**The Outcomes and Impacts of Adult Literacy Education in the United States**

From 1990 to 1994, the National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs (NEAEP) conducted an

assessment of the federal adult literacy education program. The outcome and impact variables measured by the NEAEP included the following: tested learning gain; clients’ self-report of learning gain; employment; further education; clients’ assessment of personal goal attainment; and how often clients read to their children. The California Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) was used to measure learning gain for ESL, the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), was used for adult basic education students (ABE), and adult secondary education student (ASE).

**Results**

* For ESL students, who on average received 120 hours and 14 weeks of instruction between the pre- and post-tests, the learning gain on the CASAS was five scale points.
* ABE students received a mean of 84 hours of instruction between pre- and post-tests and attended for an average of 15 weeks. On average their gain was 15 points on the TABE.
* Adult secondary students received a mean of 63 hours of instruction and gained 7 points on the TABE.
* All gains were statistically significant (one sample *t*-tests) at the .001 level.
* ABE students gained from an average 6.1 grade level on the ABE to a 7.4 grade level
* Adult secondary students gained from a 8.5 grade level to a 9.3 grade level.
* Through multiple regression analysis, the NEAEP went on to determine which background,

attendance, and program variables influenced learning gain for ABE, ASE, and ESL. Two findings from this analysis are of particular importance. First, almost two-thirds (61 percent) of the variance for learning gain in reading for ABE was found to be accounted for by the pretest score in reading, which may be taken as a general measure of ability. For ESL the score was 48 percent of the variance, and for ASE the score was 19 percent. These findings suggest that, especially with respect to adult basic education, a learner’s initial “ability” is a potent predictor of learning gain.

* Second, total hours of instruction were not shown to be related to tested learning outcomes for either ABE or ASE. This finding runs counter to logic which would assume that the more time adult literacy students spend in class, the more they would learn. The NEAEP did not offer explanations for the finding, but the relationship between tested learning gain and hours of instruction warrants more research.
* With the exception of the learning gain data, outcomes are based on learners’ self-reports. Most of the findings that pertain to employment, learners’ goals, and further education were derived from NEAEP’s telephone survey of former learners.
* From 109 local programs, 5,401 clients responded to the survey, 86 percent of whom had attended for at least three sessions. Learners were asked if participation in the program had helped them improve their basic skills. For ESL, 44 percent responded “a lot” for reading and writing, 26 percent for mathematics, 48 percent for speaking and listening, and 62 percent reported that they had been helped a lot in at least one skill level. For ABE the figures for “a lot” were 50 percent for reading and writing, 51 percent for mathematics, 48 percent for speaking and listening, and 68 percent reported that they had been helped in at least one skill level. For

ASE the comparable figures were 45 percent reading and writing, 49 percent mathematics, 45 percent speaking and listening. Sixty-three percent reported they had been helped “a lot” in at least one skill level.

* The NEAEP examined the extent to which learners’ reports of the benefits they attained in reading coincided with tested improvement in reading and found convergence in 58 percent of the cases.
* With respect to employment, 63 percent of the learners reported that they were unemployed when they entered the program and 69 percent were employed at the time of follow-up.
* With respect to further education, of those learners who did not possess a high school diploma at intake, at follow-up 18 percent were enrolled in further education (11 percent postsecondary,

6 percent GED, 1 percent other), 44 percent had no plans to enroll, and 38 percent expected to

enroll within a year.

* Although enhancing learners’ self-image and self-esteem are not stated goals of the federal adult literacy education program, the NEAEP found that 65 percent of the learners reported that they felt better about themselves at follow-up.

**The Tennessee Longitudinal Study**

* The study focused on ABE level one participants, those who had scored below grade level 5.9 on

the ABLE Test.

* The Tennessee Study used two instruments to collect data. The first was a 117-item focused

interview guide that included variables pertaining to socio-economic well-being, social well- being, personal well-being, and physical well-being.

* To measure self-esteem, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used.
* Ninety-one percent of the respondents reported that participation in adult literacy education had made a difference for them or helped them achieve their goals. Forty-nine percent reported that participation had made a difference in reading, writing, and math. Findings for “making a difference” in the other areas listed were: learning in general, 18 percent; everyday literacy skills, 13 percent; self-confidence, 10 percent; getting/improving a job, 8 percent; helping children, 1 percent; being with people, 1 percent.
* Seventeen percent reported that since enrolling in ABE classes they had enrolled in other

educational activities.

* The overall employment gain for the group was 9 percent. Of those who were unemployed and

looking for work when they enrolled in the ABE program, almost half had secured employment by the second year interview. However, 20 percent of those who were employed in year one had lost their jobs by the second year.

* Self-esteem was measured by the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale. Small but statistically significant

changes were found in self-esteem between the baseline and follow-up data collections (baseline mean=3.63, follow-up mean=3.83, difference=.20). Differences were lower for those who were no longer active in the program (.16) than for those who were still active (.28). Differences were the least for those with minimal participation (-.13), greatest for those with moderate participation (.32), and in between for those with substantial participation (.27). Women’s self-esteem (difference=.31) increased substantially more than men’s (.07).

* In addition to receiving the Rosenberg instrument, participants were asked if their feelings about themselves had changed. Seventy-seven percent reported that they felt better about themselves, 20 percent said they felt the same, and 3 percent reported that they felt worse. Thirty-nine percent reported that being able to read better caused the change and 29 percent reported that attending the ABE program had caused the change.
* There is a discrepancy between the changes recorded on the Rosenberg Scale for self-esteem and the changes in self-esteem reported by learners. While the changes recorded by the Rosenberg are small, the self-reported changes are quite large.
* No significant changes were found in positive marital relations between baseline and follow-up.

Changes were found with respect to activities with children. Visiting a child’s teacher four or more times increased from 28 percent to 46 percent. Checking on a child’s progress in school increased from 50 percent to 75 percent. Attending school activities increased from 50 percent to 60 percent, and attending four or more school activities increased from 40 percent to 61 percent.

* Changes in attitudes toward literacy increased and, of the 84 percent who reported that they had seen changes in their everyday literacy usage, 51 percent noted increases in reading and writing. Use of the public library increased, as did incidence of visits to the local public health clinic.

**The California GAIN Study**

GAIN (Greater Avenues for Independence) was California’s program for increasing employment and reducing dependence on AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children).

* All clients who were determined to be mandatory registrants and who attended an orientation session were randomly assigned to either a treatment group, which received GAIN services and was subject to the participation mandate, or to a control group, which did not receive GAIN services and was not subject to the mandate. Control group members were permitted to enroll in adult literacy not sponsored by GAIN if they wished to.
* Most adult literacy education instruction was contracted by GAIN to California’s public schools and community colleges. The GAIN evaluation was conducted in six counties: Los Angeles, Riverside, San Diego, Alameda, Tulare, and Butte.
* The study focused on a special population of adult literacy education—clients who were eligible for welfare and were required to participate in adult literacy education. This is a limitation that precludes the generalization of its results to adult literacy in general.
* Participants in the program attended an orientation and assessment, which included administration of the CASAS test. Those who scored below 215 on either the CASAS reading or math tests, lacked high school certification, or could not speak English well were assessed as being “in need of basic education” and assigned to programs for either GED preparation, ABE, or ESOL, depending on their skill levels.
* After completion of basic education, clients participated in a formal assessment where an individual employment plan was developed that could include additional training, unpaid work, or supported work.
* Over the two- to three-year follow-up period, GAIN treatment group participants were

considerably more likely to have earned a GED or other high school certification (treatment=7.2 percent, control=1.3 percent). Success in obtaining high school certification was found to be highly related to the learners’ initial educational levels as measured by the CASAS test.

* Learning gain was measured by the document and quantitative literacy components of The Test of Applied Literacy Skills (TALS). The document literacy section (26 items) measures the skills needed to work with documents such as use of charts and forms. The quantitative literacy section (23 items) measures the ability to perform calculations embedded in text.

The difference between the treatment group and control group on the combined document and

quantitative portions of the TALS was a statistically non-significant 1.8 points, suggesting that, on the whole, no meaningful tested learning gain had occurred two to three years after random assignment to groups.

* As with acquisition of high school certification, initial educational achievement as measured by the CASAS had an important impact on tested learning gain. For those whose initial CASAS scores were 215 or above on both the reading and math tests, the difference between the treatment and control groups was 17.8 points, 19 percent of a standard deviation. The differences for those who scored below 214 for both tests were -17.1, indicating that the control group outperformed the treatment group.

**The Texas JOBS Program Evaluation**

* In Texas, during its first two years (1991-1992), 84,000 AFDC recipients were enrolled in the

JOBS program. Almost all were women.

* Upon initial assessment, JOBS clients were separated into three service levels. Level I clients possessed high school certification, had recent job experience, and had few barriers to employment. They were certified as being job ready. Level II clients, who were designated as

being less job ready, lacked high school, had less recent job experience, and had more barriers to employment. Level III clients had very little education and substantial barriers to employment, and, because helping them was beyond the resources of the program, they were not served by JOBS.

* Although Level I clients were generally referred to job readiness and job search activities, they were permitted to participate in education and/or job skills training if they wished. Level II clients were generally assigned to adult education and survival skills training before they received job skills training.
* Thirty-two percent of the Level I clients and 59 percent of the Level II clients received

education. The education included high school, GED preparation, ABE, and post-secondary education.

* For both Level I and Level II clients, participation in education had a statistically significant

impact on exit from AFDC. Although job training also had a significant impact, life skill education, job search, and job assessment did not.

* A consistently greater percentage of treatment group members than of comparison group

members exited AFDC for employment.

* One year after entry to the JOBS program, the employment rates for the treatment and control

groups were similar and ranged from 38 to 45 percent. Over time, however, the treatment group outperformed the comparison group.

* The impact of education on employment was statistically significant for Level I clients (those who were certified as being job-ready) but not for Level II clients, and the impact of job training was significant for both levels. The impacts of life skills education, job search, and job assessment were not significant.
* Earnings for both treatment and comparison group members increased over time. After 10

quarters, JOBS participants’ earnings were significantly higher than comparison group members’ earnings.

* Adult education had a positive and significant effect on earnings for both Level I and Level II clients, as did job training. The impacts of life skills education, job search, and job assessment were very small and mostly not statistically significant.

**Workplace Literacy**

Workplace literacy is defined as adult literacy education conducted in learners’ places of employment to enhance individual job performance. In the early 1990s the number of workplace literacy programs increased considerably by a provision of the Adult Education Act that mandated a set-aside for federally-funded workplace education programs.

**Manufacturing and Financial Services in the Chicago Area**

* The goal of this workplace literacy project was to improve the productivity and efficiency of 19

manufacturing companies and two financial institutions by providing education to workers lacking basic skills. Customized curricula and materials were developed. Of the 21 companies that participated, 10 conducted ESOL classes, six had math classes, nine offered reading and writing, one offered only writing, and one conducted a communications class.

* Data for the evaluation were collected through post-program participant surveys; structured

interviews with participants, instructors, and program personnel; observations of instruction; reports of instructor training; participant records; and pre- and posttest scores.

* From post-program surveys and on-site interviews it was determined that most learners were

satisfied with course content, and the confidence to use learned skills was built among participants. One hundred percent of those surveyed said that they would recommend participation in the program to others.

* Pre- and posttests were administered to a limited sample. The mean pretest score was 54 percent and the mean posttest score was 80 percent for a gain of 26 percent.

**Wisconsin Workplace Partnership Training Program**

* The goal of the Wisconsin Workplace Partnership Training Program was to provide job-specific

basic skills instruction to 3,066 employees at their work sites in order to promote job retention and/or job advancement and increased productivity.

* At the state level, the program was a cooperative effort between the Wisconsin Board of Vocational, Technical and Adult Education, the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, and Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce. At the local level, there was a partnership between local Vocational Technical and Adult Education colleges, unions, and employers.
* The program operated in 23 work sites. Instruction focused on job-related reading, verbal and written communication, listening, math, reasoning and problem-solving, and use of English.
* Two surveys were designed to collect data. The first was administered to participants to measure the extent to which they perceived their basic skills and job-related skills had improved. The second was administered to local partners to determine their perceptions regarding how much participants’ skills had improved.
* Fifty percent of the learners had attended between one and six months; 24 percent had attended seven to twelve months.
* All respondents indicated the extent to which they had improved their basic skills on a 5-point

scale on which 5 indicated “strongly agree.” Mean scale scores were as follows: math (4.5), writing (4.2), reading (4.4), speaking (4.0), ESOL (4.6), GED (4.4), and computer (4.6). Similarly, using the same scale, respondents were asked the extent to which they had improved job-related skills. Scores were: job skills in general (4.2), getting along better with employees (3.4), getting along better with superiors (3.9), problem-solving (4.1), quality (4.1), self-image (4.3), eligible for promotion (1.3), and job enjoyment (2.3).

* Ninety-one percent agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the progress they made in the program. However, only 3 percent of the respondents received promotions and 10 percent were transferred to another job.
* Local partners were asked about the extent to which they perceived participants’ basic and job

skills had improved. The same 5-point Likert scale was used to record responses. For basic skills the scores were: math (4.6), writing (4.3), reading (4.4), speaking (3.7), ESOL (3.5), GED (4.4), and computer (4.4). For job skills the scores were: job skills in general (3.8), getting along better with employees (3.5), getting along better with superiors (3.1), problem solving (3.8), quality (3.3), self-image (4.4), eligible for promotion (3.0), and job enjoyment (3.4). Eighty-five percent of local partners believed that participants were satisfied with their progress in the program.

**Source:** The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. “The Outcomes and Impacts of Adult Literacy Education in the United States.” January 1999.