

Literature Review for Project Literacy Action Research Project

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The Problem

Adult literacy is a major issue in the United States. The United States government commissioned a study, the National Adult Literacy Survey (NAAL) in 2003, to measure literacy (Baer, Kutner, & Sabatini, 2009). According to NAAL, approximately 40% of adults in the United States, around 90 million people, are classified as being at the two lowest levels of functional literacy. Furthermore 14% of the population could be classified as possessing below “basic” literacy skills of being able to read simple written statements.

A high number of the adults who struggle with literacy skills are immigrants. According to Wrigley, (2007, p.221) in adult education programs, 40 to 50% of the participants are English Language Learners (ELLs). While many immigrants come to the United States already possessing a high school or college education, an increasing number since the 1970s have come from countries where they have had limited access to education (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003, p. 4).

Wrigley, Chen, White, and Sroui, (2009) examined the characteristics of adult English learners as described the NAAL. They point out that there is a 46% higher wage earning potential for the immigrants who can speak English over those who cannot (p. 5). Additionally, the immigrants need to be able to read and write English. As many people coming to the United States had limited schooling in their original countries, the task of learning to read and write in a new language is even harder. As such, without specific teaching on literacy skills in learning English, many of these people will continue to have limited economic opportunities (p. 17). The authors also raised concerns about “Generation 1.5” who may have a high verbal ability in English, but low reading and writing skills, which makes it difficult for them to be served by traditional ESL classes or Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes (p. 21).

A variety of programs address adult literacy needs. Many community colleges offer ABE classes and preparation classes for taking the GED examination. School systems and community colleges also offer the External Diploma Programs (EDP), a self-paced program where adult learners can earn a high school diploma. However, these efforts generally do not address the needs of people who do not possess beginning reading skills or who have learning disabilities. Hence, there are a number of literacy services that use one-on-one tutors, usually volunteer. Many of these are run by public libraries and provide free services.

Two major concerns arise in the implementation of these programs. The first deals with the effectiveness of the reading tutoring strategies. In particular, there is a concern to use reading teaching techniques which research indicates is effective. The report, *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction*, (Kruidenier, 2002), synthesized the findings of The Partnership for Reading, a collaboration between the National Institute for Literacy, the National Institute of Child Health and Development, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to review research on reading and glean principles and practices for reading instruction. Kruidenier recommends a comprehensive approach including a number of strategies. The second concern focuses on the training and support of the people teaching in these programs, especially the volunteers who often work with the highest needs adults (Sandman-Hurley, 2008).

Effective Reading Instruction

The report, *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction* (Kruidenier, 2002), synthesized the findings of research. They incorporated research from K-12 to augment the research on adults as there is not as much research done on adult reading as on K-12. While it is difficult to determine how many of the participants in adult literacy programs struggle with learning disabilities, some estimates put the rate at 50 percent (Sandman-Hurley, 2008, p. 96). Among adult education providers, there is much emphasis on incorporating the research-based principles from this report into the literacy education of adults (Greenburg, 2006).

According to Kruidenier (2002), reading instruction for adults should focus on four main components: alphabets (including phonemic awareness and word analysis), fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Alphabets includes teaching phonemic awareness which involves being able to identify the different sounds within a given word. Alphabets also involves the teaching of phonics, the ability of identifying the relationship of letters to sounds. Fluency is the ability to read smoothly, both silently and orally, without interrupting the flow of reading to decode words. Vocabulary involves the growth of words that readers know both in print and orally. Finally comprehension involves the ability to understand what one is reading.

From the perspective of teaching people from other countries, distinctions are made among differing literacy abilities. Burt, Peyton, and Adams (2003) describe how literacy in one's original language impacts the developing of literacy in a new language. Those who are "preliterate" come from a culture that does not have a written language. The "nonliterate" had no access to education in their own language, while the "semiliterate" had limited access to education in the original language. Meanwhile, there are people who are "non alphabet literate" who are literate in a native language such as Chinese. Those who are "non-Roman alphabet" literate know how to read in a native language such as Arabic or Greek. Finally, there are the "Roman alphabet literate" who read in an original language such as Spanish and French (p. 51). The background of these type of English Language Learners indicate the challenges of learning to read in English, and in many cases, the need to learn the purpose of literacy or the basics of alphabets. Some students need to overcome a stigma felt in not receiving education in their first language (p. 51).

While there has been little research on adults learning to read, some studies have been conducted with adult learners to measure the implementation of principles associated with the Kruidenier report. Perin and Greenberg (2007) observed an adult education program to determine the influence of the research-based reading principles. They conducted a qualitative study that included observations and teacher interviews. In their analysis, they determined that the program had implemented aspects of research-based reading instruction such as teaching alphabets, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies (p. 126). They also noted that a number of the teachers had training in teaching reading, including the Orton-Gillingham method, thus reinforcing a trend noted by Kruidenier that teacher training does affect the teachers' effectiveness in teaching reading (p. 127). Perin and Greenberg noted that this program incorporated many research-based reading principles from Kruidenier, but they did not incorporate all. They recommend that the further studies be done among adult education programs who are working with research-based reading instruction to derive principles that can guide other adult education programs (p. 313).

Hock and Mellard (2005) state that 58 % of the people with low literacy skills are between the ages of 15 and 55, which has an impact on the workforce. Hock and Mellard studied the effectiveness of certain strategies to build adult reading comprehension by analyzing the

skills needed to successfully perform on three key young adult/adult reading tests, CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems), GED Test (General Educational Development), and the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) 12th grade test. The researchers found that adults need a “toolbox” of different comprehension strategies including Self-Questioning, Visual Imagery, and MultiPass (p. 197). The adult learners need to know both how to use various strategies and when to use them (p. 198).

Winn, Skinner, Oliver, Hale, and Ziegler (2006) studied the effects of two reading fluency building strategies, listening while reading (LWR) and repeated reading, on the skills of 12 adult learners in an Adult Basic Education class. They found that both strategies helped with fluency, but neither was more effective than the other (p. 202). The researchers emphasized that more research among adults was needed, especially as their sample size was small (p. 202).

Greenberg, Rodrigo, Berry, Brinck, and Joseph (2006) conducted a study among adult literacy students to evaluate the effect of extensive reading as a strategy to motivate and improve reading. The researchers point out that “adult learners often possess negative childhood experiences and anxiety about reading books” (p.81). Extensive reading involves supplying meaningful and varied reading material and time for the students to select and silently read. This is important as many adult learners are uncomfortable using libraries, as they feel that the libraries are only for good readers (p. 84). Extensive reading also includes a time when the teacher reads aloud to the students while they follow along (p. 84). The researchers implemented an extensive reading program with an adult literacy classes that met for two hours a day, four days a week, for about 13 weeks (p.85) working with a total of 27 students (p. 89). The researchers found that the students’ attitudes to reading did improve along with their fluency. However, their work attack skills and comprehension did not (p. 90). The conclusion was that extensive reading probably needed to be complemented with explicit word identification, decoding, and comprehension skills instruction for these readers, as often people reading below sixth-grade level need such support (p.94)

Training of Teachers and Tutors

With the complexity of reading instruction, the training of the teachers and tutors warrants examination. Training among both professional and volunteer teachers and tutors has yet to have a fully developed workable model. Belzer (2006a) notes that paid teachers as well as volunteer tutors often lack training in Evidence Based Reading instruction (p. 582).

Bingman and Smith (2007) argue that adult literacy educators need to be trained to implement Evidence Based Practices (EBP). Strategies for such training include providing training that lasts for more than 1-2 hours; helping the teachers connect research to their own teaching contexts; encouraging analysis and reflection on techniques and on implicit knowledge; helping teachers studying how their students think; exposing teachers to a variety of theories and application; and encouraging teachers to learn with their work peers (p. 74).

Smith and Gillespie (2007) provided an overview of the research on professional development in Adult Basic Education. They acknowledge that the role of teachers in the student’s learning is critical (p. 206). Yet, there are some challenges. Most Adult Basic Education teachers work part time, and more such teachers leave the field than do their counterparts in K-12 education (p. 208). Furthermore, Adult Basic Education teachers teach in multiple subject areas and often have little formal education on the teaching of adults (p. 210). As for training, there is often little funding or opportunities for these teachers to receive training, and most of their training is comprised of in-house training and attending conferences. (p. 211).

Constraints on participating in training include time available as part-time workers, teachers not being paid for training time, training being based at locations too far for teachers to travel, teachers not knowing about training opportunities, not enough face-to-face time with colleagues, and mismatch of training goals and teachers' interests (p. 213).

Smith and Gillepsie recommend that more funding be dedicated to training. In particular, they advocate for "job-embedded" training which includes more sustained training, study circles, practitioner research, and inquiry projects (p. 215).

Research on the training of volunteer tutors remains scant. Sandlin and St. Clair (2005) provided an overview of the role of volunteers in literacy programs, particularly as one-on-one tutors. The model of one-on-one education stems from the approaches of Laubach Literacy International and Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA), who merged in 2002 as ProLiteracy International (p. 126). Traditionally, the one-on-one tutoring programs served the beginning learners (with 0 - 4th grade reading levels) while the more advanced learners went to Adult Basic Education classes (p. 127). In the year 2000, it was reported that 43% of adult educators in state-funded programs were volunteers (p. 127). The majority of those volunteers function as one-on-one tutors (p. 130).

The training for volunteer tutors varies greatly. Laubach and LVA typically implemented initial training programs that lasted between 12 to 18 hours. Programs without either a Laubach or LVA association vary even more greatly with their training. Even after initial training, many tutors do not feel prepared enough, struggle with feeling isolated, and often drop out (p. 133). Along with having useful resources, volunteers also felt the need for ongoing one-on-one staff support to help them address issues (p. 133). Challenges that the volunteer tutors face include feeling frustrated at a student's lack of progress and commitment, feeling ill equipped by their training, needing resources and support, and frustration with students' personal problems interfering with learning (p. 138).

There have been questions concerning the quality of education provided by volunteers. While there is little research concerning the quality of instruction, practitioners in adult education have expressed concern that volunteers often do not have the training to deal with learning disabilities with accompanying feelings of school failure, nor do they have enough training in teaching beginning readers (p. 140). The practice of many agencies in assigning volunteers to work with the lowest level students, who have the highest needs, while providing trained teachers to work with the higher level students have come under criticism (p. 142).

Alicia Belzer has likely done the most research on the training of volunteer tutor training in the last few years by conducting qualitative studies with four literacy agencies. One study examined the relationship of training to volunteer tutor practices by observing tutors in action with their students. The training offered by the four groups ranged from 2.5 hours initial training to 20 hours initial training (Belzer, 2007, p. 111). Overall Belzer found that her data did not indicate a clear relationship between the training and the tutors' practices, although one could see some indication of the philosophy imparted by the program's training being reflected in the tutors' approaches (p. 119).

In conjunction with the above research, Belzer (2006a) conducted case studies of three randomly-chosen, volunteer adult literacy tutors and their students who had been working together for at least three months. Their sessions were audiotaped, and Belzer followed up with interviews with the tutors and the students. Consistent with the above study, Belzer concluded that the initial training had little influence on the tutors' practice, in part, because the training did not address the "moment-to-moment challenges" of the tutoring sessions (p.570).

In another connected study, Belzer (2006b) examined the reading material choices and strategy choices of the tutors in the four programs. Again, she found that the training did not necessarily impact the tutors' actions. Their choices for reading material and teaching strategies, even within a given program varied widely (p.132). Belzer suggests the studying of a "less may be more" approach, a cognitive apprentice model. Rather than relying on extensive initial training, an expert staff member coaches and provides strategies to help the tutor with his or her particular student (p. 136).

Kelli Sandman-Hurley (2008) also conducted case studies of three volunteer adult literacy tutors with their students with diagnosed reading disabilities. In the literature review, Sandman-Hurley points out that while it is difficult to determine how many of the students in adult literacy programs have learning disabilities, some estimates indicate that as much as 50% of the students have learning disability (p. 95). In her study, Sandman-Hurley audiotaped six tutoring sessions and conducted follow-up interviews (p. 96). The training the tutors received included an introduction to learning disabilities and multisensory approaches to teaching phonics, comprehension, and writing. In contrast to Belzer, Sandman-Hurley found that the tutors did use information from their training in their work, though more for phonics and comprehension than for writing. However, as in the Belzer studies, the tutors do not feel adequately prepared to do their work (p. 101).

Additionally, a strategy that has been tested with volunteer tutors working with children is the "Reading Tutor Checklist" (Al-Hazza and Gupta, 2006). The proposed strategy is specifically designed to be used with children in grades 1 to 3 (p. 15). The checklist includes strategies in the categories of comprehension, fluency, word recognition techniques, phonological awareness, phonics, word study and vocabulary, and writing (p. 22).

Finally, Ziegler, McCallum, and Bell (2009) measured the reading instruction knowledge of 124 volunteer tutors using their instrument, the Assessment of Reading Instruction Knowledge-Adults (ARIK-A) drawn from Kruidenier (2002). They found that there was a positive relationship between educational background of the volunteer tutors and their knowledge of reading instruction. In general, volunteer tutors with Bachelor's degrees or higher or Teaching Certificates had a stronger knowledge base about teaching reading to adults (p. 137).

As noted by Belzer (2006b) "Reading instruction for struggling learners is a complex task" (p. 133). Thus, the volunteers who serve the students with the highest needs require meaningful and helpful support, including training.

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