

ABSTRACT

Exploring the Intrinsic Role of Agency and the Extrinsic Role of Social Expectations for Adults  
Who Learn to Read: A Life History

by

Betsy K. Stoutmorrill

M.S., Nova Southeastern University, 1992  
B.A., Saint Leo University, 1989

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Illiteracy is a problem connected to culture, power, and politics which determines how reading is taught, assessed, and valued in American society. The literature revealed that reading ability, often studied in children, is seldom examined in adults. The conceptual framework for this study was based on the qualitative life history theories of Atkinson (1998) and Denzin (1989) in addition to Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory of agency. The research questions focused on (a) the lived experience of an adult who does not read proficiently or who has learned to read proficiently as an adult, (b) the role of agency in learning to read as an adult, (c) the role of social expectations in learning to read as an adult, and (d) how agency and social expectations are connected or revealed in the pivotal moments in the narratives of adult non- or limited readers. The qualitative life history study involved screening interviews with a convenience sample of 18 adults, selecting a group of 10 adults for participation in reading interest inventories and reading autobiographies, and purposefully selecting 3 adults for extended interviews. Data were managed with Carney's (1990) Ladder of Analytical Abstraction and analyzed with Auerbach and Silverstein's (2003) evolving coding process. The findings revealed that, as children, these adults were stigmatized by their failure to meet the social expectation of reading. Those adults who had an opportunity or a serendipitous event to increase their use of agency were able to eventually develop a positive self-view based on what they could do instead of what they could not do. The significance of the study and its implications for social change are revealed in the creation of self-view in response to the reciprocal nature of agency and social expectations. Instructional practices and policies that focus on building agency can create a positive self-view in illiterate adolescents..

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