

Affecting Change in Literacy Practices of Adult Learners

A NCSALL Research Brief

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Until this study, no one had systematically explored the relationships between literacy instruction type and change in literacy practices among adult learners. Yet there are good reasons to use change in literacy practices as an outcome of adult literacy instruction, given what is known about the benefits of practicing new skills and of having many and varied uses of print in the lives of young children. Motivated by the studies showing that parents' literacy influences children's success in learning to read and write, the NCSALL researchers set out to examine the relationship between two dimensions of literacy instruction and change in adult learners' literacy practices outside class.

This study investigated the relationships between (a) two dimensions of adult literacy instruction and (b) change in the literacy practices of adult literacy students. The two instructional dimensions investigated were (a) degree of authenticity of the activities and texts employed in the literacy class and (b) degree of teacher/student collaboration around activities, texts, assessments, and program governance. The construct of authenticity for this study was defined as those literacy activities and purposes used by people in their lives, excluding those that are structured solely around learning to read and write in school settings.

The study was motivated by issues of generational literacy and by research that documents that young children's success and failure in learning to read and write in school is related to the frequency of literacy events and types of texts read and written by their parents. It is assumed that increasing the frequencies and types of literacy practices of adult literacy students is an important outcome of adult instruction due to this generational literacy factor.

Methodology

Data on the two instructional dimensions of interest—authenticity and collaboration—was collected from 83 adult literacy classes in 22 states. Data on class activities and texts and on degree of student influence on these were triangulated from three sources: a teacher questionnaire; class observation; and group-student interview. Classes were given a score indicating the degree to which they reflected these two dimensions.

Key Findings

- ♦ Adult learners in classes using real-life (authentic) literacy activities and texts read and write more often, and use a greater variety of texts, in their lives outside class.
- ♦ The degree of teacher–learner collaboration shows no influence on change in literacy practices.
- ♦ The lower a student's literacy level when beginning an adult literacy class and the longer the students attends a class, the more likely the students report change in literacy practices.
- ♦ Adult learners attribute their change in literacy practices to factors other than the degree of authenticity of their instruction and texts, including changes in employment, school attendance, living situation, and family responsibilities.
- ♦ Research can document instructional outcomes in ways that reflect actual literacy learning.

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

- ♦ Teachers should include and increase the use of authentic literacy activities and texts in their classes.
- ♦ Finding ways to make it possible and attractive for students to stay in class is necessary because we can expect to see significant outcomes that accrue from these adults entering the literate world as readers and writers—benefits that go beyond the individual but also affect future generations.
- ♦ Researchers should more directly examine the inferred cycle of intergenerational literacy—that parents' literacy influences children's literacy—using a longitudinal study.
- ♦ Other factors contributing to change in literacy practices, as well as other outcomes of such instructional dimensions as authenticity and collaboration, are potential areas of additional research.

Data on change in adult students' literacy practices was collected from 173 adult literacy students with a detailed questionnaire that was administered to students individually in their homes every three months for up to a year as long as they attended their literacy class. Students were asked if they engaged in individual literacy practices and, if so, whether these practices were new or engaged in more frequently since beginning the class.

Factors Affecting Change in Literacy Practices

Results of the analysis revealed that authenticity of class literacy activities and texts had a moderate effect on change in student literacy practices, operationalized as increases in frequency of reading and writing and/or types of texts read and written. Analysis of the literacy engagement and change scales used in this study revealed that the increases in types of texts involved reading and writing more texts at higher levels of discourse, levels associated in previous studies with higher levels of emergent literacy knowledge. The degree of collaboration between teacher and students showed no effect on literacy practice change.

Student-level factors that also showed independent effects on change in literacy practice were (a) literacy level of student at entry to class; (b) number of days the student had been attending the class; and (c) non-ESOL status of student. Besides authenticity, the class-level factor to show a positive significant effect on literacy practice change was ABE format.

A qualitative analysis was done using the spontaneous student comments on 173 home literacy practices questionnaires attributing changes in literacy practice. Results showed that students contextualized their reported literacy practice changes to life changes such as changes in employment, changes emanating from learning to read and write, changes in living situations, and family situations. These results demonstrated the socially-situated nature of literacy and literacy change.

Significance of the Results

The results of the quantitative analysis are taken to suggest ways that adult literacy instruction can help to change the cycle of generational literacy success and failure. As such, the significance of the results go beyond the field of adult literacy alone. Nevertheless, the results of this study demonstrate that research can document instructional outcome in ways that reflect actualized literacy learning in sociocultural contexts.

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To learn more about the LPAL study, order the LPALS teacher handbook, or read about other NCSALL efforts to connect practice, policy, and research, visit <http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu>.

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