

Implications for Social Change

As a methodology, qualitative life history research presents educators and other professionals with the opportunity to examine and understand the lived experience of individuals who did not learn to read as children and to make positive social change to improve the education, and lives, of children and adult who struggle to learn to read. Pole (2003) stated:

From the perspective of educational research, life history interviews allow researchers to consider what informants think is happening in education, what they expect/have expected to happen, what they make happen and what has happened to them and others as a consequence of schooling and/or educational experiences. (p. 36)

The researcher heard and presented the voices of the storytellers to reveal the experience each person faced as a non- or limited reader in a culture that rewards and punishes students based on their reading prowess and speed of skill acquisition.

Reading and writing are perceived as vital methods of communication in American society and are also seen as the foundation for future financial and personal success. How these unnatural, human-created language systems of reading and writing are valued, taught, and expected alter the lives of many people. It is not that reading and writing should be valued less, but that other equally important skills should be valued just as much. In addition, the speed of acquisition of reading skills should not be seen as an indicator of reading success as much as the end product of being a proficient reader. When the shame of not meeting the social expectation of reading enters a child's life as early as first grade, this shame squeezes out the possibility for reading to become a pleasurable and exciting experience and undermines the positive self-view needed for adult success. When standardized testing becomes the only method to demonstrate proficiency in a skill, reading and writing are in jeopardy of being no more than a means to that end. Brandt (2001) discussed how literacy is seen as commodity in American culture, instead of a means of enriching lives:

Literacy became a key resource, a raw material, for the American economy of the twentieth century, and that in turn has had untold impact on the ways that literacy is accessed, learned, and rewarded—it affects the materials we use for literacy, the routes we have or don't have to learning it, the public meanings that are ascribed to it, the social inequities that cling to it. This is not to imply that people pursue literacy only as a job skill or that being literate ensures rewarding work. Neither was true for many, if not most, of the people....[literacy] became an irresistible energy source—a public

utility—that was harnessed for American capitalism...[Even though] literacy levels...generally surpassed the reading and writing requirements of most jobs of that day, such a surplus of human potential enabled economic transformations... (p. 188)

The data from this study revealed that those individuals who had a positive self-view fared better in adult life. These stories suggested that those individuals with agency or with the opportunity to build agency, have positive, long-term outcomes, whether they become proficient readers, like Hank, or whether they learn to manage, like Constance, being a non-reader in a reading world. Adults, like Dale, who had little opportunity to build agency, did not develop a positive self-view to augment adult outcomes. Furthermore without a positive-self view in relation to reading while in adolescence, Dale could not develop a positive self-view in adulthood and could not see himself as a productive adult who contributed to his family.

Developing a positive self-view in adolescence is the foundation for a positive self-view in adulthood that leads a person to establish an identity as an individual who can accomplish things in her life. Constance contributed to her community through her volunteer efforts and her standing as a business professional. Maureen stated that her focus on the educational success of her five children was her greatest accomplishment. Both of these adult limited readers had a positive self-view about their ability to accomplish something through hard work because both exhibited strong signs of agency, which allowed them to manage their own failure to meet the social expectation of learning to read. A focus on building agency and a positive self-view within children and adolescents in the classroom environment can change the lives of the adults identified as illiterate in American society today. Some adults may not become proficient readers, like Hank, but they can build a positive self-view that allows them to perceive that they are productive contributors to their families and to their communities, like Constance. A positive self-view, based on use of agency, allows people to understand that their value as individuals is not measured by their reading ability, but by their contributions to society and their families. Their worth comes from independence and self-sufficiency. (Stoutmorrill, 2008, p. 184)