

Student Goals and Public Outcomes: The Contribution of Adult Literacy Education to the Public Good

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the relationship between student goals in adult literacy programs and policy mandates calling for important public outcomes typically related to the normative values of workplace and family literacy. It is maintained that there are some viable connections if literacy is viewed as an intervening variable that satisfies a range of personal objectives and "the public good" in enabling new readers to become more effective contributors to "mediating" institutions and social settings. This study builds on the recent work of the National Institute for Literacy which identifies three major outcome areas for adult literacy education in the realms of work, family, and citizenship.

We badly need to enrich the way we understand our public institutions and comport ourselves regarding them, particularly by attending to how they affect or even create our identities as selves and as citizens. In an age of cynicism and privatized withdrawal, it may seem quixotic to call for a reinvigoration of an enlightened public. But we believe this reinvigoration is not an idealistic whim but the only realistic basis on which we can move ahead as a free people (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton, 1991, 141).

The other day a friend asked me what I did for a living. I said I am a male nurse's aide in the hospital and the nursing home. This person made a face and said, "Oh Lord, I would not do that job for all the money in the world." A lot of people think it is an awful job. Well, believe it or not, there is something special about this job. People depend on me. I not only care for them, I care about them. You see, I like what I do. My work is the kind that many son's and daughter's can't or won't do. Somebody has to take care of the sick and the old. It takes a special person to do the work I do, and we are special people. I am proud of my work and proud that I care ("Proud to be a Nurse's Aide," Smith, 1991, 75).

A Public Philosophy for Adult Literacy Education

The issues of assessment and evaluation within such agencies as Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) and Laubach Literacy Action (LLA) are among the most difficult problems to resolve in no small measure due to their symbolic potency as carriers of the definition of literacy (Lytle and Wolfe, 1989, pp. 5-12). Proponents of

progressive adult literacy maintain that student voice and experience are central to meaningful program evaluation (Fingeret and Jurmo, 1989; Beder, 1991; Lytle, 1991; Stein, 1995). Policy advocates have tended to view student data quantitatively, grounded in prevailing norms of functionality such as how many people have been “removed” from welfare and have found a job (Chisman, 1989, 1990; Moore and Starvrianos, 1995). It is not that these latter objectives are unimportant to students. It is only that as stated they are reductionist, and represent often a “quantum” leap in skill development that is not easily attainable for participants through typically underfunded, understaffed programs where even the most active students seldom average more than a few hours per week of instructional time. Nonetheless, according to a significant body of research, individuals experience a wide array of benefits through adult literacy education. This essay builds on such literature to draw out certain relationships between personal goal attainments with more publicly valued social outcomes. It is by making this connection more visible that a rationale may be established for corporate, foundation, and governmental funding of adult literacy programs.

Such a rationale is premised on the assumption that the “public good,” rather than self-interest, narrowly conceived, is a legitimate societal value, built, in turn, on the concept of “stewardship” (Hall, 1990). Stewardship may be provided by social, policy, and intellectual elites in support of adult literacy education and among students as they engage the social arena and body politic, broadly defined, with increased effectiveness as a result of new learning. Stewardship, in turn, is incorporated into the value system of a civic republican philosophy that informs the underlying premise of this essay. As Robert Bellah and his colleagues have defined it:

In the republican tradition, the public good is that which benefits society as a whole and leads to what the founders of the American republic called *public happiness*. It includes everything from adequate public facilities to the trust and civic friendship that makes public life something to be enjoyed rather than feared. [It is also called the *common good*.

It presupposes that the citizens of a republic are motivated by civic virtue as well as self-interest. It views public participation as a form of moral education and sees its purposes as the attainment of *justice* and the *public good* ((Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton, 1985, 335).

Without denying the influence of laissez-faire economic liberalism as an overarching value system that has permeated much of the policy discussion on adult literacy since the 1975 APL Study (and of American social, political, and economic life), the civic republican tradition as an underlying countervoice could provide a broad-based consensus on adult literacy to galvanize increased resources and a common set of goals. It very well may not, but it is contended here that this tradition carries sufficient potential force to move beyond the fragmentation not only inherent in the liberal tradition, but of the “identity politics,” that focus on gender, race, and ethnicity, characteristic of much progressive literature on adult literacy education. It is not that contemporary civic republicans ignore such categories, nor dismiss the profound injustices that minority groups have experienced. Yet, in order to move “forward” in the body politic in quest of a *workable* consensus, they seek a more inclusive vision of American life that links social and economic justice to the goals of civic responsibility and political democracy inherent in an essentially middle class value system that seeks to *reform* democratic capitalism by making it more inclusive. I acknowledge that my pragmatic stance contains considerable ambivalence, but may very well represent the “limit-situation” out of which mainstream literacy programs operate (Demetron, 1997).

Current efforts by the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) to develop standards within adult literacy education resound closely with the republican sentiments expressed above. Specifically, in its *Equipped for the Future: Collaborative Standards Development Project* (1996), the NIFL seeks to link economic development with civic participation, broadly defined, in the community, at work, and in the family as a legitimate framework upon which policy makers, program administrators, instructors, students, and the general public might agree. These forms of civic participation are

linked to student “voice” that lend individual authenticity to such roles which creates a bridge between private goals and public outcomes.

In its first published product (Stein, 1995), the NIFL drew upon one of the six National Education Goals established in 1990 to construct its argument:

By the year 2000 every adult American will be literate and possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (quoted in Stein, p. 7).

Specifically, the study extrapolated four areas that adult literacy students themselves articulated in pursuit of the national goal in the three primary roles of worker, family member, and citizen.

“Literacy for access and orientation (emphasis added) [which] entails all the ways adults see literacy helping them to locate themselves in the world” (p. 10). This includes not only geographic, but psychological, and social mobility as well. As the authors summarize this objective through the words of one student, “Literacy is the ability to read something and get the information you need then to be able to act on it” (p. 11).

Literacy as voice refers to “the ability to use written and oral language effectively in interpersonal and social situations.” For non native speakers of English, this also includes “knowing how to use the dominant language of this country to express thoughts, feelings, needs, experiences” (p. 11). Stein links the power of voice “with expressing the self and the ability to be heard” (p. 12) in a public way, for example, in the political process. In the words of one of the students who participated in the NIFL study:

Being a citizen with rights and responsibilities makes me feel very important. It tells me that my opinion counts in what happens in my very own community and I am just as prominent as the next person (p. 12).

Literacy as a vehicle for independent action also entails a wide array of areas including the skill of not being taken advantage of, living on one’s own, gaining increasing control over one’s life, making decisions on one’s own. In Stein’s words,

“Literacy in this sense reflects the high value American culture places on being able to do things for yourself” (p. 12). Stated in the words of one of the participating students:

Literacy means to me having the power to make your own decisions for yourself. When you have the knowledge of knowing how to read and write, you can take control of your own business. No one else can take control of your own business, but you. Only you have the power (p. 14).

Literacy as a bridge to the future in this study is specifically linked to the national goal of being able to compete effectively in the global economy. In the words one of the participating students:

Without an education in the year 2000 we the people will be in serious trouble. Because now everything is moving forward fast and without an education you will be moving nowhere (p. 14).

The author summarizes these major concerns as “*literacy for life*” (p. 10).

What we learned from these adult perspectives...is that adult students don't make this separation between literacy for life and literacy for the workplace or for citizenship. While the specific tasks, roles and responsibilities vary from context to context, the four fundamental purposes remain the same....Adults seek to develop literacy in order to change what they can do, how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves in specific social and cultural contexts (p. 10)

Stein identifies important links between personal goals and public outcomes. Although the early literature on the *Equipped for the Future* (EFF) project does not *systematically* address this connection (Stein, 1995), the more recent work on contextual "role maps" begins to do so. A broad stream of literature on adult literacy motivation, also draws out a variety of relationships between these two factors even if it does not specifically highlight their linkage.

A Literature Review on Adult Literacy Motivation

The literature attributes various purposes to adult literacy education relating personal and public goals. These include a set of contrasting views between policy-analyst Forrest P. Chisman and that of the radical Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire.

Both perspectives are attenuated by various “middle ground” studies that link student motivation with a quest for inclusiveness within the American mainstream that has functional, personal, socio-cultural, and even aesthetic components (Demetrian, 1997).

Forrest P. Chisman (1989, 1990) argues that enhanced adult literacy can play a significant role in re-tooling the American workforce for the global economy. Chisman’s implicit message for learners is if they work hard they will enjoy the fruit of a revitalized American economy even if at the lower rungs of a post-industrial job order. Chisman calls for an intensification of instruction and a need to prioritize services to those already employed (1989, iv-v).

If, however, adult literacy learners at the lower rungs of reading ability are to be served, it needs asked whether the knowledge gap between what people need to work in the informational sector of the post-industrial economy and what they may attain even through several years of literacy instruction is not so wide as to make such employment a virtually impossible attainment. One study argues that “research efforts have only been able to detect modest to moderate effects on the skill of individual participants” (Moore and Stavrianos, 1995, 1). Demetrian’s study of adult literacy students in Hartford, Connecticut concludes that even with the intensification of small group combined with one-to-one tutoring “quantum” leaps in learning are extremely rare. Individuals clearly improve in terms of standardized test score increases and draw on literacy in a broad array of life areas that they deem meaningful (Demetrian and Gruner, 1995; Demetrian, 1996). Yet, this does not translate into significant upward mobility from service (low tech) and manual labor to employment into the post-industrial “information” economy as articulated in Chisman’s vision. Notwithstanding the “modest” effects of adult literacy education, “those who complete adult education programs and those who work with them” report “the positive effects and overall satisfaction” (Moore and Stavrianos, 1995, 1) which has been confirmed by a variety of studies. This seeming contradiction is a product, in part, of who is defining the terms.

Consider the following observation by a former illiterate French Canadian man in his forties:

Now if I go into a restaurant, I don't have to pretend I'm reading the menu; I really read it. My wife used to read it to me. I hated when people were with us or around us because they would know that I can't read, and may think that I am a dummy. But now I can order my food myself (Lestz, Demetron, and Smith, 1994, Vol. II, 92-93).

Many readers would consider such an attainment as “modest,” a view that would be reinforced in terms of a limited test score increase achieved after two years of sustained study. The challenge of national “mainstream” agencies like LVA and the NIFL is not only to articulate personal learning outcomes identified by students like that above, but to link them to broader societal goals in order to respond effectively to the question of “so what?” In the preceding case, the public significance is that it enabled the individual to assume a more satisfactory identity as a competent member of society. A further analysis of this individual's story would indicate that the restaurant incident was an epiphenomenon of a broader self-transformation through the power and symbol of literacy that has enhanced his capacity as a competent member of society at home, at work and in the literacy community itself where he has served as a spokesperson (Lestz, Demetron, and Smith, 1994, Vol. II, pp. 77-94). Based upon a policy formulation of literacy grounded in utilitarian liberalism, it would be hard pressed to articulate a rationale for public support of this student's achievements. From the vantage point of participatory literacy education, the value of these learning outcomes seems clear based upon individual self-report, but they represent thin ground upon which to build a public policy.

It is from civic republican assumptions as a ground of *potential* consensus, that the public value of this student's achievements may attain some clarity where literacy enables him to function more effectively in a range of mediating institutions that strengthen the body politic of the American political culture (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton, 1985, 1991). The challenge is whether the NIFL can muster

sufficient intellectual force and social influence to move policy discussions on literacy beyond their normative liberal bias toward a perspective that embraces citizenship, defined broadly as service to the public good. The contemporary reconstruction of the civic republican tradition espoused by Bellah and his colleagues *could* play a role, although I would not want to underestimate the difficulty of infusing this perspective into the current discussion of literacy, given the normative bias of social, economic, and political liberalism in American life. Nonetheless, unless current efforts by the NIFL are framed within a coherent and consensualist public philosophy, the fragmenting tendencies pervasive within both the liberal and progressive visions of adult literacy education are likely to persist.

Contrary to functionalists like Chisman, Paulo Freire (1970, 1985) argues that literacy is a form of revolutionary critical consciousness which enables the marginalized to fundamentally challenge the existing status quo. Presumably, by engaging in “critical literacy” non readers will gain a degree of empowerment as a prelude to establishing a more equitable society, which on Freire’s reading, requires a *profound* transformation. Whether or not such a “revolutionary” agenda conforms to the “mainstream” values of programs like LVA is another matter. Student empowerment is an articulated core value of LVA. According to the agency's mission statement:

We believe that the ability to read and write, to understand and be understood, is critical to personal freedom and the maintenance of a democratic society. We recognize literacy as an integral element in the broader goals of economic opportunity and security, social justice, and dignity (LVA Mission Statement).

This statement may seem to support a Freirian interpretation, but when unpacked ethnographically, it is more closely aligned to the mainstream aspiration of inclusion into a “self-evident” American dream of upward mobility and incorporation into the middle class (Fingeret and Danin, 1991; Lestz, Demetrian, and Smith, 1994; Demetrian and Gruner, 1995; Demetrian, 1996). On this reading, literacy is viewed as a tool of

opportunity to help fashion a more classless society characterized by gender, racial, and ethnic blindness.

Whether or not adult literacy education actually fosters such an egalitarian objective is another matter and one susceptible to a searing Freirian critique. Yet, on its own terms, the quest for a “better life,” represents a utopian project, the American Dream, serving as an underlying motivation for many students who participate in mainstream literacy programs. This goal of inclusiveness represents a core quest of the ultimate “customer” of such agency's like LVA, its students, and needs to be honored for both for its symbolic and literal significance among students. It is clear that adult literacy education does not level the playing field of class and race in American society. Yet, for those who persist in their efforts, the “literacy myth” (Graff, 1979) stimulates significant growth in confidence and aptitude so that literacy makes some notable differences in the lives of participating students (Fingeret and Danin, 1991; Demetrian and Gruner, 1995; Demetrian, 1996).

These differences are not merely personal, but contribute to the public good by enhancing the ability of new readers to participate in a range of “mediating” institutions and social settings (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton, 1991, 287-293). Thus, new adult readers contribute to significant local institutions, organizations, and networks that collectively matter much to the vitality of American democracy, including its economic health. This view is supported in part by the selective literature review below which links adult literacy motivation with a quest for inclusion into the American mainstream.

Specifically, a body of recent work has identified key areas of learning that students find important, which parallels the NIFL analysis of student motivation. These include the practical arena that commonly come under the rubric of functional literacy, but extend into the personal realm, the pursuit of socio-cultural knowledge, and even aesthetics in the reading of literature and through writing.

The studies below bring out the multidimensionality of goals of adult literacy students in a broad-based quest to achieve inclusiveness within the American mainstream. Beder and Valentine (1990, p. 78) summarize such sources of motivation as:

(a) self improvement; (b) family responsibilities; (c) diversion; (d) literacy development; (e) community/church involvement; (f) job advancement; (g) launching; (h) economic need; (i) educational advancement.

Susan Lytle identified a similar range of motivations. She (1991, p. 128) states that:

When adults who enter programs are given the opportunity at the outset to explore a range of possibilities, they typically go beyond a general interest in 'becoming better readers' to name particular reading and writing tasks they hope to accomplish, often for specific purposes and audiences. Some come with a desire to learn more about a particular subject, for example, African-American history, parenting, or health. Many seek to deal with their own children's literacy and schooling..., whereas others wish to participate or assume new roles and responsibilities in their families, workplaces, or communities. Some are looking for community in the literacy program itself. Some seek economic improvements in their lives through new jobs or promotions, or by dealing more competently with personal finances and/or their encounters with 'the bureaucracy.' For many, the program offers the possibility of taking more control and ownership of their own learning. For most adult learners who come to the programs, the desire for enhanced self-esteem is implicit in many of their stated and unstated goals.

In a collection of twelve interviews of one LVA program in Hartford, Connecticut, (Demetron and Gruner 1995, p. vii), the researchers identified a similar set of concerns:

Among the most important factors, then, which motivate adult literacy learners...are the quest for dignity, self-esteem, growth, spiritual development, competency, the improvement of family life, the enhancement of general knowledge, and the stimulation of hope.

One learner aptly summarizes these abstractions in the following manner:

I want to comprehend and read better. And I'm hungry for knowledge. I'll be more independent. I won't have to depend on anybody. I want to be an art teacher. I want to share my knowledge with a younger generation (p. 49).

In a related work Demetrian (1996) has synthesized these diverse goals and motivations under the single metaphor of growth defined by John Dewey (1916, 1938) as the enhancement of experience through the exercise of critical intelligence. The study's argument on the centrality of "growth" may be discerned in part, in its articulation of goals:

While certain goals may be specific and concrete, others, grounded more deeply in possibility and potential, may also seek to transcend given realities in the on-going process of relating being to becoming. Thus, even in the attainment of a GED or a job, the satisfaction is not always in the material objects sought as important as they may be, but in what they represent in the psychic and social experiences of particular individuals. They often point to more deeply rooted aspirations that perpetually call people further into life in the on-going constructions of their personal and social identities. However ineffable such aspirations may seem, they very well may hold the keys to some of the most fundamental sources of motivation which may or may not be nourished by the tutoring process (Demetrian, 1996, 245-246).

In *Exploring the Middle Ground: Literacy as Growth* (Demetrian, 1996), the author examines many "ineffable" and more concrete sources of motivation broadly linked to the normative quest for inclusion, similar to these other studies.

In their ethnographic study of Literacy Volunteers of New York City, Fingeret and Danin (1991) found a similar range of motivations. Among much else, the authors focus on learning within and outside the program. Of particular concern is the nexus between private and public situations and the desire to transfer the "haven" of the learning environment to "real world" literacy competency. While the authors point to a clear difference in the utilization of literacy in private and public places, they also document that as a result of considerable practice in private, students are able to draw on an increasing literacy aptitude in public settings.

Fingeret and Danin identify general skill development as one important source of growth. As one student in this study put it, "It's nothing that no one have to really come up and tell you, it just something from within the inside of you lets you know that you are, you know, you're much better than you were" (p. 97). The authors also highlight

student narratives as a means of expressing “voice” as another critical area of development that students identify. Commitment to the vitality of the literacy community, itself, is also an important source of motivation for many students.

In the external environment the authors identify the desire to overcome shame (p. 114) as a major source of motivation for accessing literacy. Literacy outside the program includes the many familiar topics identified elsewhere: desire to read the Bible, the general ability to access print in the environment, helping children with their homework, reading the newspaper, reading train and bus schedules, becoming increasingly independent, talking better, reading bills, checks, letters, functioning more effectively in the world of work, and obtaining a GED. As the authors characterize it by the heading of one of their chapters, through literacy adult new readers desire to accomplish “A Lot of Things That Everybody Else Do” (p. 114). Such aspirations can only be characterized as a quest for inclusion into the mainstream. Summarizing their research, the authors conclude “that the impact [of literacy] is profound, touching every aspect of their [the learners’] lives” (Fingeret and Danin, 1991, p. 245).

In their varying ways, these studies point to some interesting correlations between private goals and public outcomes of adult new readers that the recent NIFL project has begun to explore more systematically. This essay builds on the reviewed literature, particularly, on the quest of so many students in programs like LVA to achieve inclusion into the mainstream through literacy as an intervening variable stimulative of “life improvement” or “growth.” Personal goals, in turn, often influence the capacity of adult literacy students to expand their influence within various “mediating” institutions and social settings, although the full import of such a connection awaits more of a galvanizing effort of resources including an intellectual focus upon this nexus as a major, long term outcome of program participation. Given the impetus of the NIFL in particular, to identify both private goals and public outcomes within the interface between economic and civic democracy, it is maintained here that “the next (logical) step” is both to probe

into and to help strengthen the ways in which adult basic education students do and could even more so, contribute to the strengthening of key local institutions and social settings. To draw this out even suggestively, the following case study material, stemming from the various site-based literature of the Bob Steele Reading Center in Hartford, Connecticut, explores these connections in the realm of work, family life, and in the community which ground the concept of citizenship as articulated in the civic republican tradition and in the emerging NIFL research.

Work

Hung D.T. was a platoon commander in the Vietnamese Special Forces and a war correspondent for the Vietnamese Special Forces Magazine during the Vietnamese War in the 1960s and 1970s. He won a journalistic prize for a special report titled “The Hill of the Fight to Death” (English translation according to the author). With the victory of the North over the South, Hung, as a South Vietnamese officer, was incarcerated for eight years in a “reeducation” camp in the North. He was allowed to leave in the early 1980s and returned to the South, but his life there was marked by his “enemy” status and the Communist government would not allow him to attain gainful employment. As he expressed it:

I tried my best to work hard again in a very poor life with long waiting days for something better. I said to myself, "I must feel enthusiastic for my family's future (Demetron and Lestz, 1995, p. 72).

In 1991, he was allowed to migrate to the United States.

He and his family arrived in the United States as political refugees.

Notwithstanding the suffering he had experienced in Vietnam, he left his homeland with a deep sense of nostalgia and sadness.

My heart was sad when the airplane took off the runway. The wonderful nation, landscapes of mountains, rivers, rice fields, houses, and roads were disappearing under a mass of white clouds. At that moment I understood the meaning of my

native land. When I lived far from my country, I felt how precious and wonderful is the love of one's fatherland (p. 74).

His initial boyhood images of life in America of dazzling “science and technology” were shattered once the “reality” of his refugee status was experienced. As he sadly put it, “It was late for me, because the young men are more suitable than the old men for living a new life in the U.S. I can't speak English well and have no skill. It's difficult looking for a job” (p. 75). Hung participated in the ESL small group tutoring sessions at the Bob Steele Reading Center where I met him. I was profoundly moved by the depth of his life experience and by his burdening need to find a way to survive in American society in a manner that kept his dignity intact. It was clear that his English speaking ability would remain stilted, although I began to appreciate the power of his pen in English, and by inference, in Vietnamese as I learned that he wrote for various Vietnamese-American magazines. By his bi-lingual literacy, he would exert his identity through his pain and struggle to achieve a place in the American landscape.

It is only with this background can it be possible to appreciate the poignancy beneath Hung's decision, “After two years of studying English...to attend a nurse's aide program” (p. 75). The initial source of motivation is clear; his English skills were developed sufficiently so that he could pass the training program and he had very few other options. As he described it, “Since it” about the lowest job of medical service in the U.S., immigrants often choose this job” (p. 75). What is important for this essay is how he appropriated the position to fulfill critical dimensions of his own identity through service to his director and to the patients of the convalescent home. In the words of Bellah and his colleagues, he sought to contribute to “The Good Society” at his workplace.

Hung spelled out the reasons that motivated him to enter the program:

- A nurse's aide can help everybody especially elderly, sick, and injured patients, and their children and families.
- The requirements of a nurse's aide are very high. It's not temporary work.

- Studying nursing care requires charity, hard work, self possession, and a good disposition.
- It's suitable for adults (p. 88).

Hung's director alleviated his anxiety about his limited ability to speak English interfering with his capacity to do his work. As she put it, "In the first stages, English isn't a problem, but you have to work to the utmost of your strength. Hung, don't worry. Everything will work out." (p. 91). With that assurance Hung was able to embrace his responsibilities, particularly in providing high quality, sensitive care to the patients whom he "always looked to... as my parents" (p. 91). It was in this capacity of service to the mediating institution of the convalescent home, that Hung found the resources to no longer be "affected by an inferior[ity] complex as a refugee because I made my contribution to my country as an American citizen" (p. 92). In his sensitive caring for the elderly and sick, Hung integrated private goals and important public outcomes, with English language learning serving as an important intervening variable.

Hung's "citizenship" is not limited to his increased participation in the institutions and mores of American life. It extends as well to his role among the exile Vietnamese community as a journalist, where he is consumed by a quest, whether realized or not, to "return to my fatherland" after the end of the Communist regime. At that time, "[m]y countrymen and I will build a peaceful and free country" (p. 72). That is Hung's fondest aspiration. In assessing Hung's contribution to the public good, it is important to keep this dual citizenship in mind.

Family

Florence, born in the early 1960s, lived on a family farm in a small English speaking Caribbean island with her father and siblings. Her mother had separated from her father and lived and worked in Puerto Rico as a maid. As the oldest sibling in the family, Florence assumed major care taking responsibilities that limited her opportunity for regular schooling. She describes her father as a "very angry man" who provoked

considerable tension over discipline in the household. Florence defined herself as “a scared little girl” with her “trembling each day he walked in” (Lestz, Demetrian, and Smith, 1994, 11, Volume I). To what extent the father was physically abusive is unclear, but apparently Florence received beatings from him, along with persistent physical threats (p. 11).

As a young girl of fifteen, Florence left this situation and moved to Puerto Rico to be with her mother where she also obtained work as a maid. Florence describes the relationship between her mother and herself as very close; “my mother was always there to listen” (p. 12). “I felt good about myself because she...let me be whoever I want to be” (p. 12).

I felt love....You could talk to her, but she's gonna tell you she's there to listen to whatever you want to tell her. We had an open relationship (p. 12).

A few years later at the invitation of a friend who had migrated to the United States, Florence also made the trek to Hartford. There she initially worked as a maid for wealthy families in suburban West Hartford and bonded with a series of young women with whom she resided in various residences throughout the north end of Hartford. These female friendships served as a vital source of support as a surrogate family:

[Omel] was about 35....We lived in the third floor of a house. Omel was really nice. I helped her in some ways, and she helped me in other ways. She did nursing, and a lot of other jobs. And like, when she was really sick, sometime she go out to work, and then other times she just couldn't make it. She really did appreciate me for that [supporting her]. And sometimes when I needed money for my daughter she would supply it. We helped each other in a lot of ways (p. 15).

Once Florence's daughter and son moved to Hartford, she shifted careers and became a day care worker mostly for parents who had migrated from the Caribbean. In this position she gained important self-respect and a sense from the parents that she was well qualified and suited to work in this field. Still, she experienced certain limitations in not being able to respond to all the questions the children asked and in her inability to read to them. More pressingly, her daughter was “coming to me with different questions

and she didn't know how to read and she needed my advising....That was the first time I realized I had a reading problem” (p. 19).

With these concerns she entered the literacy program in Hartford and worked one-to-one with Martha. Family oriented literacy dominated their work. They read children's books together which Florence would then read at home to her children. “They loved somebody to read to them, even if I didn't know all the words. It gave me motivation. It really help me a whole lot” (p. 20). They worked on school correspondence, and she learned to write notes to her kids. She learned to write letters to her sister and mother in Puerto Rico. Florence had a baby during the time she and Martha worked together and they studied books on childcare.

Florence identified being a good role model for her four young children as a primary motivation in her life which included a strong, active involvement in their school activities. Florence exerted such a motivation *before* she learned how to read, so it is critical not to exaggerate the role of literacy in making her a "better" parent. Still, it is difficult to deny the importance that literacy has had in providing her with some critical tools to accomplish more effectively her primary aim. Given her desire to become a hairdresser or clothes designer, Florence's continual development with literacy promises to provide her with more tools in fulfilling her parental aspirations of helping to provide her children with a “better” and more loving life than she experienced in her early years, growing up with her father. In a society where the family is endangered by poverty, consumerism, violence, self-obsessiveness, and other disintegrative forces, Florence's achievement and aspiration to preserve and buttress the mediating institution of her own personal household, is no minor objective. It is a worthy outcome of adult literacy education.

Community

Derrick, a high school graduate, entered the program after discovering he had a reading problem while stumbling over words in a Bible reading class at church. He had always been able to meet his everyday literacy needs including those of his job which he had held for over twenty years in a local aircraft factory that required minimal reading skills. As he put it, "I wasn't ashamed or bashful or hurt or anything like that. I just discovered that I needed help" (Lestz, Demetron, and Smith, 1994, 92, Volume II).

From the beginning of his participation, Derrick became an important member of the life of the program and the local affiliate. Throughout all of his adult life, Derrick had taken an active role in his community and his church, including, in the late 1960s, an interracial group with urban blacks from Hartford and whites from suburban West Hartford meeting and visiting each other's homes. As he expressed the sentiment of this group, "We [whites and blacks] found out how we can merge our thoughts together as one. We wanted to spread this kind of idea to everyone else concerned in the area" (Smith, Ball, Demetron, and Michelson, 1993, p. 96). He was on the board of trustees of his church and aspired to be a deacon. Derrick's participation in the literacy program was a logical extension of his sense of citizenship and "mission" within these other "mediating" institutions and social settings. As he expressed it in a collection of student writings:

We must stamp out this illiteracy now! You and I are too smart to let a good thing die. We are talking about our minds. There are some good people in this world that care. I thank God for this program. It works for me. I have found it to be true that reading is the best policy, and that can be true for you. I have prayed that they would have a reading program like this (Smith, 1991, p. 53).

Derrick entered the program initially to improve upon his Bible reading and to become a skillful churchman. Through his long tenure he has fulfilled these objectives, but soon discovered that he had a passion for autobiographical writing. Yet, in finding a new forum for expressing his "voice," Derrick moved beyond the solipsism that is always a temptation of this genre. Rather, his writing has remained rooted within the African

American Baptist and civil rights traditions through which he experienced his call. As he expressed it about his many contributions to the program, “I feel that I’m doing a missionary work spiritually” (cited in Demetrian, 1996, p. 317).

Such citizenship has had many aspects. As an articulate spokesperson, Derrick has had many opportunities to speak to large groups, in smaller gatherings, and in one-to-one encounters about the centrality of literacy in his life and the importance of the local program. He has served as a creative peer small group tutor and has operated the program when the manager was absent. He has counseled many a discouraged and uncertain tutor by providing good advice and words of encouragement. He served as a founding member to the North End Committee, charged with the task of linking the affiliate’s direction with the needs and interests of Hartford’s African American and Caribbean communities. He has appeared in local television programs and has served on the affiliate’s Board of Directors. He raised \$1500 for the program from his church and has helped to raise consciousness about literacy within his congregation. He has attended various LVA national conferences and has linked up with literacy students across the state and throughout the LVA network. He has embraced the institutional life of the program and affiliate and has “found himself” through its activities which he has helped to strengthen in collaboration with his many colleagues. He has embodied the civic republican ideal identified by Bellah and his colleagues as an antidote against the autonomous liberalism which the authors identify as a major source of fragmentation that breaks down community in the United States. As they interpret it instead, in their vision:

We form institutions and they form us every time we engage in a conversation that matters, and certainly every time we act as parent or child, student or teacher, citizen or official, in each case calling on models and metaphors for the rightness and wrongness of action. Institutions are not only constraining but also enabling. They are substantial forms through which we understand our own identity and the identity of others as we seek cooperatively to achieve a decent society (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton, 1991, p. 12).

It is within the context of fulfilling his self-identity through the significant institutions that matter greatly to his life, that Derrick's autobiographical writings may be most completely grasped.

Most recently, Derrick has completed a full scale religious novel, *The Prodigal Son of the 90s: A Family History*, that brings his work in the program full circle. The novel draws on the imagery of the fallen David as the Old Testament Prodigal Son depicted in the New Testament book of Luke to tell a modern tale about the King family that migrated from Atlanta to New York City in the early decades of the twentieth century in the quest to establish a life of mission and ministry. The novel is punctuated with songs and prayers clearly coming out of Derrick's own religious tradition in a text that profoundly echoes his own autobiographical journey. It represents his most complete internalization of the "literacy myth" to date and brings to fruition deep rooted aspirations both in his motivation to participate in the literacy program and in the fulfillment of his religious calling.

Now as author, religious servant, public spokesperson, peer tutor, advocate, board member, and student, Derrick has exercised his voice as citizen of the Bob Steele Reading Center and of the Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford which in their role as mediating institutions contribute to the civic life of Hartford, Connecticut.

Conclusion

In addition to illustrating a few of the many ways that individuals have achieved valuable personal outcomes through their long term investment in adult literacy education, I have sought to probe some of the public significance of such "growth." On both the personal and public levels I have identified various mid-range areas of development that perhaps may not be viewed as *profoundly* important among adherents of Chisman or Freire, who, in their different ways, view literacy as a major vehicle of social and cultural transformation. Yet, both the case study material and the literature

reviewed in this essay attest to the importance of literacy as an intervening variable in a range of critical life areas. Literacy, then, in such mainstream programs like LVA serves as a tool for developing a range of life competencies and as a symbolic source of power in the realm of self-reconstruction. It has many personal significances for student participants.

Beyond that, adult literacy education also contributes to the public good, yet neither in the ways alternatively defined by Chisman and Freire. Rather, it makes its contributions in subtler ways, in the enhancement of such “mediating” institutions and social settings as the family, the literacy program, itself, the local church, the public school, the job site, and the neighborhood. These institutions and settings are endangered through the twin onslaughts of a privatized value system and an intrusion of bureaucracy, commercialism, and mass media into the very center of contemporary personal and local community life (Dewey, 1927; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton, 1985; Habermas, 1987). They require considerable buttressing from the citizenry in order to be reconstructed sufficiently to challenge the dominance of these powerful forces of modern life. Obviously, the contribution that adult literacy education can make to such a reconstruction depends upon the extent to which the society can undergo a sustained transformation of its current primary, “:autonomous,” utilitarian ethos. A degree of skepticism may be warranted. However limited the change, ultimately, many of we constituents of adult literacy education, wherever we specifically stand, would agree that these mediating institutions and settings are important to the fabric of our personal and collective lives.

I have drawn on the case study material to demonstrate some of the connections (both current and potential) between personal development and the enhancement of various mediating institutions and social settings. More detailed work is required. Still, I maintain as a reasonable hypothesis that literacy be viewed as an intervening variable rather than the determining cause of life enhancement, both personal and public, in the

sense that it facilitates individual and community projects which at times open new doors to perceptions and possibilities that hitherto had been closed. The recent work of the NIFL points in this direction, which is carefully developing a research agenda designed to flesh out further the role of literacy in the lives of students as workers, family members, and citizens (NIFL, 1996). The purpose of this essay is to draw out explicitly some of the public outcomes of adult literacy in its contributions, both actual and potential to the vitality of society's mediating institutions and social settings and to suggest a train of research that the NIFL could more comprehensively pursue.

According to Kevin Smith, the Executive Director of LVA New York State:

Goals that are agreed to by learner and practitioner as achievable and appropriate, are the best indicator of program quality. It is the *system's* (emphasis added) responsibility to indicate the connectedness between these personal goals and social and economic goals, not the learners. When a system determines the standards for current and future social and economic participation we will be better able to integrate and access how personal goals enable social and economic development. Until that time it is difficult to hold programs accountable for anything other than personal goal achievement (Smith, 1992, p. 112).

This essay is an attempt to move the discussion on the connections along, for it is only by drawing out their relationships in significant ways that the long term viability of adult literacy programs and organizations can be sustained. Even in current practice, the public good of literacy may be discerned in its role of strengthening mediating institutions and social settings at the local level. Supportive funding and a policy formulation grounded upon such objectives, linking personal goals to public outcomes, would logically enhance this connection.

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