

COPING WITH STIGMA:  
AN ADULT LEARNERS PERSPECTIVE

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction:

In 1992, the Department of Education conducted the National Assessment of Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), the first nationwide assessment of adult English literacy skills and the first large scale assessment that supported a “functional” measure of literacy. The functional measure assesses literacy skills typically used by adults while functioning in day to day life (i.e. reading a newspaper, road map, schedule etc...) (Hauser 2005). The outcome of the NALS showed that “as many as 47% of adults in the United States, or about 90 million people, fell into the bottom two levels” determining them functionally illiterate (16). Contrary to the belief that most low literate adults are immigrants, the study concluded that about half of these adults, 40 to 44 million, have English as their primary language (Skinner and Gillespie 2000). The results of the most recent national survey, the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), indicate that there has been virtually no improvement in literacy levels among adults in the U.S. (National Center of Education Statistics 2007).

The intention of the NALS and the NAAL was to only to describe adult literacy levels and not to prescribe necessary literacy skills adults should have in order to function in society or to obtain a well-paying job. However, the media and policy makers reported the results as a serious social and economic warning. Rhetoric convinced public opinion to ascribe labels like “inadequate” and “deficient” to those who scored in the bottom two levels (Hauser 2005:16). Clair and Sandlin (2004) point out that the results were grossly misinterpreted in the press. “Rather than being, for example, the inability to use written

language at a 9<sup>th</sup> grade level, illiteracy now means the inability to function, with the implication that to be illiterate is to be incompetent” (50).

The functional measure of literacy promulgated in the media entirely excluded fundamental beliefs held by literacy researchers and educators. Literacy studies have recognized that constructing meaning is central to the concept of literacy and people participate in the construction of meaning in various ways and degrees (Hudelson 1994; Smith 2004). The state of being literate occurs on a continuum of proficiency and involves a range of skills that are defined by the values and characteristics of a society. Language is socially situated (Gee 2001) and one’s cultural framework will inevitably affect it (Heath 1986; Bell 1995). Heath (1986) writes “the learning of language takes place within a political, economic, social, ideological, religious, and aesthetic web of relationships of each community whose members see themselves as belonging to a particular culture” (146). These multiple “literacies” are socially constructed within political contexts where access to power is unequally distributed (Comings, Garner and Smith 2001).

The results of the NAAL were cleverly embedded in political discourse implying that low literacy leads to a wide variety of social problems. One such example is Senator Paul Coverdell’s testimony to the Senate in 1998:

According to the 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey, more than 40 million Americans cannot read a phone book, menu or the directions on a medicine bottle. Those who can’t learn to read are not only less likely to get good jobs; they are disproportionately represented in the ranks of the underemployed and the homeless. Consider the fact that 75% of unemployed adults, 33% of mothers on welfare, 85% of juveniles appearing in court and 60% of prison inmates are illiterate. (Straus 2005:12).

The mere existence of low literacy among a portion of those who are unemployed, homeless, receiving welfare, or incarcerated does not establish a causal relationship. Yet, adults with limited literacy continue to be positioned as a leading cause of broad social ills. Political discourse directs public attention away from the more prominent conditions underlying social problems and toward the problem of low literacy. The blame for underemployment, homelessness, welfare, and crime is placed on adults with limited literacy rather than on structured inequality stemming from poverty and unequal distribution of quality education, health care, child care, affordable housing, and legal representation (Berliner and Biddle 1995; Straus 2005).

The hegemonic misuse of the concept of functional literacy perpetuates and reinforces the social stigma surrounding adults with low literacy. Adults with limited literacy have been, and continue to be, socially misjudged and labeled inferior, mentally disabled, immoral, lazy, criminal, or just plain stupid (Ehringhaus 1990; Ziegahn 1992; Clair and Sandlin 2004; Ozanne, Adkins and Sandlin 2005). The term literacy as it is used in other areas of competency such as health, computer, or math literacy does not invoke similar negative stereotypes when proficiency is below societal standards. No other educational condition castigates as severely as the inability to read and write print (Clair and Sandlin 2004). The low literacy stigma acts as a double burden to learning. It can create additional barriers to entering literacy programs, obtaining better employment, accessing health care, participating in the democratic process, and living more independently. Relieving stigma attached to low literacy is critical to increasing adult literacy.

The literature dedicated to the experience of stigma and adult low literacy is quite limited. Few studies (Beder 1991; Ziegahn 1992; Ozanne, Adkins and Sandlin 2005) examine how adult learners meet their needs while managing stigma in their daily lives. Very little research focuses on the outcomes of stigma from the point of view of the adult learner; how it affects their self-concept, their personal, family and professional relationships, their work experiences, and their children's health and education.

This qualitative thesis explores the intersection of adult limited literacy and stigma from the perspective of the adult learner. It uses data from ten in depth interviews with adult learners to gain a better understanding of how adults with literacy challenges meet their needs in public places, how they manage stigma, and how stigma affects their personal, social and economic well-being. This paper critically addresses the impact of stigma on various aspects of adult learners' lives including self-concept, personal and academic achievement, and employment opportunity. It also explores the participation in an adult literacy program as a factor mediating stigma and as a catalyst for transformative learning.

Literature Review:

*Conceptualizing Stigma:*

Most researchers agree that the process of stigmatization is socially constructed within a framework of power (Fiske 1993; Link and Phelan 2001, Vannoy 2001; Majors and O'Brien 2005; Tappan 2006). The process of stigma begins with selecting differences among groups and labeling socially significant differences as undesirable and deeply discrediting qualities to possess. Although, labeling may occur by both high and low status groups, low status groups lack the social, economic and political clout to



produce widespread, individual and structural discriminatory consequences for high status groups (Fiske 1993; Sekaquaptwa and Thompson 2002). “In short, stigma exists when labeling, negative stereotyping, exclusion, discrimination, and low status co-occur in a power situation that allows these processes to unfold” (Major and O’Brien 2005:395). Conceptualizing stigma in a sociological context is critical in order to better understand the social processes that enable a dominant group to produce discriminatory consequences that limit life chances. Many life chances, not just one, may be limited by a particular stigmatized circumstance. Stigma has been linked to poor physical and psychological health, and reduced access to housing, education and jobs.

#### Stigma and Adult Limited Literacy:

Since the literature dedicated specifically to the experience of stigma surrounding adult low literacy is limited, a review of the salient literature on stigma and intellectual development and achievement will provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and outcomes of stigma in adult learners’ lives. Three theories dominate the impact of stigma on intellectual development and achievement: Expectancy theory or self-fulfilling prophecy, stereotype threat, and identity threat. Each theory explores the integral relationship of self-esteem and the academic identity, and describes stigma mechanisms and related outcomes on self-esteem, motivation for learning, expectations of achieving, and actual achievement.

#### *Expectancy Theory:*

Expectancy theory or self fulfilling prophecy occurs when stigmatized members are influenced to behave in ways that confirm initial, erroneous expectations and behaviors made by perceivers’ of negative stereotypes (Fazio et al. 1981; Majors and

O'Brien 2005). When the perceiver is a teacher, he/she may initiate the expectancy effect process by behaving toward students labeled as low achievers in ways that lower their self-esteem and self-efficacy for learning. In turn, low achieving labeled students may begin to perceive themselves as, and behave in ways that affirm the negative stereotype (Fazio et al. 1981; Madon, Jussim and Eccles 1997; Jussim and Harber 2005). Intellectual development can be greatly affected by teacher expectations as early as first grade (McKnown and Weinstien 2003). Stigmatized students were found to be more susceptible to self fulfilling prophecies, especially negative perceptions and low expectations, even when prior achievement was high (McKnown and Weinsien 2003; Jussim and Harber 2005). "Teacher perceptions predicted achievement changes more strongly among low achievers than high achievers" (Madon et al. 1997:805) and found this to be true for both negative and positive perceptions.

Results from expectancy theory studies may grossly underestimate the impact of self fulfilling prophecy because methodology seeks to measure effects made by one perceiver on one target. However, "Because stereotypes are often shared, perceiver after perceiver will presumably heap self-fulfilling prophecy after self-fulfilling prophecy upon stereotyped targets" (Jussim and Harber 2005). Quigley (1992) explores this cumulative effect of self-fulfilling prophecy with adult learners who dropped out of school. Adult learners were "influenced and sometimes 'haunted' by memories of earlier schooling" (107) and reported teachers' perceptions and behavior as a primary reason not to enter an adult literacy program (Quigley 1992). Adult learners interviewed "firmly believed that they had been ignored in the classroom" (111) and felt that alienation and oppression experienced in the school environment "pushed" them out of school more

than quitting school was an act of their own volition (114). Ozanne, Adkins and Sandlin (2005) found cumulative effects of self fulfilling prophecy among some adult learners as they navigated the marketplace and other public domains in their daily life. They describe the “alienated consumer” as an adult learner who has come to expect being stigmatized and feels ashamed or embarrassed of his/her literacy status. Through repetitive negative social reinforcement, “The alienated consumers internalized the stigma, which led them to feel negative social evaluation and thus affected their self-esteem and social confidence” (Ozanne, Adkins and Sandlin 2005:266).

*Stereotype Threat:*

Stereotype threat theorizes that intellectual ability and achievement are compromised when stigmatized members are aware that there are negative stereotypes held about their group and that their task performance may be judged by those negative stereotypes. Expectations of confirming negative stereotypes impact actual task performance. When the task tests for intellectual ability (i.e. literacy skills), stereotype threat predicts that achievement results of stigmatized members will be lower than non stigmatized members because intellectual functioning is hampered by stigma (Steele 1997; Stangor, Carr and Kiang 1998; Mcknown and Weinstein 2003; Major and O'Brien 2005). Task performance is lower even when the stigmatized member has a high degree of self-confidence in the ability being tested (Steele 1997; Stangor, Carr and Kiang 1998). Stereotype threat differs from self-fulfilling prophecy in that performance outcomes are affected even when stigmatized members have not come to associate their academic identity with low expectations or labels such as “low achiever” or “slow learner.” Activation of stereotype threat is situational and dependent on the student’s

awareness of stereotypes held (Steele 1997; Mcknown and Weinstein 2003; Major and O'Brien 2005). Children as young as six years old may be aware of broadly held cultural stereotypes when they belong to a stigmatized group (Mcknown and Weinstein 2003). Schmader and Johns (2003) found that stereotype threat reduces working memory capacity because it produces increased stress levels. Lower working memory capacity inhibits task performance and may explain how stereotype threat contributes to lower academic achievement among stigmatized groups. Some stigmatized members may strive so hard to dismiss stereotypes such as "lazy" or "stupid" that they put themselves at risk for hypertension (Link and Phelan 2001; Major and O'Brien 2005).

*Identity threat:*

Identity threat theory focuses on the variability of self esteem within stigmatized groups and coping mechanisms employed to mediate outcomes of stigma such as stereotype threat. The degree in which stigmatized members perceive stereotypes to threaten their social identity (including intellectual/academic identity) varies according to individual goals and motives, personal characteristics, and group and member identification (Pinel 1999; Major and O'Brien 2005). The more aware a stigmatized member is of cultural stereotypes, the higher the "stigma consciousness," and the more likely he/she will expect to be judged on the basis of stereotypes rather than on individual merit (Pinel 1999). Stigmatized members cope with identity threat in numerous ways, but coping efforts could be categorized in three main ways: "attributing negative events to discrimination (versus the self), disengaging self esteem from identity threatening domains (versus engaging), and increasing identification with one's stigmatized group (versus distancing)" (Major and O'Brien 2005:404). When stigma consciousness is high,

stigmatized members might protect their self esteem and social identity by psychologically disengaging and avoiding stigma relevant domains, even at the cost of succeeding in that domain (Steele 1997; Pinel 1999; Hebl and Dovidio 2005; Major and O'Brien 2005). If the domain is academic achievement, perhaps an adult literacy program, an adult learner may protect his/her self esteem by 1) psychologically devaluing literacy skills and 2) avoiding the program and disclosure of the literacy status. However, Lipnevich and Beder (2007) compared doctoral students' self esteem levels to adult literacy students' self esteem levels in a classroom environment and found that there were no significant differences in global and academic self esteem levels. "Whether high-self esteem leads to high achievement or whether high achievement breeds high self-esteem is an unanswered question both in this study and in the research literature on self-esteem" (Lipnevich and Beder 2007:80). Furthermore, his findings question stigma theories and models of adult education that presume adult learners must overcome low self esteem before they can academically succeed. Ozanne, Adkins and Sandlin (2005) also found that self esteem levels and perspectives of stigma varied among adult learners as they engaged in marketplace activities. "The stigmatized person may indeed feel shame....But the consumer with limited literacy skills may also ignore or reject the label and the potentially debilitating negative social evaluation" (Ozanne, Adkins and Sandlin 2005:266).

#### Literacy Program Participation and Adult Learners:

Adult learners bring their prior knowledge, life experiences, and ways of knowing with them when they enter adult literacy programs. Ways of knowing, or how meaning is made from learning experiences, has been organized as instrumental or technical, social

or communicative, and self-authoring or emancipatory. Instrumental or technical learning involves task-oriented problem solving (Mezirow 1990) in which learners view knowledge as a “set of skills, facts and actions” that will help them meet specific needs (Helsing et al. 2001:11). Communicative or social learning refers to meaning derived from communicating with others concerning social values, roles, feelings, concepts and cultural expectations (Mezirow 1990; Helsing 2001; Cranton 2006). Self-authoring learning perceives “knowledge as construction and a matter of context” (Helsing et al. 2001:11) and emancipatory learning adds questioning other meaning perspectives and using knowledge as a means to liberate learners from personal and social constraints (Tappan 2006; Cranton 2006).

While participating in an adult literacy program, learners may acquire instrumental knowledge in the form of concrete literacy skills, but they may also develop more complex ways of knowing and transform previously held assumptions about self esteem, intellectual ability, employment, socioeconomic status, and family life. Helsing et al. (2001) found that as learners broadened their ways of knowing, developmental “changes they experienced in the classroom carried over into other aspects of their lives” (11). Three other longitudinal studies of literacy program participation, all with a constructive-developmental perspective, reported improvements in such areas as self esteem, interpersonal awareness, employment rate and goals, life satisfaction, involvement in children’s schooling and in community organizations, in addition to language skill acquisition (Bingman, Ebert and Smith 1999; Kegan et al. 2002; Terry 2006). Kegan et al. (2002) adds that belonging to a literacy program cohort is valuable to learning because it can offer adult learners additional emotional and psychological

support, as well as provide more exposure to various meaning perspectives. Participation in literacy programs led to transformative learning in Ozanne, Adkins and Sandlin (2005) where some adult learners reexamined and reinterpreted the impact of the low literacy stigma in the marketplace. They refer to “identity exchangers” as the adult learners who “challenge the negative label of low literacy and begin to own the label of literacy seeker” (261). In turn, the “identity exchangers” were able to meet their needs and goals in the marketplace better than other adult learners, even those with higher literacy levels, but who remained strongly associated with and influenced by stigma.

Critical reflection on learning experiences and meaning perspectives is central to adult learning and to transformative learning theory (Mezirow 1990; Cohen 1997; Cranton 2006). Through critical reflection, adult learners may come to redefine labels like “slow learner,” “lazy” or “incompetent” and reassess their intellectual ability with higher academic confidence and employment goals (Cohen 1997). Adult basic education programs that apply critical pedagogy believe that becoming literate involves learning how to use reading and writing to critically evaluate one’s social position in terms of socioeconomic status, gender, race and educational level and question ideology that promotes stigma (Comings, Garner and Smith 2001; Tett 2006). In addition to critical reflection, Dirkx (2001) suggests that imagination, intuition and affect also play a key role in transformative learning. It is important to keep in mind that while literacy program participation may offer an environment that fosters transformative learning, transformative changes in how adult learners perceive themselves, stigma, and the world around them may result from any learning context (Cranton 2006).

*Gaps in the literature:*

Research on intellectual development and academic achievement has been primarily concerned with explaining the experience of stigma on an individual level. It has focused on how stigma mechanisms produce debilitating psychological effects on a target, which in turn lower motivation for learning, lower expectations for achieving and lower actual achievement. Much more attention needs to be given to studying the larger social structure of learning environments that enable the process of stigmatization to unfold and in what ways these social structures could be altered to ameliorate the reproduction of stigma. (Tappan 2006).

Most studies on stigma and intellectual development have focused on children and adolescents in a K-12 classroom setting or college students during a test-taking period. Little or no attention has been given to how previous interpretations of school influence lifelong learning patterns among adults (Quigley 1992). There is compelling evidence that earlier school experiences shape future learning expectations and achievement. However the literature seldom targets this connection. Stigma research exploring the period between primary/secondary school and adult basic education may lead to a deeper understanding of how stigma influences adult learners' interpretation of literacy learning and the development of an academic identity. Insight on these areas may help educators serve adult learners better.

Previous literature points out that policy makers prescribe solutions to the problem of low literacy without enough understanding of how adult learners actually operate and navigate through routine activities (Ozanne, Adkins and Sandlin 2005). Adult basic education policy has assumed how to meet the needs of adult learners without



examining how adult learners actually meet their own needs. For this reason, a “deficit” model in adult literacy education has prevailed (Ziegahn 1992; Quigley 1992) and perpetuates the hegemonic misuse of functional literacy by assuming all adults with limited literacy have inadequate self-esteem and lack motivation for learning (Lipevich and Beder 2007). Adult learners attending literacy programs premised on these notions may indeed learn to decode print, but never be exposed to critical pedagogy that might enable them to challenge their stigmatized status. In such learning environments, research suggests that program participation is unlikely to foster transformative learning or mediate stigma. More research exploring potential factors mediating stigma such as critical pedagogy in adult basic education is needed to make emancipatory learning visible to adult learners (Quigley 1992; Comings, Garner and Smith 2001; Tett 2006).

#### Significance of this Study:

This study contributes to the research on stigma and adult literacy by giving voice to an understudied and marginalized group. It allows adults with literacy challenges to elaborate on how they accomplish everyday activities, to describe what strategies they use to manage stigma, and to tell their stories about how stigma has affected various domains of their lives. This study also explores some participants’ experience with stigma during childhood and its impact on their self-esteem and self-efficacy for literacy learning. It situates these findings in a larger social context by analyzing changes in self-concept and lifelong learning goals of adult learners who have been participating in a literacy program for at least two years.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Methods:

The method used in this qualitative study was one-on-one, in-depth interviews with both male and female adult learners who have been in an adult literacy program for at least two years. An interpretive method was chosen for this research since the primary goal is to uncover the meaning of stigma in multiple domains of adult learners' lives and to give a voice to this stigmatized group (Riehl 2001; Esterberg 2002).

### *Researcher Role:*

My motivation for this research stemmed from my previous volunteer work as an adult literacy tutor. This previous experience provided an opportunistic research setting and increased access because I occupied a similar membership role with literacy program gatekeepers such as program directors, student coordinators, and tutors (Lofland and Lofland 1995). This common ground with gatekeepers helped put me in contact with potential participants who are "hidden" in the sense that their literacy status is socially invisible and concealed from the general population (Watters and Biernacki 1989). I believe that my tutor status was advantageous to this research because it fostered trust and a degree of camaraderie with adult learners. This encouraged research participation and helped ease any pre-existing tensions due to stigmatization during the recruitment phase and throughout the interview process. I feel that my insider role facilitated more open and honest interviews with adult learners.

My insider role as a tutor may have had some limitations. I employed several techniques to safeguard against the possibility that any prior tutoring experiences or prior assumptions about adults with literacy challenges did not influence information

discovered during this research. I carefully documented my thoughts and feelings in a private journal and shared this self-reflection with my thesis chairperson to address any biases of my perspective at several stages the research process. The interview questions were pre-tested in a preliminary investigation in 2005 which assured me that I am appropriately distanced from this research. Overall, I feel that my insider status did not conflict with my role as a researcher or impede the research process.

*Sample:*

The sample consisted of ten adult learners from two adult literacy programs in a Midwest metropolitan area. Each adult learner had been attending a literacy program for at least two years at the time of the interview. Participants were between the ages of thirty and sixty years old and had English as their primary language. To maximize variation, the sample consisted of five women and five men and represented both African American and Caucasian racial groups.

I began the recruitment process by contacting literacy program gatekeepers via email, telephone, and/or in person to introduce and discuss the study. I was then given permission to meet with adult learners in their program in person to further discuss the study and invite them to participate in my research. A trusted, more literate person accompanied every adult learner during the in-person, recruitment meetings. Each person attending the meeting, program managers, tutors and students a like, was given a copy of the consent form so that they could also review it privately among themselves. Potential participants were given my contact information and some volunteered theirs as well. The time, date and location of the interview were arranged over the course of the next several weeks.

### *Research Instrument:*

The research instrument used was a semi-structured interview. This data collection strategy was well suited for the interpretive approach of my research. The nature of open-ended questions in the semi-structured interview was optimal for capturing the adult learner's perspective (Riehl 2001). Open-ended questions allowed adult learners to elaborate freely about how they make sense of their personal experiences with literacy challenges and stigma. The semi-structured interview also provided many opportunities for me to probe for more information about the adult learner's interpretation of reality (Esterberg 2002). Interview questions guided conversation through the three primary focuses: 1) how adult learners meet their needs in a variety of social settings, 2) how adult learners experience stigma in many domains of their life and 3) how adult learners perceive their abilities, skills and intelligences and how abilities, skills, and intelligences are used to achieve personal and/or professional goals (see Appendix A).

Adult learners were interviewed one time on a one-on-one basis by me. Interviews lasted between one and half to two hours and took place in a private study room at several different public library locations. The library setting was chosen because the literacy programs the participants were involved in frequently use library study rooms for tutoring lessons. As advocated as a best practice, the setting was conveniently located, familiar to participants and provided comfortable privacy (Nagy Hesse-Biber 2004).

### *Data Analysis:*

The data analysis followed the principles dictated by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Charmaz 2006). This method systematically develops theory from the adult learner's experiences with limited literacy and stigma rather than developing theory from

a preconceived hypothesis (Nagy 2004). For the first phase of grounded theory analysis, the transcribed interviews were coded line by line to capture the thoughts, feelings and social processes that may be occurring. Line by line coding provided an analytical perspective that helped disentangle the complexity of stigma experienced, coping strategies employed, and the meaning of literacy program participation.

For the next phase of focused coding, I condensed several related and reoccurring line by line codes into broader categories. The categories were color coded to help organize emerging themes in the data. The focused coded groups that emerged were: (1) using visual and audible clues to understand printed material (2) managing stigma by deceiving (3) managing stigma by “playing it off” (4) managing stigma by avoiding (5) disclosing literacy status voluntarily (6) stigma and health care access (7) stigma and helping with children’s homework (8) stigma and employment-staying employed and moving ahead (9) “getting caught”/literacy status exposed (9) being taken advantage of (10) feeling afraid, alone, and/or depressed (11) stigma experienced in childhood/primary school (12) reasons to enter adult literacy program (13) overcoming painful past while in literacy program (14) developing trusting relationships while in literacy program (15) reassessing self concept while in literacy program (16) interpreting stigma as a social problem while in literacy program and (17) exposing literacy status to help others understand adult literacy issues while in literacy program. It is important to mention that the focused coded group “stigma experienced in childhood/primary school” emerged from conversation initiated by the adult learners interviewed. Adult learners initiated and discussed freely their experiences with stigma during childhood at home and in school without prompting. Volunteering information about this issue is significant because it

demonstrates the importance of these experiences in their lives. It is also important to mention that focused coded groups (12) – (16) emerged from open-ended questions regarding the adult learners self perception of his/her skills, abilities and intelligences of any kind and in any domain (see Appendix A). Adult learners interviewed were specifically questioned or prompted on conversation relating literacy program involvement or how it has affected their lives. However, the coding (12) – (17) revealed that literacy program participation had a significant influence on how these adult learners perceive their abilities, and interpret and experience stigma.

In the next phase of memo writing, I drew connections within and between focused codes which produced more concise categories or themes. I then created memos that described the thoughts, feelings and processes expressed by adult learners and supported these conclusions with salient quotes (Charmaz 2006). The final themes developed from the memo writing phase are: (I) making sense of a print dominated world (II) coping with stigma (III) consequences of coping strategies (IV) stigma and the labeling event in early childhood and (V) roles of adult literacy programs.

#### *Report Writing:*

In the writing of this report, all names and identifying information were changed to protect the identities of the participants. The names that appear in the report are aliases created by me. Conversational spacers such as “you know” and “hmm” were mostly deleted from the quoted sections (Weiss 1994).

The functional literacy perspective has described the term “adult learner” in the literature as an adult with literacy skills below the 9<sup>th</sup> grade level. I used the term “adult learner” in the data analysis section of this report to refer to adults with literacy skills at

or below the sixth grade level. The term “literacy program participation” implies that adult learners in this study have been in a literacy program for at least two years and have been meeting with a tutor on weekly basis. “Literacy program participation” may not be limited to this involvement, as some adult learners interviewed explained that they also attend monthly program meetings, and seasonal and annual social events sponsored by the literacy program they attend.

## CHAPTER THREE

Findings and Analysis:

### *Making Sense of a Print Dominated World:*

Many adult learners acquire information and gain a better understanding of printed material by using other senses and skills. Adult learners can often compensate for limited literacy skills by paying attention to visual and audible clues during everyday activities. They may turn various clues into meaningful information without needing to ask a more literate person for additional help. This is typically done by interpreting pictures or symbols, recognizing letters and words, paying close attention to conversations and memorizing information (Ozanne, Adkins and Sandlin 2005).

Pictures take on a greater importance for understanding the marketplace, the workplace, or the home environment. For example, a picture on a menu helped Sandra choose what to order at a restaurant. Sandra would simply point and say "I'll have that." By using the pictures on the menu, Sandra could order a meal she knew she liked without having to ask anyone for help. Christine relied on pictures at work regularly. She worked as a teacher's aide in a day care for several years and interpreted pictures in books to tell fun and interesting stories to the children.

"Reading stories to the kids was my thing. I would sit down with an easy book with a lot of pictures before I told the story to the kids. I could make the story exciting for the kids. I was skipping over stuff, but they never knew I had a problem with reading." (Christine)

Although pictures can help an adult learner complete a routine task, they can sometimes be misleading and misinterpreted. Roger recalled that once when he was shopping at a grocery store, he accidentally bought a container of Crisco when he really



thought he was buying cookies because the container had a picture of freshly baked cookies on it.

If pictures are not available, some adult learners rely on letter/word recognition to help make decisions. Sandra relied on recognizing the letter “L” when she wanted to purchase a Liz Claiborne brand of clothing. Similarly, Christine relied on recognizing “Help Wanted” to find a job.

“I was at the bus stop and on the corner I saw a “Help Wanted” sign at a restaurant. I got the job. I worked the breakfast bar. I worked there for three years.” (Sandra)

Denise also used letter and word recognition, but she added that she used an audible dictionary with earphones to help her learn new words discretely. She said that this technique was particularly helpful for filling out medical and employment forms.

“If I look at something that doesn’t make sense to me, then I put my earphones in and nobody knows what I’m doing.” (Denise)

Most adult learners interviewed have been involved in a variety of social activities. Listening carefully to conversations and memorizing information enables them to participate in Church activities, at their children’s school, and in other social functions just for fun.

“I’ve always been involved in things. I’ve been a Sunday school teacher for 25 years. All you have to do is be able to talk about the lesson. I’d memorize it” (Nick).

Christine discussed her involvement with her daughters’ elementary school education. She said that she was going to make sure that her girls were going to get a better education. By listening carefully to conversations around her she was able to participate in their primary education.

“I was involved with the school. I was on the fundraising team and a room mother. I was always there in elementary school for them.” (Christine)

Having literacy challenges does not prevent all adult learners from attending functions just for fun, even those dedicated to reading literature. Sandra reminisced about attending a book reading. She explained that listening carefully to what was being said allowed her to participate.

“I didn’t even know what a book reading was. So, when we were at the book reading and people were discussing the book, I just put two and two together and I then knew what the book was about.” (Sandra)

### *Coping with Stigma*

According to the identity threat model, stigmatized members sense that their social identity has the potential to be devalued and then react to this threat with a variety of coping efforts. The threat may be initiated by negative stereotypes held in society, by a particular situational cue that could potentially expose or confirm their stigmatized status, by their level of stigma consciousness (Pinel 1999), or by a combination of any of these (Major and O’Brien 2005). The potential harm to their identity is appraised and its evaluation guides how stigma is “affectively, cognitively, behaviorally, and physiologically” responded to (Major and O’Brien 2005:402).

Participants in this study were motivated to conceal their literacy challenges in order to avoid negative social evaluation and protect their social identity. Some actively manage stigma more than others and planned in advance a strategy to conceal their literacy level while engaging in everyday activities. Adult learners who are not ready or willing to disclose their literacy challenges primarily coped with stigma by disguising their literacy status. They did this by: 1) actively concealing it by deceiving others, 2)

passively concealing it with “passing it off” strategies, and, 3) passively concealing it with “avoidance” strategies. A few participants disclosed their literacy status voluntarily under some circumstances, but this coping method was rare.

Actively disguising limited literacy skills by deceiving others means that adult learners make up ‘stories’ about why they cannot read or write something. The story is a premeditative plan of action to conceal literacy challenges. This type of deception most often takes place in public while running errands or at work, but it can also take place at home with family and friends.

One of the most common stories told by participants that actively disguise their literacy level is saying “I left my glasses at home and I can’t see.” Another common plan shared was pretending to have a hurt hand or thumb so that the writing would be done by someone else. These stories are told most often in public places where the reading and writing required is minimal. These places could include a medical clinic, a bank, or a store.

Ozanne, Adkins, & Sandlin (2005) describe adult learners who actively disguise by deceiving others as “alienated consumers.” These consumers feel more alienated during social encounters because coping with stigma is usually accompanied with embarrassment, fear, and shame.

Nick explained that he actively disguises at work because he believes he has no other choice due to stigma.

“Well I hate to say it but I’ve just lied about it. But sometimes you have to guard yourself at all cost. A lot of people want to know why you’re not literate. They just think that you’re not smart. So I just don’t deal with it. If I would spill the beans about me not being able to read and write, then everyone will start hackin’ on me. No. I could lose my job and everything.” (Nick)

When the amount of paperwork is much more involved and when its frequency is on a more regular basis, an adult learner may actively conceal by telling more complex stories. In other words, a more elaborate story than “I forgot my glasses” may be necessary to motivate another person to complete lengthy paperwork. Candice explained that she would complain a lot about doing paperwork at work and say over and over how much she disliked doing it. She would then suggest paying someone to do it for her.

“I’d say, here, I’ll pay you. You do this for me. I hate paperwork. I’ll tell you the information and almost always they would do it.” (Candice)

Actively concealing with a more complex story may also set up an arrangement between the adult learner and the person/s hearing it and accepting its conditions. In Candice’s situation, the same co-workers completed her paperwork at work on a fairly regular basis.

Actively concealing with more complex stories may set up reading and writing arrangements in the home too. Sometimes the more literate children and grandchildren are motivated to help the adult learner complete paperwork. For example, Sandra explained that when her daughter learned to read and write, she would make grocery lists, pay bills, and read the mail to her. She talked about setting up this arrangement with her daughter.

“...but I would act like I was teaching her so that she would keep on reading to me. I always told her that maybe one day she might have to do my job and she would write anything I wanted her to write. That’s how I got through.” (Sandra)

Passively concealing limited literacy is different from actively concealing because the adult learner does not plan in advance how they are going to conceal their literacy challenges. One type of passive concealing occurs when the adult learner just ‘plays it off’ automatically by ignoring someone or something that could expose his/her limited

literacy. Denise said that she simply ignores requests that involve reading and writing such as filling out a form in a public place.

“I just don’t fill much of it out and then I bring it back to the front desk. They say, well, you didn’t do so and so, and basically I tell them and they write it in for me.” (Denise)

Another type of “playing it off” strategy occurs when an adult learner deliberately behaves in a way that he/she believes will help hide limited literacy. This happens when the adult learner is put on the spot and believes that his/her literacy status might be revealed unless he/she behaves in a particular way. For example, Sandra talked about being caught off guard one time during a Red Cross meeting. The facilitator wanted everyone to take turns reading aloud. When it was Sandra’s turn, she played it off by pretending to choke on the popcorn she was eating in class so that someone else would read aloud for her.

Sandra also explained how she sometimes concealed her literacy challenges by deliberately becoming more talkative and extroverted with people around her. Her intention was to give the impression that she was as literate as other people.

“I’m outgoing and I’ve learned through the years how to do this. I could not read or write. They didn’t know because I was doing all the talking.” (Sandra)

Ozanne, Adkins and Sandlin (2005) refer to adult learners who conceal their literacy status by behaving in ways they believe literate people do as “conflicted identity managers” (260). Conflicted identity managers experience embarrassment and shame due to stigma, but are not as socially isolated as other adult learners because they are extroverted and possess better social skills. These attributes are used to maintain concealment while accomplishing a task or acquiring information. Although using social

skills is advantageous, adult learners who are very social simultaneously experience high stress levels because they run the risk of exposing their status during conversations more frequently (Ozanne, Adkins and Sandlin 2005).

Nick, who is very socially skilled, reported that he learns the most about the world by talking to other people. He often strikes up a conversation about the news, sports, politics or religion to acquire more information. While this strategy serves him well, he also feels that he must control the conversation so it avoids topic areas that could expose his literacy challenges. Likewise, social interaction is often underlined with fear of exposure for Denise, another socially skilled adult learner.

“You avoid conversations about where you went to school, what high school you graduated from. You avoid them because you don’t want them asking you more questions.” (Nick)

“I stay in familiar territory. People don’t know what level you are on if you only speak on the topics that you know.” (Denise)

Passively concealing with avoidance occurs when adult learners deliberately avoid certain people, places or activities so that their literacy challenges are not exposed. Stacey illustrates direct avoidance in which she immediately leaves the scene and indirect avoidance in which she avoids a friend by simply being unavailable in the following.

“The lady wanted me to fill out papers and asked a lot of questions. I just left. I never tried anymore. I didn’t know how to fill out those papers.” (Stacey)

“I have people that trust me so I would not want to lie to them. So I would back off from them just to keep from telling a lie. People would wonder why I didn’t call or why they haven’t seen me in such a long time. We would be friends for just a while, and then, y-know it was going to come to that point (of being exposed) and I would always back off.” (Stacey)

Sometimes adult learners choose to voluntarily disclose their literacy challenges.

Voluntary disclosure usually occurs with family members and close friends. Andy

explained that his family had always accepted his literacy challenges and gave him a great deal of love and support. This social support influenced him to disclose voluntarily to his wife before they were married. Having family acceptance has also encouraged him to voluntarily disclose in some public situations. The sense of belonging and social validation that Andy receives from his family may partially counter the negative effects of stigma (Major and O'Brien 2005).

“My wife works with deaf and blind people and she understands people with disabilities. If I don't have my wife with me, then I just tell them I don't know how to do this (fill out the form). They just have to accept that. Sometimes they're frustrated, but they'll have to get over it.” (Andy)

Denise and Stacey also reported voluntary disclose with family or close friends. To their surprise, their family members and friends received the news with disbelief.

“My family is fine with it. But they said I can't believe it! I don't believe you. They said yes you can, you can read. It's amazing to me that when you tell people that you have a reading problem and then they still bring stuff for me to read all the time.” (Denise)

“Yeah, they thought I was kidding. And I was like, for real, I can't read. And they still didn't take me serious.” (Stacey)

Stacey believes the reason for not believing voluntary disclosure may be because society assumes every adult can read and write.

“We think everybody can read and write. Nobody pays attention to literacy. But we really have so many people out here that cannot read or write. It's unbelievable.” (Stacey)

#### *Consequences of Coping Strategies:*

Most adult learners feel that they must actively or passively conceal their limited literacy in order to protect their social identity. Fearing ridicule and discrimination, adult learners may go to great lengths to hide their literacy status. Coping strategies that aim to conceal may initially help the adult learner avoid exposure, but their use can have a high

price. Maintaining invisibility by actively or passively concealing can put adult learners at a higher risk for physical, financial, and emotional harm. Despite the increased risks, almost all adult learners interviewed agreed that concealment was a better method of coping than being an open target for stigma. Participants discussed how concealment strategies affected their lives in the areas of health care, employment, friendships, and children's schoolwork.

Adults with low literacy suffer the highest rates of illness and mortality from chronic diseases and conditions (Plimpton and Root 1994). Most health care information is communicated at a literacy level that is too complicated for adult learners to comprehend. More literate patients are also unable to comprehend information very well when they are ill because illness interferes with working memory and lowers comprehension (Schmader and Johns 2003). Remedies to the health communication-literacy problem focus primarily on training health care professionals so that they can communicate in a manner that meets their patients' needs (Plimpton and Root 1994; Rudd and Comings 1994).

George shared a story about how he accidentally misused his high blood pressure medicine. George was concealing his literacy level at the time he received the prescription. He was told by health care professionals to refer to the written instructions for the correct dosage, but the directions were never verbally communicated and he was never asked if he understood how to take the medicine.

“I have high blood pressure medicine. I have to take it everyday. I had to learn how to take it, when to take it. You can mess yourself up (if done incorrectly) because blood pressure medicine helps control your heart. I did that one time. I went back to the doctor and the doctor said I wasn't taking enough because I did not read it (the directions).” (George)



This harmful situation could have been avoided if just one person involved in this health-related transaction would have explained the dosage to George in a simple and concise manner. That person could have been a physician, a nurse, or a pharmacist. George's example illustrates the lack of adult literacy awareness in the health care community. This physician not only demonstrates the need for better communication skills, but he/she also placed the entire blame of the communication problem on the patient.

Stacey also reported difficulties receiving health care. Stacey typically concealed her literacy status in public places and had a hard time filling out medical forms if she was not with someone who could help her. On occasions when she did ask the staff for help, they responded with a negative attitude and were reluctant to make time for her. In addition to the lack of adult literacy awareness and poor communication, Stacey adds that stigma and overbooked/understaffed medical centers contribute to the health communication-literacy problem.

“And then you get an attitude. It causes conflict (asking for help). If they don't have the time, they should find somebody to fill out the paper. So then I wouldn't go to the doctor. I wouldn't take my kids to the doctor. And if I take them to the clinic, the first thing they tell me is to fill out that paper. What am I supposed to do? And they (other adult learners) are not going to bring their child to the doctor or anything because they know they have to sign papers or write down something on paper that's wrong with the child. So that's why kids get neglected for care. It's because we do not pay attention to the parents. And when they come in, if they would be more kind and let them know, okay, I'll fill the paper out or get somebody to fill the paper out for you, but they have to be aware. That's the thing, they're not aware that these things are going on.” (Stacey)

Some adult learners conceal their literacy challenges by avoiding certain people who they believe have learned about their literacy status. If these people are co-workers or employers, then some adult learners will choose to quit their job in order to maintain

concealment. Stigma can be so strong that they would rather risk losing their job than to be subjected to stereotypes.

Sandra discussed her employment history. She worked at the Post Office, a fast food restaurant and a hospital. She proudly said “I would always do my job well.”

“I even worked as a secretary before. This place was a plumbing company and then I did office work too. But I would always look things up so no one knew what I was doing. But if someone would find out, then I would quit and go to another job” (Sandra)

Sandra believed the consequences of being exposed at work were worse than unemployment. On a different occasion, Sandra explained that she did not have to quit because she was hurt on the job and could not return to work.

“But then they caught on after I was there seven years. They just caught on. But then I got hurt on the job in the meantime, while they were catching on. So, I couldn’t work anymore anyway. They didn’t know really.” (Sandra)

Sandra talked about the injury with a sense of relief. The painful back injury that she suffered seemed to be a better alternative to being confronted in person about her literacy challenges at work.

Christine felt equally threatened by stigma at work and concealed her literacy status even at the cost of losing her job. Christine explained that she was a successful teacher’s aide and earned a promotion. She feared being promoted even though she worked very well with children because it would require her to submit written lesson plans. Fearing exposure, Christine quit before her promotion took effect.

Although Nick has had the same job for almost twenty years, he still experiences a great deal of anxiety because he feels he must constantly hide his literacy status at work.

Several participants reported having skills that they were unable to demonstrate in their present employment or use to secure better employment because doing so might lead to exposure. They expressed feeling belittled and unfulfilled because they believe that they could perform well on the job if stigma did not associate them with being stupid or lazy.

A few adult learners shared examples of how stigma has affected their desire and ability to develop and maintain friendships with other adults. They reported feeling fear and anxiety about being exposed even to their closest friends. Adult learners said that they feel vulnerable and fear being taken advantage even while they are with friends because they believe exposure may cause them to lose peer acceptance and permanently damage the friendship.

“I don’t think you should expose your deepest things to just anyone. You don’t tell people. People abuse that, they do, especially something like reading. There are a lot of people that are afraid, and I’ve learned this because I was afraid to let people know (about literacy challenges). They feel like you’re slow, or you’re ignorant, or you’re dumb. I mean they don’t have anything to do with you if can’t read or write” (Andy)

As Stacey explains, sometimes getting caught by a friend can end the relationship altogether.

“I had a friend ...we were good friends and when she found out, she said, “Well my third-grader can read better than you.” And she never called me back. That was really, really hurtful. I have never forgotten that” (Stacey)

Some adult learners may employ the avoidance strategy to most aspects of their life, including friendships, as means to shield themselves from stigmatization. One adult learner explained how he tried to escape stigmatization by isolating himself from as many people as he could.

“I think I was vulnerable because I just wanted somebody to say they cared or somebody just to have as a friend, or buddy, or girlfriend. I just wanted somebody that I could trust. ...I would find myself giving things away just to hold onto a friend or something. I did not really have anything (material value to give) at all, but what I did have, I would always try to help other people with. I would end up losing a lot of times with my kindness toward people and that was why I went into isolation. I isolated myself for three years. I did not talk to anyone. I would go to work, go home, go to the store, go home, did not talk to anybody on the phone, did not have anybody come over, or anything. I was just disgusted with people. There are so many people out there who will take you for a ride and you don't know. Sometimes people start off good, nice, and the next thing you know they are really not what you thought.” (Roger)

Some adult learners conceal their literacy status from their children. Christine felt compelled to conceal her literacy challenges from her two daughters because she believed it would undermine her parental authority if they found out. She wanted her two daughters to take her advice and work diligently in school. She felt that if they knew about her literacy challenges, then they would be less motivated to succeed in school. Christine talks about her decision to conceal as well as her involvement in her children's education in the following:

“When she was little (oldest daughter), she'd come to me and say mommy “What's this word?” I'd say you can figure it out. And she never forgot that neither. I'd always say, you can figure it out. I didn't know the word. So, she didn't know I didn't graduate from high school. I always kept it a secret. Bringing her up, she would learn how to read. I don't know how I did it, but I put it in her what I didn't know. I said you've got to do this. If you want to get somewhere in life, you have got learn how to read! She learned. Now, how would she feel if she found out that her mama never got her education? I was always there in elementary school for her. I was a room mother and all, but in high school, I couldn't keep up. I always let her be herself and she's really proud that I let her become the woman she is now. She graduated from college in, can you imagine, in Journalism.”

“My younger daughter got her GED. I watched her struggle, but she hung in there and got it. Oh if she knew I didn't get my education, she'd say Mama all these years you just lied!”  
(Christine)

Christine added later that she wonders now whether or not concealment was always the right choice to make.

“I think that if I had told my youngest daughter, she might have stayed in school. She went back later and got her GED, but if I came forward and said that I never graduated, she may have stayed” (Christine)

Nick discussed concealing his literacy status from his son. He never openly discussed it with his son, but said that his son probably figured it out over the years. Nick believes that it did not lower his son’s motivation and self-efficacy for school success because he always emphasized the importance of education and encouraged his son to achieve as much as he can. When his son needed help with his schoolwork though, Nick felt helpless and hurt because he could participate.

“We talked about college his whole life. You will go to college. You can study what you want to, but you will do better than a high school education. He knew how hard I had to work, so I wanted him to do better. He went to college and is in security systems.” (Nick)

“The hardest thing is when you have a kid in school and you want to help with the homework, but you can’t. They’re struggling and you can’t help at all.” (Nick).

#### *Stigma and the Labeling Event in Early Childhood:*

Several of the adult learners interviewed offered information about how stigma influenced the development of their academic identity since childhood. The adult learners who referenced childhood experiences volunteered the information without being prompted by specific questions. They felt very strongly that their intellectual development was thwarted by stigmatized labels and low expectations held by members in the school environment. These members included teachers, peers, and caretaking adults in which they socially interacted with on a regular basis during their early school-

age years. During this time, these adult learners specifically remember acquiring a stigmatized label such as slow, stupid, or retard. They believe that the negative perceptions and low expectations held about them had a long lasting impact on the way in which they perceived their own intellectual ability. All reported that these early incidents caused them to feel ashamed and embarrassed of their literacy status and lowered their self-esteem and self-efficacy for learning all the way into adulthood, and even through the first year or more of attending an adult literacy program.

Christine explained that she was placed in special education “from the very beginning” and how she was aware that her placement in school was different from the other children’s.

“So I didn’t put my mind on reading so much ‘cause I knew I was in a special class. We didn’t learn reading and my sisters and brothers attended special education. That’s why I think I did too.” (Christine)

She went on to explain that in addition to being in a learning environment that held low literacy expectations, she was also subjected to repetitive humiliation by peers who caused undue suffering and embarrassment.

“I was in special education until I went to high school. It was a separate school and we were bussed over there (to the primary school) to have lunch. I will never forget that. I believe that it made a mark on me back then and I’m not gonna talk about that... I just remember that the other half of the school would make fun of the special education. They’d say ‘ooey’ look, here comes all those special ed. kids.” (Christine)

Christine’s account is consistent with literature on expectancy theory in that the impact of self-fulfilling prophecy is often underestimated. This occurs because methodology seeks to measure effects made by one perceiver on one target, typically one teacher on one student or classroom. As Christine explains, she felt alienation and oppression from her

peers as well as low expectations from her teachers resulting in a cumulative effect of self-fulfilling prophecy (Quigley 1992).

Roger also shared his experiences with stigma during primary school. He attended a general education elementary school, but remembers not understanding the material covered and receiving very low grades. He said he was never formally tested for dyslexia until he was an adult.

“I went to grammar school. They did not test people to find out (about dyslexia). They (his parents) would just know that I would bring F’s home and my sisters and brothers would always bring A’s and stuff. Nobody could understand why I was so slow” (Roger)

“I had a lot of challenges in my life. I mean critical challenges mostly because I am dyslexic. I could not read or write and a lot of challenges come from home because my parents. They just thought I was lazy, dumb, just did not care. I could not even spell my middle name \_\_\_\_, and I would be standing there and my father would tell me “You’re going to spell this when I come home tonight.” All I could focus on was what was going to happen to me when he got home so, when I got to the age of 15, I told him I was not going to take any more whippings. So I had to leave. I left home at 15. I did not feel I had any purpose here (home). I did not feel like I even belonged here at one time because everyone...I am talking about from my grandmother to cousins to everybody; Nobody wanted me .... and really, the biggest thing I ever wanted was love from my family and they did not know how to give it to me.” (Roger)

Andy believes that being labeled in early childhood resulted in low expectations and influenced his academic identity, but his account differs from Christine’s and Roger’s in that he was not subjected to social humiliation or parental abuse. He never received any sort of formal education even though he was not diagnosed with a physical or cognitive disability. It was just assumed by his caretakers that he had a disability. He explained that his primary caretakers were his grandparents and brothers and sisters. He described them as “good people,” but they had very limited literacy skills and “did the best they could.”

“I had medical problems when I was a kid. They wouldn’t allow me to come to school. But I really don’t think I have a disability. I just feel like it (learning to read) wasn’t the focus for me when I was younger” (Andy)

He believes that being in a learning environment with low literacy expectations contributed to his literacy challenges in adulthood, but he did not report suffering shame and embarrassment for having limited literacy in this environment. The sense of belonging and social validation that Andy received from his family may have partially countered the negative effects of stigma (Major and O’Brien 2005).

*Roles of Adult Literacy Programs:*

Adult learners interpret new life experiences in two main ways. They interpret them according to experiences they had in childhood or they interpret them critically. When they interpret them critically, they can reexamine the meaning of these experiences to reassess self-concept. This process of reassessing and renewing self-concept is referred to in the professional literature as transformative learning. Transformative learning deconstructs previously held beliefs about one’s abilities and intelligences and reconstructs self-concept with higher self-esteem, self-confidence, and higher personal expectations (Mezirow 1990; Cranton 2006).

Attending an adult literacy program may be an experience that fosters transformative learning. Adult learners may acquire technical knowledge in the form of concrete literacy skills, but they may also develop more complex ways of knowing as they are exposed to multiple perspectives held about stigma, intellectual ability, self-esteem, employment, schooling, and family life. New experiences in a program may provide an educational and social environment for adult learners to re-interpret previous hurtful experiences caused by stigma. Reexamining their identity and how they may have



come to accept a poor self-concept due to stigma can be a means to “transform” a poor academic identity to one with a strong self-efficacy for learning (Terry 2006; Helsing et al. 2001; Cohen 1997). Critically reflecting on how stigma has impacted their lives may encourage adult learners to question ideology that perpetuates stigma and to actively challenge the status quo (Comings, Garner, & Smith 2001; Tett 2006).

The significance of participating in an adult literacy program cannot be underestimated for several of the adult learners interviewed. Participation has been reported to be a primary catalyst for personal healing and growth in the lives of these adult learners.

Roger remembers beginning a literacy program feeling very frustrated and helpless. He had lived most of his life fearing consequences of stigma so intensely that he reported losing the ability to trust people. He recalls that meeting with his literacy tutor in the beginning focused less on improving actual literacy skills and much more on learning how to verbally express his emotions and develop a trusting relationship. Roger had been actively participating in the same literacy program for many years at the time of the interview and described its affect as a liberating, life changing experience. He believes that his participation has not only helped him improve literacy skills, but it has also helped him reassess aspects of his self-concept that were distorted. “The professional literature connects self-concept and self-esteem as inseparable partners in the adult learning process” (Terry 2006).

I think it opened me up to the fact that I could express myself, but at first, I didn't know whether she (tutor) would insult me or say something I did not understand or not because I was already frustrated and, to sit here in front of my tutor and open up to her, that took a lot of doing ...but then I really saw the side of her that she really wanted to help me. She said, “You are not dumb. You are a very smart, intelligent man but you just had

so many bad breaks in your life to the point that it's just going to take some time to get it back in your head." I listened to what she had to say and I paid attention. It is so amazing because I never thought I would pick up another book and read it because it carries so many frustrating memories. But now, I know books. I am living and this is the first 13 years that I have had 13 years of freedom--real true freedom. All of the other time was just time going by. (Roger)

Other adult learners interviewed pointed to their progress with learning concrete literacy skills, or instrumental learning, as a primary reason for a more positive self-concept and increased motivation. Regardless of skill level, successful learning outcomes can alter academic identity by raising self-esteem and self-efficacy for learning (Terry 2006; Helsing et al. 2001). The success with learning new skills in the program motivated adult learners to set higher and longer term learning goals such as earning a GED. Literacy program participation inspired adult learners to broaden their goals as well and strive to make other types of self-improvements. Denise began setting diet and exercise goals for herself as an outgrowth from the inspiration she was experiencing from academic success.

Now I'm taking care of myself because I'm doing so well. I know I need to do my reading and get my GED. These things I gotta do. So I'm losing weight too. I exercise every day after work and I eat fruit and drink a lot of water. I'm telling you it feels good. (Denise)

In the process of reassessing aspects of academic identity in a literacy program, some adult learners reexamined their role at work and its intellectual demands. "Judgments about intelligence carry great weight in our culture, and one of the ways we judge each other's intelligence is through the work we do" (Rose 2004:19). The adult learners interviewed occupied what has been traditionally referred to as "blue collar" or "low skilled" jobs, but they did not perceive their work as menial or simple. Instead, they pointed to how their work demanded a great deal of intelligence in judgment,

organization, memory, perception, and attention. All adult learners believed that they are “good at something” and have come to understand the notion of intelligence in a broader, deeper sense regardless of their literacy skill level.

George helps organize photos for poster layouts. He has critically reflected on the skills he employs at work since he has been in the program and believes that his spatial intelligence makes a valuable contribution.

If you show me something once on the job, maybe a month later, I can zero back to it in my mind and remember how to do it. I can picture it in my head. But you can give a word and I can't spell it. If you give me a picture of something, I will remember it.

A few adult learners explained how they feel less threatened by involuntary exposure since they began literacy program participation. Stacey credits making friends in the program as well as instrumental learning. She feels that the social support she receives from her tutor and peers in the program has helped her feel much less intimidated by stigma. She describes her perspective on “getting caught” at this point as:

“It's like you've gotten to a point where it's like, look, this is a different situation than whatever your opinion is. You've kind of gotten beyond that ...beyond other people's narrow mindedness” (Stacey).

Nick also agreed that he is less intimidated by stigma since he has been in a literacy program. He said that he still does not voluntarily disclose his literacy status, but he is not as scared as he used to be that someone will find out. He said he does not feel ashamed because he is making progress.

Some adult learners interviewed took their personal growth and literacy development to a higher level by being adult literacy advocates and spokespeople for their literacy program. They have renewed their self-concept and want to put their “transformation” into action by raising public awareness about adult literacy issues in

effort to decrease stigma. Doing so involves exposing their literacy status. Even so, they feel that at this point in their lives, they have the self-esteem and self-confidence to expose having literacy challenges, and are motivated by larger issues concerning adult literacy. They no longer perceive limited literacy as a problem belonging solely to the individual. Instead, they interpret limited literacy as a larger social issue that is maintained and perpetuated by stigma. In effort to change the status quo, several adult learners interviewed have brought their life stories and battles with stigma to the public.

Andy combats stigma by telling his life story to potential adult literacy tutors during the program's orientation. He hopes that his life story helps dismiss stereotypes.

Some of us are 40-50 years old, have raised kids, bought a house...we do the same things you do, we just can't read. But I really do enjoy talking to potential tutors because they want to help people. They don't have all the equipment yet, not all the tools yet, but they have the right attitude. That's why I like to talk with them. It's fun to tell them how they're gonna change someone's life forever" (Andy).

Stacey raises awareness about limited adult literacy by going to healthcare centers and teaching physicians, nurses, and staff about how they can increase access to healthcare for these adults and their children. Roger co-authored his life story. He wrote about how he was homeless before he began a literacy program and how he eventually became a proud homeowner with a stable, secure job that he enjoys. He hopes his life story and his many struggles with limited literacy will encourage teenagers to believe that it is never too late to learn. Roger also speaks at local homeless shelters to encourage people to enter a literacy program. He discussed visiting shelters:

You have to have somebody who is not afraid to go to the people. You want the people to learn something. Find somebody that is not afraid to stand up and tell it like it is and not sugar coat it. These kids will sit there and they will listen. If a person never went through anything, they will know it. Once I explained to them, they really listened. They had no

problems at all because I have been there where they are and they wanted to know how I got from it. That was the story they really wanted to hear. How did you get from this shelter and what motivated you to go on?  
(Roger)

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

#### *Summary of the Findings and Analysis:*

This study's exploration into the ways in which stigma affects personal, social, and economic well-being of adults with limited literacy reaffirms many of the findings in the literature. Stigma acts as a double burden to learning and produces discriminatory consequences that limit life chances. From their point of view, adult learners shared life experiences illustrating how stigma marginalized multiple domains of their lives and how it has impacted the integral relationship of self-esteem and academic identity.

Participants in this study were motivated to conceal their stigmatized status in order to avoid negative social evaluation and to protect their social identity. Managing stigma occurred frequently while adult learners engaged in everyday activities. The threat of exposure was initiated by their awareness of negative stereotypes about limited literacy or by a situational cue that could potentially expose or confirm their literacy level. This supports the identity threat model that suggests stigmatized members sense that their social identity has the potential to be devalued and then react to this threat with a variety of coping efforts (Major and O'Brien 2005).

Adult learners in this study described situations illustrating how coping efforts were used. Stigma management strategies involved premeditative plans of deception, passive or "passing it off" strategies, and avoidance strategies. Adult learners reported experiencing some level of fear, embarrassment, or shame during or shortly after they employed one or more of these strategies. Some adult learners used their social skills to accomplish tasks, make acquaintances, and acquire information. Although these adult

learners felt less socially alienated in a print dominated world than those who used avoidance strategies, they experienced high stress levels because they risked exposure during conversations more frequently. These findings corroborate the research on consumer behaviors of adult learners as a social practice (Ozanne, Adkins, & Sandlin 2005).

Self-disclosure was uncommon among participants and occurred when adult learners already felt a strong sense of belonging and social validation (Major and O'Brien 2005). Close friends and family members learning about literacy challenges for the first time responded with disbelief and denial. This reaffirms the extent in which the relationship between one's intelligence and level of literacy is misunderstood. While some adult learners selectively self-disclosed, all participants sought to maintain invisibility across environments despite the potential physical, financial, and emotional harm. Health care, employment, friendships, and children's schoolwork were areas most frequently affected by stigma management.

Concealing literacy challenges while obtaining health care resulted in taking prescription medicine incorrectly or forfeiting treatment because the written instructions and medical forms were too complicated to complete. Adult learners felt that their attempts for clarification and writing assistance were ignored by physicians and staff who appeared to be annoyed with such requests. The literature on health communication-literacy problems reports that adults with low literacy suffer the highest rates of illness and mortality from chronic diseases and conditions because information is too complicated to comprehend (Plimpton and Root 1994). Illness itself interferes with comprehension and puts more literate patients at risk as well (Schmader and Johns 2003).

These findings point to the need for health care professionals to be specifically trained in communication techniques that meet a wider range of literacy ability.

The consequences of stigma management at work sometimes resulted in losing a job. Unemployment was often the preferred outcome relative to involuntary exposure. Adult learners also reported fearing promotion because the added responsibilities may lead to exposure. As a result, their daily lives at work were mostly unsatisfying and fraught with anxiety and fear.

Mothers and fathers interviewed experienced frustration and helplessness when their children turned to them for help with schoolwork. Literacy skill level and risk of exposure were factors motivating adult learners to limit their participation with schoolwork. However, adult learners encouraged success by holding high achievement expectations and empowering their children to set future academic and employment goals. Some of the goals achieved by their children included high school graduation and equivalency, technical or trade school, and a four year university degree.

The parent-child intergenerational effect of limited literacy is complex and often misunderstood. Low literacy is not the inevitable outcome the media and policy makers so often portray it to be. Data from the Adult Literacy Basic Skills Unit shows that children whose parents have limited literacy are more likely to be in the lowest reading level, but the “vast majority of children actually in the lowest reading level did not have parents with literacy difficulties” (Prinsloo 2005:25). Children of adult learners may indeed be at a disadvantage when there is no other more literate parent to help them with schoolwork and develop literacy skills. However, there are several environmental factors that influence children’s motivation, self-efficacy, and achievement more than the



literacy/educational level of their parents. These include a child's level of social capital, their parent's expectations, and their school and classroom environment.

Social capital refers to the support and involvement a child receives from adults to foster school success. The level of social capital in children's lives contributes more to school success than their family income, their parents' educational level, or their household composition (Teachman, Paasch and Carver 1997; Pong 1997, 1998). Parents with limited literacy who participate in their child's education by attending school programs, activities, and clubs encourage academic success. Such parental involvement can reinforce the importance of education as well give the impression that academics are more conquerable. This in turn, may enhance their child's academic identity (Grolnick and Slowiaczek 1994). In addition, parents with literacy challenges can indirectly encourage academic success by organizing a home environment that teaches effective time management strategies and healthy work habits (Jodi, Michael, Malanchuk, Eccles and Sameroff, 2001).

While parents in this study were unable to directly assist with their children's homework, they were involved in school related activities, emphasized the importance of academics, and held high expectations for their children. These factors contributed to their children's literacy success. Although the parent-child intergenerational effect of limited literacy is inconclusive, these findings suggest that its influence is not significant enough to infer causation.

Some adult learners discussed the impact of stigmatized labels such as "retard," "slow," and "stupid" in their childhood. The labeling event in early childhood caused deep feelings of shame and embarrassment, lowered self-esteem and self-efficacy for

learning, and initiated self-fulfilling prophecy behaviors and outcomes. Adult learners believed that labeling interfered with learning well into adulthood. This supports large-scale and longitudinal studies finding intellectual development being greatly affected by labeling as early as first grade (McKnown and Weinstien 2003) and academic identities responding to social influences in early school environments for decades (Entwisle and Hayduk 1998). Furthermore, the impact of labeling is often underestimated because effects are not typically measured across multiple domains (Quigley 1992).

Adult learners in this study were strongly influenced literacy program participation. Participation was reported to be a primary catalyst for personal healing and growth. It provided an educational and social environment for adult learners to critically reflect on how stigma has impacted their intellectual ability, self-esteem, schooling, employment and personal relationships. Adult learners articulated processes and events that are described in the literature as transformative. Transformative learning deconstructs previously held beliefs about one's abilities and intelligences and reconstructs self-concept with higher self-esteem, self-confidence and higher personal expectations (Mezirow 1990; Cranton 2006).

Adult learners were exposed to multiple perspectives or ways of knowing while meeting with a literacy tutor and cohort for at least two years. Several common themes emerged as the participants re-assessed and transformed how meaning is made from technical and social learning experiences. Person-centered learning altered academic identities by raising self-esteem and self-efficacy for learning. Adult learners experienced increased motivation as new skills were attained. This led to setting higher and longer term literacy goals. A greater self-awareness and a broader interpretation of intelligence

encouraged a self-improvement spill over in health and employment. Social support and camaraderie from tutors and peers helped lower fear of involuntary exposure. As participants learned to conceptualize stigma as a social process and problem, some reported experiencing emancipatory learning and began to actively challenge ideology that perpetuates stigma.

Literacy program participation may offer an environment that fosters transformative changes in how adult learners perceive themselves, stigma, and the world around them. However, it is important to keep in mind that transformative learning may result from any learning context (Cranton 2006). Adult literacy programs that apply critical pedagogy and view the adult learner as having rich life experiences that enhance, not hinder, learning are most likely to act as catalysts for transformation (Cranton 2006; Lipnevich and Beder 2007). Implicitly, adult literacy educators need to understand the political nature of education and practice critical reflection in their own lives in order to help their students understand the socio-political inequalities embedded in the “functional” literacy discourse (Comings, Garner and Smith 2001).

#### Limitations of the Study:

The non-random, small sample size of this study is not generalizable to the larger population. All the data in this study were self-reported. In any such study, researchers have to assume that participants told the truth as best they knew it. In some cases adult learners may have wanted to present themselves in the best possible light or they may have wanted to obscure personal information. These limitations are inherent to one time, in-depth interviews and should be considered as my findings are reviewed. Another issue that affected the study pertains to the length of literacy program participation. All adult

learners were regularly attending literacy tutoring for a minimum of two years at the time of the interview. However, several adult learners had been in the program for a much longer period of time. This potentially afforded these adult learners with many more opportunities to critically reflect on stigma, identity, and life chances; therefore, data revealing transformative changes could reflect longer literacy program attendance. Lastly, my insider role as an adult literacy tutor could have had limitations even though any prior assumptions and experiences were carefully monitored before and throughout the study.

#### Direction for Future Research:

There was not a comparison group in this study. Comparing transformative learning experiences of two groups of adult learners; one which attended a literacy program and one that did not, could be insightful since transformative learning can occur in any learning context. Critical pedagogy in literacy programs may benefit from a larger, quantitative study assessing emancipatory learning experiences comparing two such groups of adult learners. Several of the participants in this study openly challenged the reproduction of stigma. It would be interesting to examine the specific curricula, instructional processes, and goals of the literacy program that encouraged adult learners to become spokespeople for literacy issues. There is a need to examine how adult literacy educators engage in critical reflection on their own practice. A study targeting transformative learning about teaching literacy could enhance self-awareness and potentially lead to professional development in adult basic education. A provocative finding in the literature on self-esteem revealed that there is no significant difference in academic and global self-esteem between adult learners and doctoral students (Lipnevich

and Beder 2007). This topic should be explored more because it directly challenges the deficit model in adult literacy education which assumes adult learners have inadequate self-esteem and lack motivation for learning.

#### Conclusion:

This study explored the experience of stigma and adult limited literacy from the point of view of the adult learner. Dominant theories on stigma and its impact on intellectual development and achievement were applied to this under-researched area. Expectancy theory, stereotype threat theory, and identity threat theory helped provide a theoretical framework in which to examine the integral relationship of self-esteem and academic identity, and describe stigma mechanisms on self-esteem, motivation for learning, expectations of achieving, and actual achievement. Adult learners shared detailed examples about how stigma acted as a double burden to learning and produced discriminatory consequences in areas such as employment, healthcare, and education. It was found that attending a literacy program for at least two years mediated the negative effects of stigma. Regular weekly participation provided an educational and social environment for adult learners to critically reflect on how stigma influenced their intellectual ability, self-esteem, employment, schooling, and personal relationships. Critical pedagogy in the adult literacy program was found to foster transformative learning and participants learned to conceptualize stigma as a social process and problem.

## APPENDIX A

The interview guide is used to provide broad areas of conversation. Additional probing depending on responses will in part determine the direction of conversation.

- 1) Introduce myself and explain researcher role (prior tutoring experience)
- 2) Explain purpose of study and how their information will be used
- 3) Read consent form to/with participant and obtain informed consent
- 4) Thank participant and give \$20.00 cash

### Main Questions:

#### *Questions about how adult learners meet their needs in various social setting:*

- 1) How has literacy challenges affected you during routine activities like shopping at a store, eating in a restaurant, or going to the bank or post office?
- 2) Can you tell me step by step about how you choose to buy something in a store or order something in a restaurant when you have trouble reading the label or menu? How do you go about making a decision?
- 3) In what ways has limited literacy affected your employment?
- 4) How has literacy challenges shaped the type of work you do? (Paid work experience)
- 5) In what ways do literacy challenges influence volunteer work or work you do at home? (No paid work experience)
- 6) If you wanted or needed to complete a task on the job (or at home, when applicable) that required reading and writing, how do you go about accomplishing the task when it's beyond your skill level?
- 7) Can you share with me in detail how you may go about filling out a form, writing a note, or reading instructions?

#### *Questions about how adult learners cope with or manage stigma:*

- 1) Do you now or have you ever concealed your literacy challenges?

#### If Yes:

- 2) What sort of things do you do exactly to conceal literacy challenges?
- 3) Can you share an experience in which you were successful?
- 4) How do you conceal literacy challenges in public setting with a stranger?
- 5) How do you conceal literacy challenges with a friend or family member?

#### If No:

- 2) How has being upfront about having literacy challenges affected your everyday activities?
- 3) Do you think being open about literacy challenges influences interaction with strangers? With friends? Family?

#### *Questions about the impact of stigma:*

- 1) How has limited literacy shaped the way you feel and think about yourself? Self-esteem? Personality? Relationships? Independence?

*Questions about skills, abilities and intelligences used to accomplish personal and/or professional goals:*

- 1) What sort of things are you good at?  
(Public speaking? Storytelling? Organizing people and events? Sports? Music? Listening to other people's problems? Building things? Advising people? Drawing? Cooking?)
- 2) Can you tell me about how being good at \_\_\_\_\_ has helped you accomplish a personal or professional goal?
- 3) How has being good at \_\_\_\_\_ made you feel about yourself?
- 4) In what ways do you think being good at \_\_\_\_\_ can be useful or beneficial to learning something new?
- 5) In what ways do you think that being good at \_\_\_\_\_ could be applied to learning to read and writing?

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

### Cynthia Leigh Solinski

#### Education

- 8/09-Present **Master of Arts in Special Education** at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
- May, 2010 **Master of Arts in Sociology** at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
- May, 2009 **Secondary Teaching License in Sociology, Economics, and Historical Perspectives**, Transition to Teaching at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
- May, 2005 **Bachelor of Arts in Economics** at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

#### Teaching Employment

- 8/09-present **Mentor and Job Coach**, *Indianapolis Public Schools-IUPUI S.I.T.E. Program*
- Facilitate person -centered planning for individuals with disabilities as they transition from high school to postsecondary settings.
  - Instruct career education class to help students prepare for interviews, improve job skills and assess career interests.
  - Tutor one-on-one literacy skills and reading sessions.
  - Train students to use public transportation to support greater independence.
- 8/08-12/08 **Sixth Grade Student Teacher & Special Needs Assistant**, *Craig Middle School*
- 8/09-12/09
- Planned and implemented inquiry-based units that address varied intelligences, learning styles, and modes of expression.
  - Collaborated with ENL and Special Needs instructors daily to differentiate and assess teaching and learning.
- 1/09-5/09 **High School U.S. History Student Teacher**, *Northwest High School*
- Developed and implemented daily and unit lesson plans for 11<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History classes, administered tests, and analyzed student performance.
  - Integrated technology with project based learning.
  - Fostered a classroom environment conducive to learning and promoting excellent student/teacher interaction in a school with a high minority population.
- 5/05-8/08 **Adult Literacy Tutor Workshop Instructor**, *IndyReads*
- Conducted literacy and ENL workshops for volunteer tutors.
  - Demonstrated learner-centered teaching strategies using authentic materials such as journals, newspapers, maps, and email.
  - Developed creative literacy strategies to increase student's academic confidence and interest.
  - Researched application of multiple intelligence theory with adult learners' goals, interests, and abilities.

### Research Work (Employment and Non-Employment)

#### 8/09-present **IPS-IUPUI S.I.T.E. Program**

- Researched and tracked data on transition services for individuals with disabilities.
- Participated in interview research and professional development with teachers, job coaches, and agency professionals working with individuals with significant disabilities.

#### 8/07-5/10 **Sociology of Education**, *Cynthia Solinski, IUPUI*

- Thesis project focused on stigma in the lives of adult literacy learners, intellectual and academic identity development among stigmatized members, and adult literacy program participation as a catalyst for transformative learning.
- Conducted independent qualitative research using semi-structured in-depth interviews with adult learners and analyzed data using grounded theory.
- Responsible for IRB paperwork, interview protocol, data collection, analysis, literature review, and summary of findings.

#### 5/08-8/08 **Research Assistant**, *Indiana University-Indianapolis Geography Dept. and School of Public Health.*

- Participated in field research for community planning.
- Collected data using multiple methodologies.
- Analyzed strategies that could increase sidewalk usage, especially for individuals with physical challenges.

### Community Involvement

8/08-5/09 **Homework Club Tutor**, Craig Middle School

4/02-5/06 **Adult Literacy Tutor**, IndyReads

5/05-8/05 **Yoga for Kids Workshop Instructor**, City Yoga

5/03-10/05 **Food Rescue Kitchen Assistant**, Second Helpings

### Professional Associations

National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

American Sociological Association

Council for Exceptional Children

National Council for the Social Studies