported that the effects on their children were positive. The learners also talked about their children with new per-

spectives as they stayed in the program longer. Their comments began to include topics such as developmental level, the importance of motivation, especially the importance of “doing your best,” and the use of various techniques to help children.

- We found that tutors reported changing, also. They said they gained pleasure from helping their learner, showing that they knew their learners well and talking a lot about how they tried to find relevant techniques. They said they enjoyed getting to know their learners and that in doing so, they gained more complex perspectives about life and individual effort. They also increased their social networks, showing again the cooperative nature of the program.
- We found that participants stayed in the program for a significant amount of time and we divided our participants into three groups, those that stayed one year, those who stayed two years and those who stayed all three years. We found interesting differences between the three retention groups. Basically, our data show that participants are pleased with their experience in the library literacy program and if they leave it is because of life events or getting a job. Those that stay the longest appear to have the greatest need for the program.
- We also found that many of our college students who conducted the interviews self reported changes in their own lives. They became aware of a population that they did not know existed or could previously relate to. A number decided to explore future work in literacy or education. Many felt the work they did impacted their lives.

In anyone’s life, there are changes in a three-year period. If we could interview individuals in all walks of life we would possibly be able to pinpoint the activities and social interactions and life events that created these changes. In this study, we observed changes and tried to connect our participants’ changes at least partly to participation in the literacy program. We attempted to find the exact reasons the program made such a difference. As time went on and we interviewed more people and continued to read and study, our understanding of our learners and their experiences grew. We began to see the patterns of interrelated changes for various subgroups within the study and the bigger picture emerged.

While we originally believed that it was the relationship between learner and tutor that created change in the learners, we came to see this as a more complex dynamic. These are not counseling sessions. The literacy activity is at the very center of change. It is what learners and tutors do for the hour or two they are together. They read together, they set goals together, select material together, and do various activities together such as practicing reading children’s books. The conversations they have are about their literacy activities and those of their children. They also talk about what they have read or learned over the preceding week. In

other words, they have a significant amount of time in which they are immersed in the written word and how it relates to them. This reinforces the learners' personal literacy activities.

We know from our interviews and from other research studies of adult education that literacy acquisition brings learners into contact with activities that challenge them. Many learners have had negative experiences with school and have had embarrassing moments as members of society who can't read and write. We saw this acknowledged in comments from learners about feeling less embarrassed as they stayed in the program longer. Some learners are trying to read and write in a new language that they are just learning to speak. These are big undertakings and the learners seem well aware of this. They talk about the amount of effort it takes and how challenging it is. These individuals have decided to tackle the problem head-on by becoming more literate and they have reaped many benefits for themselves and their families as a result. They are proud of themselves and more connected to the community.

One of the most profound conclusions we have drawn from this study concerns the ways in which literacy engagement and improvement appear to impact many other aspects of an individual's life. Literacy is all-encompassing activity and self-confidence, social networks, plans for the future and abilities to help and influence children are all involved in the main activity. From our study, it appears as though the literacy lesson itself is at the center of change for our participants. Participation in family literacy improves literacy for parents and children and can be dramatically life changing.