

Retention



Cassandra is a 34-year-old African American who lives in low income housing. She had been an exceptional athlete in high school and had dreamed of going to the Olympics. Instead she became pregnant at 17 and is still with the man she married soon after her daughter was born. She told her story with a wry sense of humor, but indicated no bitterness. After her marriage she went on to have six more children.

Cassandra told us that she had heard about literacy programs on television. When she saw Oprah interview a man who had learned to read at a library she went to the local library and asked about programs. She described herself as someone, *“who gets along with everybody OK.”* When the interviewer asked her for more details she told us that she really preferred to be around people who said what they meant instead of beating around the bush. By the interview in the second year she described herself as *“very confident in myself. I give 100 percent in what I do.”*

At the time of the first interview her children ranged in age from 5 to 16. She is fond of saying that they are just *“normal kids, but there are a lot of them.”* She believes organization is the key to keeping the family running smoothly. She was thankful for the broad age range so that not very many were young at any one time.

When encouraged to talk more about her children it became obvious that she has serious concerns about them. In response to probing by the interviewer, she admitted that 4 of them have learning disabilities. They have problems in reading and her tutor helps them at the library. At home they use “Hooked on Phonics” and she helps them with their numbers and letters. Her tutor has been showing her ways to help the children

and she tries to use those. Most of her children prefer to watch videos and every night Cassandra tries to turn off the television and make everyone read.

In addition to being a wife and the mother of seven, she usually has a full-time job and sometimes a part-time job as well. For a while she had a small cleaning business, but had a very difficult time taking care of the paper work. Although she thought that she could read quite well she knew that she couldn't spell well enough to do her paper work. By the second interview she had become aware that she needed to improve her reading skills. Her goal changed, she said, *"My goal is to learn how to read good and be able to understand what I am reading. To go to the library and really learn, those are my goals."*

She was paired with a tutor whom she liked and respected. Although she tried to attend the weekly meetings, by the second year she was *"taking a break."* One of her children has a rather severe physical disability and Cassandra was spending a lot of time taking her to different doctors for help. In the second year she expressed how hard it was to watch her child suffer so much pain. It was also



Questions about participant retention in learning programs are frequently asked by researchers, policy makers and educational practitioners. How long do participants stay in the program? Why do they drop out? What type of learners stay in the program longer? Policy makers want to justify the expenditure of funds; researchers want to search for meaningful patterns in their data; and practitioners want to improve their educational product to better serve their learners. Our research study included questions about program retention, too.

Other national longitudinal studies have investigated the topic of retention, sometimes referred to as persistence. Reder and Strawn (2004), in a longitudinal study conducted in Oregon, found that adults without a high school diploma did not end their educational efforts, but continued to use various programs and methods to increase their skills. They came and went from educational programs as they were able. For our case study in this chapter, we selected a learner who was no longer active. Although many learners did stay in the program, we felt it would help understand the complexity of adults' lives when talking about retention.

Findings from another large national study (Comings, Parella & Siricone, 1999) revealed that individuals who showed most persistence in adult learning programs had already been in previous basic skills programs or had been doing self-study. These learners tended to have more specific goals than learners who did not persist. They also tended to be a little older – in their 30's -- and be parents of older children or teens as opposed to small children. The authors identified several factors that

during that interview that Cassandra expressed her deep faith in God.

During the third interview, Cassandra was still on break. Her disabled child was hospitalized at the time and we were honored that she found time to talk to us at all. In spite of her wide social network, she began talking about staying more *“to herself.”* It was difficult for her to find time to do anything for herself and spending time with friends was out of the question.

Her isolation might have been exacerbated by her dissatisfaction with her living situation. She described her community as *“just a place to stay.”* She still lives in low income housing and finds most of her neighbors rude and inconsiderate. She particularly worries about the way her neighbors are raising their children. She doesn't feel that she has a voice in the community, nor does she feel that the community will get better. Her best hope is to get out of debt and move. In fact, that has become a major goal.

Although Cassandra regrets not being active in the program, she feels that it is unavoidable. She is constantly torn between the needs of her children and financial demands. She maintains contact with her tutor, but for now her literacy tutoring is on hold.



helped persistence such as social support, feelings of self-efficacy, setting specific goals, and making progress toward the goals. Our research project also considered the issue of retention. Our findings confirm many of the previous findings and add interesting additional data about diverse participants in California.

In our study, there are actually two types of retention to discuss. First, how successful were we in keeping our sample participants in the research study? Second, how long did our learners stay in the literacy program? We shall discuss research project retention first.

In the first year of our study, we interviewed 132 learners and 127 tutors. We made numerous attempts to keep them all as participants in the study, that is interview them over three years. We made many phone calls to reach participants. We called the libraries and asked if they had new numbers or any information about the learners we couldn't reach. In spite of a lot of effort we were not able to retain all of these individuals for second and third year interviews. In the second year we interviewed 109 learners and 115 tutors, 82% and 90% retention rates respectively. In the third year, we interviewed 96 learners and 87 tutors, showing 73% and 68% respective retention rates. Our interview overall retention rate was 86% percent in the second year and by year three was 70%.

Retention of participants in the FFL program is our second issue and the main focus of this chapter. We interviewed our learners each year (if we could reach them) no matter if they stayed in the literacy program or not.

PARTICIPANT RETENTION IN THIS STUDY

PARTICIPATION RATE IN STUDY BY YEAR

| Year of Data Collection | Participants in the Study |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Year 1 | 259 (132 learners + 127 tutors) |
| Year 2 | 224 (109 learners + 115 tutors) |
| Year 3 | 183 (96 learners + 87 tutors) |

COMPARISON OF PEOPLE WHO STAYED IN PROGRAM AND THOSE WHO DID NOT

This allowed us to also question participants who had stopped attending the program. Of the 109 learners interviewed in the second year, 57.8% were still in the program. By Year 3, 55.2% of the 96 learners interviewed were still in the program.. For tutors, by Year 2, 71.3% of the 115 interviewed were still tutoring. In Year 3, 87 tutors were interviewed, 56.3% were still tutoring. For purposes of understanding retention, it was helpful to be able to talk to participants who had left the program. This is often not available to researchers and evaluators.

We found that the main reason people stopped attending the tutoring program was because they no longer had time for it. They gave reasons such as getting a job or having a schedule change or family commitments. In some cases they left because they were having scheduling difficulties with the tutor or because one of them was sick or as in Cassandra's case, they had a child with health problems. Like Cassandra, our participants did not tell us that they were leaving because they had reached all their goals or because they got all they could from the program. As many other adult education studies have concluded: life gets in the way.

METHODS FOR STUDYING PROGRAM RETENTION

| Demographic Comparisons | Retrospective Comparisons |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Native Language + Interview Language | Reasons for joining |
| Age | Goals |
| Number + Age of Children | Social Support |
| Time in Program | Experience in Program |



RETENTION IN LITERACY PROGRAM FOR LEARNERS AND TUTORS INTERVIEWED

| Year of Interview | Learners Active | Learners Inactive | Tutors Active | Tutors Inactive |
|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Year 1 | 132 | | 127 | |
| Year 2 | 63 | 46 | 82 | 33 |
| Year 3 | 53 | 43 | 49 | 38 |

This leaves us with the interesting question of who stayed in the tutoring program; who persisted. We have analyzed this research question using two main issues. First, we wondered whether there were demographic differences between those who stayed in the program longer. For example were people who stayed in the program of different ages, languages, or did they have fewer children? Or maybe the participants differed in their motivations to join the program or had different experiences while in the program? Maybe those who stayed accomplished more of their goals. Many of these questions could not be answered until all our data had been collected and we knew who was still in the program and who had dropped out. At that point, we knew which participants had stayed for one year, two years or all three years. We formed retention groups for these three years and could compare them on important dimensions of their experience. We refer to this as making retrospective comparisons. Even better, we were able to interview people who had left the program and find out why. Here is what we found. Basically participants stayed in the program for significant periods of time. Those that dropped out of the program had already been there for quite awhile. But it is interesting to look at the various aspects of retention and how the various participants performed.

We found that age did make a difference in the program. Actually, age made more of a difference in program attendance than in retention. In the first place, remember that the average age of our participants was 32 when we first interviewed them. When we compared our three retention groups, the average age of those who stayed one year was 35.06 years, those who stayed for two years had an average age of 34.45 and those who stayed all three years were 37.44 years old, on average. So, the participants who stayed longer were a bit older but not significantly so.

AGE

When we first interviewed our participants, they had already been in the program for over a year on average. For those participants who were active all three years, the average time in the program at the beginning was 37.45 months. This is compared to those who stayed for only a year and those who stayed for two. They had been in the program an average of 18.38 months and 18.73 months respectively before we interviewed them for the project.

TIME IN PROGRAM

This made us wonder whether the groups had experienced different levels of satisfaction in the program. Were they all treated similarly or were those in the program longer treated better in some way? We found no support for that idea. When we compared our three retention groups by looking at the amount of attention they received from their tutors, there was no difference in numbers of techniques used in the sessions or numbers of personal comments made by the tutors about their learners' needs. Furthermore when we looked at learners comments about tutors, all three groups were equally positive about their tutors' efforts on their behalf as

SATISFACTION WITH PROGRAM

well as the positive experience it was to get to know the tutors. This should be good news to program developers and managers.

NUMBER OF CHILDREN

We next looked at number of children participants had and whether this distinguished those who stayed from those who left. We found, similar to Comings' findings, that number of children did make a difference although we are not quite sure what to make of the first finding. Those who were active for all three years and those who were active only the first year had the fewest children. These groups averaged 2.34 and 2.95 children respectively. Those who were in the program for two years had an average of 4.73 children.

AGE OF CHILDREN

Number of children alone does not reveal the entire picture of how children influence their parents' persistence in the literacy program. Younger children may be more labor intensive than older children and may place more constraints on their parents' schedules. The learners who were in the program for the first year had the most children between the ages of 3 and 10 years old. In order to be in the program, all parents had a child younger than 5 but it was relative numbers of younger children who made the difference. Childcare duties were frequently listed as reasons for discontinuing the program. People who stayed in the program for the next two years had many children in the older age groups. Perhaps these children were able to help with the childcare and allow the parent an opportunity to continue going to the sessions.

NATIVE LANGUAGE



Our next issue was language spoken. California has become multicultural with numerous languages spoken by significant numbers of people. The diversity of our sample was congruent with state demographics overall. Therefore, we had to consider native language when we attempted to interview someone as we mentioned in a previous chapter. We wanted our participants to be comfortable. We were able to offer Spanish interviewers to participants who preferred this. Some of participants were interviewed in their own language but interestingly, some of them declined this and were interviewed in English. We had a group of participants whose native language was not English but was other than Spanish and we had to interview them in English. And then we had native English speakers also. We divided participants into four language groups to see if there were any differential rates of attrition among groups. Learners were identified by native language as well as by the language in which they were interviewed. We assumed that there might be differences between those who were native English speakers versus those who spoke a different language. We also assumed that those who spoke a different language but were interviewed in English had important differences from those interviewed in their own language. The two groups that showed the highest retention were the native English Speakers (EE) and the participants speaking languages other than English or Spanish who were interviewed in English (OE). The Spanish speakers interviewed in

| RETENTION IN FFL PROGRAM BY LANGUAGE GROUP | | |
|--|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Language/Interview | Percent Active, Year 3 | Percent Inactive, Year 3 |
| Spanish/English | 38.46 | 61.54 |
| Spanish/Spanish | 47.62 | 52.38 |
| Enlish/English | 68.18 | 31.82 |
| Other/English | 66.67 | 33.33 |

English showed the highest drop out rate for our study, followed by the Spanish speakers interviewed in Spanish. Perhaps these groups of learners had met their particular needs well enough to accomplish their daily tasks.

Another important aspect to persisting in the program is the amount and type of support that the learners have. We assessed that in several ways. One of the most common ways to assess social support is to measure the size of social networks. This has already been discussed in the Learner and Tutor chapters. We used the method of Antonucci (1986), which allows quantification of both total numbers of people in a perceived social network and the relative closeness of individuals.

When we take the retrospective approach, there are interesting differences between the three groups in the first year. Figure 1 shows these differences. Those who remained active for all three years (Retention 3) actually had on average smaller networks with a mean of 9.94 members. The other two groups Retention 1, and Retention 2 had average network sizes of 13.60 and 12.70 respectively. Perhaps one of the reasons some participants stay is because of the social connections provided by the program. So, while other national longitudinal studies have found that individuals with more social support stay in literacy programs longer, the participants in our study seem to find social support in the program and this may supplement other relationships in their lives.

Another very interesting facet of the social networks is that distribution across the circles differed for each of the three retention groups. Those who were active during the first two years had proportionately more people in their outer circle where as those who were active for only the first year (Retention 1) had more people in their middle circle. The relative proportions of the circles changed for the Retention 2 group and by the third year interviews they had many more people in their outer circle. This may be related to their dramatic increase in employment, which will be discussed next.

Finally, we looked at employment to see how it affected retention in the literacy program. More individuals were employed as time went on in all three retention groups. In the first year, those that ended up staying for

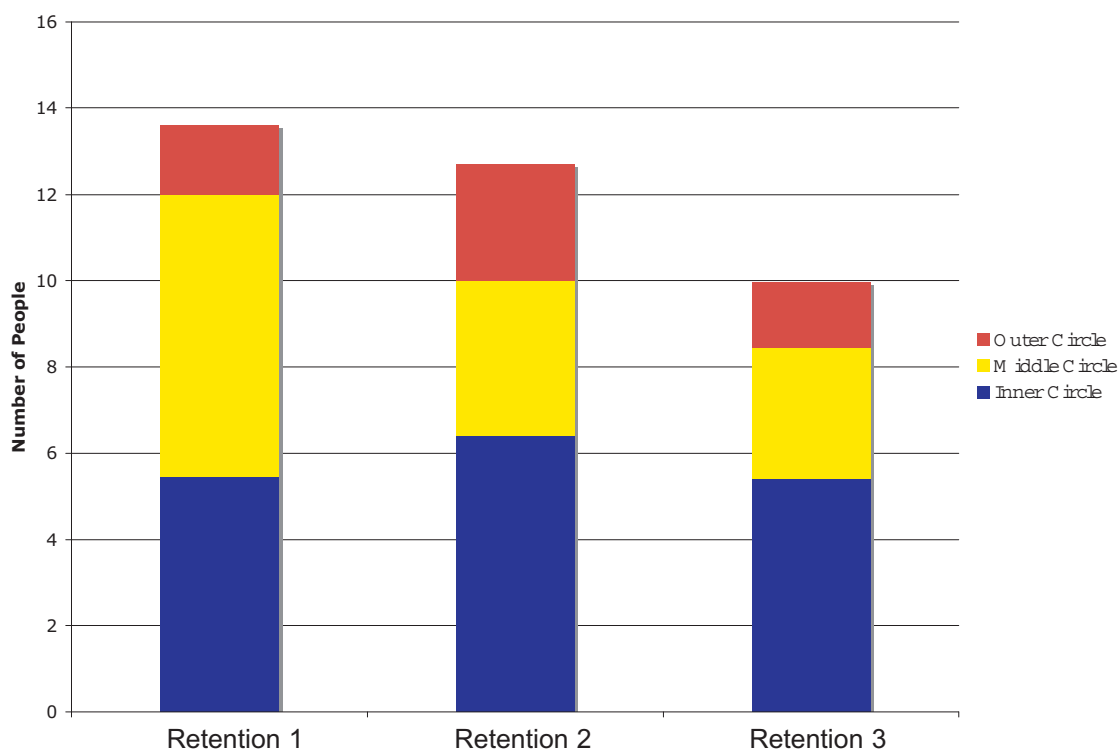


LEARNER SUPPORT

LEARNER EMPLOYMENT

Figure 4

Social Circle Membership



three years had much lower rates of employment (18.42% were employed), compared to 36.36% of the Retention 2 and 35% of Retention 1. At the time of the second year interviews, all three retention groups had employment rates between 40.00 and 45.45%. At the time of the third year interviews, the group who had left the program after a year had an employment rate of 50.00%, similar to that of those who stayed all three years. (52.63%). The Retention 2 participants were dramatically different with an employment rate of 72.73%.

All in all, we see several patterns in our data showing why participants stay or leave the family literacy program. For example,

- people who stay in the program longer are on average older than the ones who leave
- they tend to have fewer preschool age children. We saw that some learners left the program because they had new babies, for instance.
- Spanish speakers left the program at a higher rate than learners who were native English speakers or who spoke a first language other than English or Spanish. Presumably, the native English speakers are still working on literacy goals and some of them may be learning disabled, lengthening the amount of time it takes to make progress. If they are new English speakers but have no large cohort of speakers of their own language (unlike Spanish-speakers), they may need to improve their English even more than the Spanish speakers.

However, overall we must remember that participants in this study had all been in the program over a year by the time they left and for some of the learners and tutors they had been there several years. One tutor said *"I think I have done enough now."* Energy for the activity might have dwindled or need for decreased or there were intervening complications. But nowhere do we see that it is because the program had failed them nor did we see evidence that they had moved on to new programs. They appeared to be satisfied for the time being.