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Recommended Citation

Ebert, Olga and Bingman, Mary Beth (2000). "One Year After Enrollment in Literacy Programs: A Study of Changes in Learners' Lives," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2000/papers/19>

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One Year After Enrollment in Literacy Programs: A Study of Changes in Learners' Lives

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Abstract: *The study examined changes in the lives of 450 Tennessee adults one year after they enrolled in literacy programs. Among the findings were: increase in rate of employment, in participants' self-esteem, in their involvement in community organizations, and in some literacy practices.*

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to identify if and how participation in literacy programs impacted the lives of adults. The study focused on changes in lives of 450 participants after they enrolled in literacy programs. It aimed at expanding understanding of how program participation changes adults' quality of life in the domains of work, family, and community.

Typically, the outcomes of participation in literacy programs for adults have been measured in terms of gains on standardized tests and/or passing the General Educational Development (GED) exam. Some studies have found that participation in adult basic education can lead to increased employment, self-esteem, and social participation (Beder, 1991). Fingeret and her colleagues (1994) found that literacy programs produced outcomes on students' confidence and cultural awareness as well as on literacy practices. The changes that occur in students' lives, especially changes outside the classroom, may be the most significant outcomes, although they are generally not assessed. Such real life outcomes are the main focus of this study.

The Study

Research Design

Adult learners from nine adult basic education (ABE) Level-1 programs from across the state of Tennessee were interviewed for this study. Participants in three cohorts (1992, 1993, 1994) were given a baseline interview as they enrolled in ABE programs. All had scored below the sixth grade level on the ABLE (Adult Basic Learning Exam) reading test. Those who had indicated they were willing, participated in follow-up interviews at approximately one-year intervals. The study was designed to continue for five years and include qualitative (individual, program, and community case studies), as well as quantitative data. However,

funding was interrupted, and the study was not completed. A total of 450 baseline interviews were completed in the nine sites participating in the study in Years One, Two, and Three.

Although data collection and analysis was suspended in 1995, researchers from the Center for Literacy Studies returned to it later (Bingman, Ebert, & Smith, 2000). The analysis for this report includes data from Follow-up One interviews from the combined three cohorts (N=199). The table below presents the number of interviews for each year of the study (the numbers analyzed for this paper are italicized).

The questionnaire used in this study included 116 questions. To examine socio-economic well-being, respondents were asked about their employment and sources of income, as well as about other activities used to make ends meet. Social well-being was examined through questions relating to family and community involvement. The personal well-being of respondents was examined with questions pertaining to self-esteem and lifestyle. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), to which an "Undecided" mid-point was added, was selected because it has been widely used with different populations and because it is one of the shorter self-esteem instruments. To examine physical well-being, students were asked about their health and access to health care. In addition to these major areas, respondents were asked general demographic questions. The follow-up questionnaires included many of the same questions as the baseline questionnaire, as well as some new ones that asked people to reflect on changes in their lives. For the present study, the 56 questions common to baseline and follow-up questionnaires were analyzed. Readers should be aware of the limitations of this research. The sample size was small, and learner attrition over time resulted in further decrease in

sample sizes. All the data in the study were self reported.

There was no comparison group in this study. It was beyond the means of the research team to obtain a representative sample of adults who would be

eligible for the study but did not enroll in ABE. Within these limitations, the study provides learners' responses to a wide variety of potential outcomes and contributes to our understanding of the impacts of ABE participation in learners' lives.

Table 1

Tennessee Longitudinal Study Interviews

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3	Total
Baseline	133	149	168	450
Follow-up 1	70	64	65	199
Follow-up 2	45	39		84
Follow-up 3	35			35

Research Questions

The two main research questions of the study were:

1. What aspects of life change one year after enrollment in an ABE program?

Two different statistical tests were used to answer this research question. A chi-square analysis was used in situations where variables at both baseline and follow-up were measured at the nominal level. And for interval level variables, a t-test analysis was performed.

2. Will substantial participation in an ABE program produce more change in various aspects of life than limited participation?

To help answer this question, the participants were divided into two groups: those with substantial participation (80 or more instructional hours), and those with limited participation (less than 80 hours). A repeated measures mixed design analysis of variance was conducted to determine whether there were interaction effects where the change of means from baseline to follow-up was dependent on the participation group (substantial or limited).

All statistical tests utilized an error rate of 5% ($p < .05$) for testing research questions.

Findings

In the analysis of the follow-up interviews of the combined cohorts, a number of important changes were found. Approximately one year after enrollment in adult literacy classes these adults reported changes in various aspects of their lives. These include:

- An increase in rate of employment from 32% of participants to 48%
- An overall increase in self-esteem as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale from 3.52 to 3.66
- Increased involvement in community organizations (religious, PTA/PTO, and social sports); changes in the number of registered voters also approached significance ($p < .06$).
- Positive changes in three of eight literacy practices examined (paying bills, working with numbers on the job, and needing to memorize because of limited reading ability)
- Increase in number of people who thought a book was a good gift for a child
- An increased overall satisfaction with their financial situation in Cohorts 2 and 3.

In summary, there was positive change on at least one item in each category examined by this study – employment, self-esteem, community, and children's education. It should be noted that there was not a control group in this study, and so one cannot say that these changes were a result of the enrollment of the participants in an adult literacy class. But the changes were greater than would be expected by chance, and the common variable

among the participants (in addition to being Tennessee adults) was enrolling approximately one year earlier in an adult literacy program.

However, there were no significant changes in some areas. No significant changes were found in community awareness or in how people felt about their community. People were not more likely to attend community meetings or talk politics. There was not a significant increase in reading reported, nor a significant increase in involvement in children's education. There were few significant changes in life satisfaction.

The analysis for this report also compared the 32% of the group (N=60) with substantial participation (at least 80 hours of class since enrollment) with the 68% (N=129) with limited participation (fewer than 80 hours.) There were few significant differences between those with limited hours of classroom time and those who had substantial participation:

- Those with *substantial* participation reported significantly more satisfaction with their family life than those with fewer than 80 hours
- Those with *substantial* participation were more likely to say that a book is a good gift for a child
- Those with *limited* participation were more likely to report a decrease in need to memorize because they could not read well enough than those with substantial participation
- For those with *limited* participation, 18.5% more were employed one year after enrollment than at the baseline, while for those with substantial participation the difference between employment rate at baseline and at follow-up was 12%.

Implications

The findings reported here support the conclusion that participation in adult basic education is a positive factor in regard to employment and learners' self-esteem. There are multiple factors impacting both these variables, but enrolling in an adult education program, even one without a specific workforce focus, may have led to increased self-esteem and employment. This suggests that while

focus on work-force preparedness might strengthen employment outcomes, programs that focus more on basic skills development also support employment outcomes. This study also suggests that information about the curricula and instructional approaches of the programs in which adult literacy students participate are needed to really understand what factors contribute to outcomes in learners' lives. This study also indicates the need for increased support for the outcomes beyond basic skill acquisition, if stakeholders in the adult basic education system have expectations for outcomes beyond basic skill acquisition. An increased focus on community issues, family literacy, and everyday literacy uses in ABE classes are indicated if goals for ABE include changes in these areas of students' lives.

To understand what these findings mean for adult basic education beyond the reassurance that even limited participation seems to lead to some positive changes in participants' lives, detailed program information is needed. What were the curricula, the instructional processes, the goals of the ABE programs that participants attended? Qualitative interviews with ten of the participants of the Longitudinal Study who were in seven of the programs (Bingman and Ebert, 2000) provide a picture of what these programs offered. Those ten participants and a case study of one of the nine programs (Crosse, 1994) described programs where the teachers were very supportive and the curriculum was primarily structured around basic skills acquisition and practice. These were not family literacy programs. Nor were they community-based programs with a focus on civic involvement. So it is not surprising that this study found little change in community awareness and involvement. Likewise, the small changes in involvement of participants with their children's education are not surprising.

But there was a significant increase in employment even though the programs did not emphasize workforce development. Perhaps taking the step to enroll in an adult education program and improving reading and math skills, at least to some extent, led people to take the additional step of seeking employment. Another possibility is that people enrolled in the programs with a goal of getting a job.

The analysis reported here supports the conclusion that participation in adult basic education is a positive factor in regard to employment. And it supports the often-reported (Beder, 1991; Beder, 1999) conclusion that participation in adult basic

education leads to increased self-esteem. Although positive changes found in self-esteem, literacy practices, and community involvement were not large, it should be noted that small changes after a short period of association with an ABE program could lead over time to much greater impacts. For example, increased frequency of paying bills reported by some participants provides them with additional practice of basic skills that, combined with other new activities, can eventually lead to more confidence in one's ability to read and write.

Other questions that could be addressed from additional analysis of the data from the Tennessee Longitudinal Study of Adult Literacy Participants (see Merrifield, Smith, Rea, & Shriver, 1993; Merrifield, Smith, Rea, & Crosse, 1994; Bingman, Ebert, & Smith, 2000). Analysis of the follow-up interviews conducted two and three years after enrollment, while of many fewer subjects, might yield new understandings of longer-term changes. A more detailed analysis of the descriptive baseline data could be compared to data on current adult education populations, populations affected by welfare reform. Questions that were discarded for this report (mainly because of the inconsistencies in questionnaires from year to year), for instance on health status, might yield interesting findings. We hope that other researchers will use the data sets generated by this study.

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