

READING PARTNERS TUTOR PERSPECTIVES PROJECT: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC  
EVALUATION OF VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES

A Project Report

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READING PARTNERS TUTOR PERSPECTIVES PROJECT: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC  
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## **Abstract**

Reading Partners is a non-profit organization providing one-to-one literacy tutoring for students at low-income elementary schools who are behind grade level in their reading skills. The organization recruits and supports volunteers from the community to work with these students using a curriculum specifically designed for this purpose. In this project, I conducted an ethnographic evaluation to better understand the experiences of volunteers, focusing on how these experiences could be improved within the organization to enhance recruitment and retention efforts. Ethnographic interviews were conducted with tutors from three Reading Partners sites to gain a more in-depth perspective on their interactions with students, Reading Partners staff, and the broader organization. Based on this evaluation I also conducted a tutor forum at one school site using an empowerment evaluation approach to gather tutor feedback around student progress monitoring.

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## **Introduction**

The literacy nonprofit Reading Partners (formerly YES Reading) was founded in California's Bay Area in 1999 and has grown to include 101 school sites in six states as of the 2012-2013 program year (Reading Partners 2012). The organization partners with low-income public elementary schools to provide one-to-one tutoring for students who are half a year to two and a half years behind grade level in their reading skills. Reading Partners recruits community volunteers to each school site to tutor students using the organization's own curriculum. Each reading center at a school site is managed by a Reading Partners staff member who is usually serving with the organization as an AmeriCorps member. I initially became involved with Reading Partners as a site coordinator at one of their San Jose school sites in 2011-12 and continued with the organization at another San Jose school for 2012-13.

In my role as a site coordinator I work with volunteers to facilitate their tutoring of students in the program. Through this role I recognized the potential for an ethnographic evaluation to give additional insight into the experiences of volunteers, providing the organization with information to improve these experiences and thus volunteer recruitment and retention. I proposed this project to the organization and worked with Senior Vice President of Research and Evaluation Dean Elson and Outreach Manager (2011-12) Salleha Chaudhry to design a study that would explore questions of interest to the organization and increase understanding of the volunteer experience. The first stage of this project involved a data-gathering period of ethnographic interviews in Fall 2012 as well as the presentation of this information to stakeholders in the organization. During the second phase I used this research to

develop a project to be undertaken in Spring 2013. With the advice of Dr. Darrah at SJSU I chose to facilitate an adapted empowerment evaluation with volunteers at one Reading Partners site.

In this report I will discuss the process of designing and conducting an ethnographic evaluation with Reading Partners volunteers as well as the results of this research in terms of observations and recommendations for the organization. I also explore my further use of the empowerment evaluation model with volunteers at a specific Reading Partners' site, concluding with implications and scenarios for future action resulting from this research.

### *Project Goals*

The primary goal of this project was to learn about the experiences of volunteers from their own perspectives and use this information to inform organizational efforts to improve their experiences. Within this primary objective I was interested in learning about specific aspects of the tutoring experience, including tutor interaction with students as well as the organization. Once data was collected it would be utilized in both a client presentation to stakeholders at Reading Partners as well as a further project during the Spring 2013 semester. My report to the client included both recommendations for changes that could be made organizationally as well as a proposal for the project I would undertake at a local level. The objective with this part of the project was to work within the Reading Partners context to apply the information gathered from the interviews while working directly with tutors.

### **Research Considerations**

#### *Designing Interventions to Support Students Struggling with Reading*

The existence of Reading Partners and its approach to improving the reading skills of students is grounded within the research on literacy interventions in general and one-to-one tutoring specifically. The reading challenges of students can have impacts not only during their

school career but throughout their lives, which is acknowledged in the literature and commonly understood by Reading Partners tutors. To understand the significance of these early reading skill deficits, Nes cites a study by Shanahan and Barr in which the researchers found that “children who do not attain efficient reading skills do not do as well as other students in content area classes, have lower-self esteem, are more likely to demonstrate discipline problems in school, and are less likely to graduate from high school” (2003:179). While schools utilize a variety of strategies to assist students in developing the necessary reading skills, research suggests that one-to-one tutoring by adults can be of great benefit to students who need additional support.

Within the literature on reading interventions, tutoring is defined very specifically and differentiated from other types of instruction. In their review of the research on tutoring, Woolley and Hay provide the following definition from Roe and Vukelich: “Tutoring could be defined as a learning interaction between a tutor and a tutee that focuses on one area of curriculum content needing improvement or strengthening in the tutee” (2007:9). Consistent with this model, Reading Partners focuses on reading skills and works with students who have been identified specifically by teachers or other school staff as needing improvement in this area. While tutoring is defined specifically, there are a variety of different models that may be implemented. These include programs where tutors work with students either one-on-one or in small groups and those that use certified teachers or para-professionals (e.g. certificated aides) as opposed to community volunteers or even peers (Woolley and Hay 2007). There is research to support one-to-one tutoring as an effective way of developing reading skills in students, in addition to studies that find community volunteers can have a positive impact in their roles as tutors, especially with adequate training and support (Woolley and Hay 2007). However, such one-to-one tutoring can become a challenge for implementation based on the costs associated with this type of instruction

(Nes 2003). The Reading Partners program works to make one-to-one tutoring feasible for schools in terms of both cost and program implementation, addressing barriers that can otherwise prevent students from receiving this type of instruction.

While the efficacy of one-to-one tutoring provided through a “well-designed” program that offers “immediate and substantial assistance to elementary students identified at risk for reading failure” is supported by research, it is less clear what exactly makes it effective for students (Burns et al. 2008:28). Wasik analyzed four well-documented tutoring programs and identified eight common components as being integral to an effective tutoring program. These components are: certified reading specialists to supervise volunteer tutors; ongoing training and feedback; structured tutoring sessions including rereading, word analysis, writing, and new stories; intensive and consistent tutoring (at least 1.5 hours per week); availability of quality materials (books and otherwise); and ongoing assessment of students (1998). Two of the programs Wasik analyzed utilized professional teachers as tutors while the other two worked with volunteer tutors (1998). Wasik’s recommendations are directed primarily toward making programs that utilize volunteers as effective as possible by providing them with the training and resources that teachers already possess (1998). This was particularly timely given the context in which the article was written, as President Clinton’s America Reads initiative for getting tutors into schools to support students struggling with reading was being considered (Wasik 1998). Although studies have supported the idea that programs using certified teachers as tutors can provide greater impacts than those using volunteers, providing such a program presents a tremendous financial challenge for many schools (Burns et al. 2008).

However, there is also debate over whether all aspects of the approach advocated by Wasik—one that focuses heavily on utilizing the expertise of teachers—are in fact necessary for

the success of a tutoring program. In his response to Wasik, Topping disagrees with the goal of training tutors to be as much like teachers as possible and instead supports the idea that they are a separate entity from teachers and should be considered as such (1998). Topping argues that trying to make tutors like teachers is costly and unnecessary because “Tutoring methods must be engineered specifically to capitalize on the strengths of volunteer tutors and avoid their potential weaknesses” (1998:46). By recognizing that tutors do not have to be teachers to be effective in their roles, tutoring programs can reduce the amount of training they do before volunteers begin tutoring and instead focus on the “procedural knowledge” that will be most helpful to them (Topping 1998). While Topping believes that successful tutoring programs must provide “quality training, support, monitoring, and troubleshooting for the tutors,” he also suggests that the qualifications of a teacher or reading specialist do not necessarily transfer directly to the tutoring context (1998:47). Instead of training tutors to emulate teachers, Topping argues that the focus in training needs to be on procedural knowledge as well as how tutors can deal with mistakes made by both themselves and their tutees (1998). Such an approach allows tutors to acquire content knowledge through training as they gain hands-on experience in the program and reflect on their experiences, focusing early training efforts on the areas likely to present the greatest challenges to tutors and students (Topping 1998).

In advocating this approach to tutoring, Topping comments that “neither tutors nor tutees should be pushed beyond their own zones of proximal development” (1998:47). The theory behind the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is one with particular relevance for one-to-one tutoring and the Reading Partners model. This theory was originally articulated by psychologist Lev Vygotsky early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has since received recurring interest from those within the educational community (Smagorinsky 2013). Smagorinsky quotes Vygotsky’s summary of

the ZPD, which is “what the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow” (2013:N.P.). In this conceptualization, children have a zone of actual development encompassing all the skills they can carry out independently and the ZPD, which are the tasks that students can carry out with the assistance of an adult (Varetskii 2009). Within this model, “Development...takes the shape of a process of moving from the joint execution of difficult, but accessible assignments to independent ones (without adult assistance)” and can only be achieved when the student is undertaking tasks in their ZPD (Varetskii 2009:78). One-to-one tutoring can be seen as particularly effective within this model because it allows for collaboration between student and adult on tasks that the student is not fully capable of doing on his or her own but can come to do independently if given assistance. The focus in tutoring must also be on difficulties falling within the ZPD as opposed to tasks that will cause frustration because they are outside the student’s present reach even with adult support or that simply reiterate those they can already perform independently (Varetskii 2009). As Topping’s comment suggests, tutors also work within their own ZPD as they learn how to tutor and develop their own capacities with the support of the program.

In addition to the ZPD, Vygotsky’s theory is significant for this application because of the emphasis it places on social context for children’s development. Development within the ZPD is influenced by a variety of social factors, including “the learner’s prior experiences and framework for viewing the world,” as well as “...the degree to which teacher and learner agree on the definition of the task and one another’s roles carrying it out,” and “the social context that each constructs for the situation, and the history of activity that each has had in prior social contexts that in turn frame their understanding of the present circumstances” (Smagorinsky 2013:NP). When applied to the tutoring context, this perspective suggests that there is far more

to the interaction between tutor and student than just the instruction taking place. Each comes to the session with a particular worldview and set of experiences that informs his/her actions as well as his/her receptivity to the situation. Smagorinsky explains that at the classroom level "... when teachers strive to adapt to students, the classroom dynamics may be altered to promote richer learning, and thus a stronger sense of affiliation with school than the students might otherwise develop" (2013:NP). Similarly, consciousness of these social aspects can be utilized within a one-to-one tutoring setting to better meet the needs of students and improve their response to the tutoring process.

The focus on supplemental interventions such as tutoring for students who struggle with reading skills is part of a broader trend taking place within education (McIntyre et al. 2005). McIntyre et al. observe from their review of the literature that "in the last few decades, the field of literacy has experienced a shift toward concern about children who historically have been left behind," including efforts to strengthen strategies for supporting such students in the classroom as well as "early-intervention programs for children at risk of school failure" (2005:99). Reading Partners is an example of the latter, as the program supplements classroom instruction for the student with weekly sessions with a trained tutor. While research has shown that such programs are effective for helping students who are behind in their reading skills, the exact ways they are able to do so are still being studied (Burns et al. 2008). Several trends for providing tutoring exist, including the use of certified teachers or focusing instead on volunteers (Wasik, Topping 1998). Arguments have been made for both approaches, with cost being a major barrier to widespread implementation of programs using teachers as tutors (Burns et al. 2008). The efficacy of working with students one-on-one can be contextualized by Vygotsky's theory on the zone of proximal development and having the support of an adult to allow students to make growth in

skills that they can then use independently (Varetskii 2009). Vygotsky also focused on the socio-cultural side of this interaction, stressing the importance of these factors for effective instruction that is relevant to students based on their own life experiences (Smagorinsky 2013). The issues brought up in these studies on literacy interventions, in addition to Vygotsky's theory, provide background for understanding the specific approach to tutoring taken by the Reading Partners program.

*The Reading Partners Model: Community Engagement for Literacy*

From its initial partnership with a single school in Menlo Park as YES Reading, the Reading Partners program has expanded to serve 3,392 students nationwide with 5,162 volunteers recruited during the 2011-12 program year (Reading Partners 2012). As of the beginning of the 2012-13 year the program operates in schools in several regions of California (the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and Sacramento/Chico), Washington, D.C., New York, Baltimore, Dallas, and Colorado with further expansion planned. Volunteers are an integral part of both the Reading Partners model and the organization's mission, which is stated as "help[ing] children become lifelong readers by empowering communities to provide individualized instruction with measurable results" (Reading Partners N.D.). Ensuring that volunteers have positive experiences with the organization and return to the program from year-to-year is essential not only to Reading Partners' operation but also the overarching goals of the organization in the communities where it is active.

In addition to empowering communities, Reading Partners also recognizes the importance of literacy for student success not only in school but in their lives more broadly. The organization's work is carried out to help students close the gap between their current reading level and grade level expectations so they do not fall farther behind as they progress through

school. Reading Partners uses data from the National Assessments of Educational Progress to analyze trends in reading achievement, particularly for subgroups such as low-income students (Reading Partners 2012). These assessments are conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, which is part of the U.S. Department of Education (Institute of Education Sciences N.D.). Unlike state standardized testing (e.g. California Standards Test), these assessments do not occur annually but are consistent on a national level, allowing for the comparison of student scores between states (Institute of Education Sciences N.D.).

Assessments completed in 2011 for the National Center for Education Statistics (the last year with data available) show achievement differences based on income level among fourth grade students, as measured through free and reduced-price lunch eligibility in the National School Lunch Program (National Center for Education Statistics 2011). Scores for this assessment are on a scale from 0-500, with free lunch eligible students in the fourth grade scoring an average of 29 points lower than students who are ineligible based on income and reduced-price lunch eligible students scoring 17 points lower than ineligible students (National Center for Education Statistics 2011). These differences remain despite slight across-the-board increases in scores for fourth grade students since 2009, with non-eligible students increasing by 3 points and 2 point increases for both free and reduced-price lunch eligible students (National Center for Education Statistics 2012). It is these students that Reading Partners seeks to target when it partners with low-income schools, with this status determined by whether the school receives Title I education funding. This funding comes from the federal government and “provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards” (U.S. Department of Education N.D.).

In order to address discrepancies between existing student reading levels and the level at which they are expected to be reading, Reading Partners assesses student progress both in terms of narrowing the gap between their reading skills and grade level expectations as well as the extent to which they are accelerating their rate of learning (Reading Partners 2012). Students are expected to make one month of progress in their reading skills for each month that they are in school but those who are behind grade level are making less, with “Reading Partners students gaining an average of 0.6 months of reading skills for every month in the classroom” before they begin the program (Reading Partners 2012). Accelerating their rate of learning allows students to eventually begin closing their grade-level gap because they are gaining an increased number of months per month once enrolled in the program.

In order to accomplish this, Reading Partners has students in the program work with volunteers twice per week. Students are referred to the program by their teachers or school administrators and assessed to determine their placement within the curriculum. Volunteers choose from session times established by the program that are based on a particular school’s schedule, coming in for one or more 45 minute sessions of tutoring per week. The organization engages in outreach efforts to recruit community volunteers from high schools, colleges, local corporations and other sources both online and in-person. Once in the program, volunteers use the Reading Partners curriculum to work with students, focusing primarily on phonics or comprehension skills depending on where the student has been assessed. On-site staff members coordinate the tutoring, communicate with teachers and other school staff, and monitor student progress over the course of the program year.

*Conducting an Ethnographic Evaluation of Volunteer Experiences*

An anthropological perspective has much to offer an evaluation of the experiences of Reading Partners volunteers. Davidson quotes Scriven's definition of evaluation, which is "defined as the systematic determination of the quality or value of something" (2005:1). This process is usually undertaken with the intent to "find areas for improvement and/or to generate an assessment of *overall* quality or value (usually for reporting or decision-making purposes)" (Davidson 2005:2). An analysis of the experiences of tutors with Reading Partners also shares characteristics with other situations where anthropology can be applied productively:

Whatever the specifics may be, the situation to be studied always involves populations with internal variation, where some of the people engaged in the joint purpose have expectations and an outlook that is different from that of others in the enterprise; one that can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts that threaten the overall functioning of the institution. [Goldschmidt 2001:425]

While tutors generally reported positively upon their tutoring experience, using ethnographic evaluation allows for a more nuanced understanding of tutor perspectives on their own terms, regardless of the degree to which they might diverge from those held by organizational staff. Such an approach is particularly important because these differences have the potential to create the sort of conflicts or misunderstandings mentioned by Goldschmidt. This approach allows ethnographic methods to be used to evaluate the experiences of Reading Partners tutors and build upon their perspectives for consideration in future organizational planning.

Using ethnographic evaluation for this project is also consistent with other research done on volunteerism in a variety of disciplines, including not only anthropology but also psychology and sociology. Musick and Wilson's argument for the greater structural orientation found in a sociological approach (as opposed to psychological) can also be applied to the use of anthropology in such studies. The authors state that "the psychological approach often lacks this structural dimension, treating volunteer work as if it took place in the social vacuum" (2008:68).

By using an ethnographic approach we are interested in the social factors that are not only a part of why a volunteer joins the organization in the first place but also help them to understand their experience as a volunteer. As Spradley explains, “The essential core of ethnography is this concern with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand” (1979:5). While these perspectives may not coincide with the official views of Reading Partners or viewpoints of staff members within the organization, they nonetheless require careful consideration because they represent the way that volunteers conceive of the world both in and out of Reading Partners. As Musick and Wilson point out, tutors with Reading Partners do not exist within a social vacuum once they are in a reading center but are instead influenced in their tutoring by their broader experiences outside the organization. Understanding tutor experiences from their perspectives without imposing outside assumptions is an important consideration in terms of future organizational planning because the gap between tutor understandings of their experiences and organizational understanding of those same experiences can create tensions and misunderstandings. These misunderstandings can negatively impact the tutor experience and ultimately the service they provide to students. This in turn can result in a lowering of tutor retention rates if the quality of the tutor experience declines and volunteers do not feel their voices are being heard.

#### *Use of the Empowerment Evaluation Model to Enhance Student Progress Monitoring*

Based on the data collected from Reading Partners volunteers the empowerment evaluation model stood out as a way to build upon their feedback and apply this information to improve the tutoring experience. Over the course of the study it became clear that a tutor’s ability to measure student progress can contribute substantially to his/her perception that he/she is having an impact on the student he/she is tutoring. While Reading Partners does assessments of

students throughout the school year, tutors have adopted their own personal measures to determine if their students are making progress on a daily basis. Building capacity for evaluation among tutors can provide increased monitoring of student progress while also allowing tutors to better measure their impacts. Tutors from one school site came together over the issue of knowing what their students are learning in a forum that drew on the methods and theory of empowerment evaluation. They shared their strategies for determining student progress as well as some of the challenges they face in trying to do so.

The use of this model within the Reading Partners context was limited by time constraints yet still provided valuable information for the organization as well as the tutors (based on their subsequent feedback). The empowerment evaluation steps of creating a mission statement, taking stock, and creating goals for the future were adapted to fit the time available as well as the focus of this particular forum. While this initial use of empowerment evaluation yielded positive results it also demonstrated the potential benefit that processes undertaken in this spirit could have if integrated more regularly into the Reading Partners schedule. Tutors are able to connect with each other, provide important feedback to the organization as well as becoming more involved in it, and apply the knowledge they take away from the session in their tutoring. More extensive use of the goal-setting process could also have positive results by helping tutors use evidence to measure student progress and other aspects of the Reading Partners program to improve the service provided to the students. While the complete use of empowerment evaluation and the space it requires for self-determination may not be immediately applicable within Reading Partners it is worthwhile to consider how participatory processes for tutors could be incorporated within the organization's structure.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### *Research Design*

This project was designed to increase understanding of the experiences of Reading Partners tutors through an ethnographic approach, allowing for programmatic enhancements to improve these experiences as well as facilitate tutor recruitment and retention. Given the diverse regions in which Reading Partners sites are located the research was structured to gain the perspectives of tutors from different schools in a manner that was still feasible for conducting in-person interviews. Dean Elson and Salleha Chaudhry were consulted during the 2011-12 program year in order to choose three Bay Area sites with a variety of tutor recruitment and retention scenarios as well as geographic locations. The three sites chosen were located in Redwood City, Santa Clara, and San Jose. Although the Reading Partners site in Santa Clara has since closed all interviews were completed prior to this event.

Conversational ethnographic interviews with volunteers from these three sites were conducted from late August to late November 2012. At the beginning of this research the goal was to interview seven participants from each school for a total of 21 semi-structured interviews. No minors were interviewed in the course of this study, although Reading Partners does work with tutors as young as 14. The research design and recruitment protocol used to contact tutors were approved by the San Jose State University Institutional Review Board (IRB Protocol S1202130). Each participant was given a \$5.00 gift card for his/her participation in the study.

### *Participant Recruitment and Demographics*

Study participants were contacted using Reading Partners data and information from site coordinators (and the Program Coordinator in Redwood City) for the 2011-12 program year. This information from site coordinators included lists of tutors who were active during 2011-12 but were not necessarily returning for 2012-13. The objective in contacting former tutors was to

understand what factors influence a volunteer's decision to leave the program. An understanding of why tutors choose to leave could be best obtained by speaking with tutors who had actually made the decision to discontinue their tutoring, just as Musick and Wilson argue that both volunteers and non-volunteers must be studied to understand volunteer motivation (2008). Three participants said they were not planning on returning, although two would reconsider if there was a convenient location or time in their schedule respectively. One other tutor responded that she might return for 2012-13 and another is now working for Reading Partners as a site coordinator. Volunteers were contacted using the phone script approved by the IRB to ask if they were interested in participating in the study as well as informing them of the voluntary nature of their participation. If a tutor did not answer the phone call a message was left with the option to call back if he/she was interested in being interviewed. In this respect, there was a degree of self-selection involved as tutors could choose to decline participation or not return the phone call.

By the end of the study a total of 21 participants were interviewed. The final summary of participants had eight volunteers from the Redwood City site, six from San Jose, and seven from Santa Clara. It is also important to note that the majority of the interviews took place as tutoring was resuming after the summer break. At the beginning of the semester the San Jose site's tutor base was more heavily composed of minors than the other two sites, meaning it had a smaller pool of possible participants. Overall, I found that I made more phone calls for the same number of interviews for the school in San Jose as compared to the other two sites. Out of the 21 interviews completed, 19 were in-person at a location of the participant's choosing with the remainder completed over the phone at the participant's request. In these two cases prior arrangements were made to provide participants with the consent forms.

The majority of participants in this study were aged between 18-30 years old (ten participants) and 51-70 years old (nine participants). Only one participant was aged from 41-50 years old with none falling into the 31-40 range. The youngest participant was 19 years old and the oldest 69 years old. One tutor was not asked her age, giving a total of 20 respondents for this question. Over the course of the interviews, participants were also asked directly or provided information independently about what they do in their time outside of Reading Partners. Based on these responses, tutors could be considered in terms of three main categories, which are retirees, those who are working, and students. It is important to note that almost every student also mentioned working so there is a high degree of overlap in this area although I have labeled them separately. Tutors were fairly evenly divided into these categories with eight retirees and six each of student and working tutors. There were again 20 respondents for this question.

Contacting the tutors at the beginning of the 2012-13 program year had an impact on who participated in the interviews. Numerous tutors were contacted before tutoring began for the year at their school site, which meant they already had at least their experience from the previous semester to inform their responses. While this meant that none of the participants were new recruits for the 2012-13 program year there was still variation in the amount of time volunteers had tutored prior to the study. Out of the 20 participants who answered a question about how long they had been tutoring, the mean response was two and a half semesters prior to the start of Fall 2012. Two semesters was the most frequently occurring response from tutors. The amount of time spent volunteering was calculated in semesters given tutors varying perceptions of what one year was within the program. Some tutors counted a program year as such (e.g. Fall 2011-Spring 2012 as one year) while others used calendar years (e.g. Spring 2012-Fall 2012). Reading

Partners' policy is to have tutors to start on a rolling basis during a given semester as they express interest in doing so, which leads to variability in responses as a result.

All tutors were also asked how many sessions per week they volunteer with Reading Partners. Eleven participants volunteer for one session per week, which is the minimum commitment requested by the organization when tutors join the program. Six tutors reported tutoring four or more sessions per week and another anticipated doing so during 2012-13. However, one of these tutors was a work study student with the program, meaning that his hours were also being compensated. Four tutors expressed variability in the number of sessions they tutor, either within a semester or between program years. In the former case, the tutor might volunteer to take extra sessions as-needed when he has time to do so. Other tutors who changed their number of sessions did so because they started out with a more limited commitment to see the impact of tutoring on their schedule and then increased this commitment either during the semester or for the next year as they saw it would be possible for them. All three tutors who reported increasing their sessions as time went on—as opposed to the tutor who added additional sessions week-to-week—were returning, suggesting that there are opportunities to increase the commitment of tutors over time if they remain with the program.

This coincides with research on volunteerism that indicates weighing costs is an important part of the process for potential volunteers when determining how to give their time (Musick and Wilson 2008). Musick and Wilson explain that this assessment of costs when volunteering (e.g. travel, financial outlay, etc.) is a subjective process that varies based on the individual (2008). This is no less true for costs in terms of time because “it is determined by the value placed on other uses of that time,” which will vary based on the activities and volunteer (Musick and Wilson 2008:115). Volunteers may choose to increase the amount of time they

spend tutoring once they begin and can better assess the costs and benefits. This thought process was explained by one tutor who was increasing the number of sessions she is tutoring for this year: “I did the spring semester of last school year and just did one hour a week to get started. I didn’t want to over-commit myself and then have to call in and cancel or whatever. I really enjoyed it.” Another tutor explains how she focuses on the costs (specifically the lack thereof) when encouraging others to volunteer with Reading Partners. This tutor particularly prioritizes speaking to peers about the one-on-one attention received by the children of these peers and that students in Reading Partners may not be receiving at home. She explains:

The people I talk to know that [it’s important] and so it’s simply a matter of letting them know that this organization exists, it’s a walk-on part, you don’t have to have any specialized training, it doesn’t cost you anything, you don’t have to make a huge commitment. And that it’s all setup: you can walk in and do it and give these kids what your kids got.

As this comment indicates, having tutors feel that the startup costs of participation with Reading Partners are minimal helps them get in the door so they can experience the program for themselves and make their own assessment about the amount of time they can commit. In this early period as tutors are deciding whether or not to participate it may be the costs that are most obvious because the positive feelings that can result as a benefit from tutoring are far less tangible. Once tutors are able to better measure these costs through their participation they can determine if they are able to tutor more sessions in the future.

### *Methods*

The primary research method used for this study was semi-structured ethnographic interviewing, which allowed for a consistent core of questions to be asked of all volunteers while also providing flexibility to ask additional questions as relevant. Reading Partners collects quantitative program data, including regular surveys of volunteers, which I considered in

addition to the qualitative data I collected. Questions were organized around the following themes (see Appendix A for the full list of core questions):

1. Background questions for demographic information and basic information about Reading Partners involvement
2. Day-to-day tutoring experiences
3. Perceptions of success
4. Communication
5. Appreciation
6. Reading Partners as an organization
7. Interpersonal connections

These interviews ranged in length from 30-75 minutes. With the permission of the participants, 20 of these interviews were audio-recorded (the only exception being an equipment issue on the part of the researcher). The majority of tutors are strictly volunteers with the program, with the exception of the work study student and current site coordinator (a former tutor) mentioned previously.

#### *Comments on Research Design and Methodology*

After completing the research portion of this project I was able to reflect on the challenges and advantages of the approach that I took. One of the main challenges I encountered in this project involved the phone calls for tutor recruitment. While I communicated with Reading Partners staff at each site to explain the project, the tutors were not familiar with me when I contacted them about participation. Although this strategy worked out well for providing a more random sample—as opposed to tutors who might have come forward had a group been asked—it would have been simplified with a greater effort to notify tutors at each school of the

project so they would have a context for my subsequent call. However, this was also a challenge in terms of timing as numerous tutors were contacted before they had started tutoring again for the year and thus had minimal communication with the organization at that time. Nonetheless, I was able to meet my initial research goal for the total number of interviews even with this “cold-calling” approach for recruiting tutors.

Participant observation is a notable ethnographic method that was excluded from this study due to time and consent constraints. Since volunteers work with elementary school students the process of obtaining consent from all stakeholders, including school administration and parents of students, was not feasible given the timeframe of the project. Data provided from the interviews also fulfilled the goals of the project in terms of understanding the experiences of tutors from their own perspectives. Through my job I observe, tutor, and communicate with volunteers on a regular basis so in that respect I could understand the specifics volunteers were referring to in their interviews without additional observation.

My position with Reading Partners provided an advantage in these interviews while also presenting challenges based on my assumptions about tutoring. It helped to legitimize my asking for interviews when I made calls because tutors understood that I was part of the organization. In addition, it allowed me to share my own experiences working with students and build rapport with the participants. However, my perspective as an organization staff member also created assumptions that played out in my interviews. One example would be my early assumption that tutors would be highly interested in feeling connected with the Reading Partners organization beyond their local school site. While this might be an important idea for me as a staff member it turned out to be of lesser importance for tutors. After a few interviews I realized the problems

with this assumption and worked to adjust my questions as the project progressed to more accurately reflect the experiences of the participants.

## **Summary of Client Report Findings**

### *The Importance of Tutor Impact*

When tutors consider their experiences volunteering with Reading Partners, their desire to make a positive impact comes through as a central theme that can help in understanding their perceptions of other aspects of the experience. Tutors who volunteer with Reading Partners are there to make a difference for students, just as volunteers with other organizations are seeking to make an impact. Musick and Wilson quote Mansbridge to underscore the importance of impacts for volunteers, paraphrasing the sentiment that “. . .I am less likely to act if I conclude that my actions are not likely to have a positive effect or that a small positive effect will be offset by major personal costs” (2008:114). The authors further argue that volunteers select an organization based partially on the extent to which they feel that the organization will “make good use of their time” (2008:104). Tutors, like volunteers more broadly, come into Reading Partners wanting to have a positive impact on the students they are working with, which allows them to feel that their time is being used productively.

This was clear in responses to several questions I asked volunteers during the interviews, including what makes them feel successful as tutors. As one tutor explained, “For me, my success is his success, right? I would judge my success on—I guess the factors would be his interest, proficiency, whether or not they get any better in quality of reading.” Garner and Garner (citing Boezeman and Ellemers) comment that two of the key factors in a volunteer’s commitment to an organization are their perceptions of the extent to which their work is important and the support offered by the organization (2011:814). In the Reading Partners

context, tutors often associate their impacts with the importance of literacy skills for children throughout their lives while simultaneously looking to the organization to provide them with the support to make these impacts possible. Taking this idea of maximizing impacts as the framework for understanding responses about other aspects of tutoring contextualizes the experiences of volunteers with Reading Partners.

### *Differentiating Between Good and Bad Sessions*

All tutors were asked to describe the factors that in their experience contribute to a positive tutoring session. In order to better understand what aspects of a session cause the tutor to consider it positive or negative, they were also asked what would indicate that their session was less than ideal. While tutors mentioned a variety of factors influencing their judgment on whether sessions were positive or negative, most of these factors were related to student engagement and focus while at Reading Partners. This topic came up in almost every interview as an indicator of a positive session when students were engaged in the lesson and with the tutor as well as on-task. It was an indicator of a more negative session when the student was distracted and unable to focus on the task at hand. A tutor explains:

The best sessions would be probably when the student was actually engaged and not distracted. I had a few kids that were constantly distracted. But when they were actually on topic, engaged—and also they actually like the story. That was another good thing too because if they were reading something that they just had no interest in or they didn't like that was also a bummer.

The significance of student engagement and focus for determining good or bad sessions is particularly relevant when considered in terms of tutor impact. If tutors feel students are distracted and not paying attention to the lesson it makes it very difficult for them to perceive that they are having an impact on the student's reading progress. Tutors also reported that a student's understanding of the material is important for their perception of how well the session

went. Understanding the material and retaining it from one session to the next are tangible markers that the tutor is having an impact on the student but both become much more difficult to achieve when the student is disengaged. Tutors enjoy their sessions more when students show a positive attitude toward the work that they are doing, indicating that they are receptive to what the tutor is trying to teach them. A tutor commented that her student, “was very eager to learn and most of the sessions went pretty well. It was rewarding for both of us when sessions went well. I felt like my time spent was worthwhile and that she was getting something out of it.”

This quotation summarizes the importance of student engagement in allowing tutors to feel that their time at Reading Partners is worthwhile because they are making an impact on students. When students struggle to stay focused or lack motivation to participate in the lessons, tutors become more disconnected from their personal impact. As this tutor indicates, an eager-to-learn student provides an opportunity not only for a positive session but also the sense that an impact has been made. While tutors recognize that there are many factors affecting student focus in Reading Partners it is still a central issue not only for distinguishing between good or bad sessions but also the extent to which tutors perceive they are making a difference. Accordingly, it is a worthwhile consideration in numerous decisions including targeting tutor and site coordinator training to address challenges with student focus and motivation as well as designing the room layout to minimize environmental distractions.

#### *What Makes a Good Site Coordinator?*

The role of the site coordinator is also important for ensuring that tutors have a positive experience while at Reading Partners. Site coordinators function not only as the “face” of the organization for many tutors but also set the tone when they enter a reading center. As one tutor

explained, the site coordinator is a key part of creating an environment that enhances the positive role of the program at the school:

I had been working in the same school district student teaching for a whole year and [Reading Partners] was a really bright place in the school district that I wish had been at the school I had been at. I was very jaded from student teaching...so to have a place like Reading Partners where the kids could come to was just really beautiful to me. To have this site coordinator who's nice and thoughtful and caring and nice to the tutors and anyone who walked through the door was just something that I thought was super special.

For many tutors, site coordinators are not only the most consistent Reading Partners staff member they come into contact with but also the only one. While the majority of tutors did not object to their lack of contact with other staff, the site coordinator often becomes the single point of contact around which tutors can base their perceptions of the organization and its staff. Tutors spoke very highly of site coordinators and the role they play in making Reading Partners a positive experience. When asked to discuss their connections to site coordinators past and present, one tutor's comment summed up the opinions that I heard frequently: "They're just both very warm people. You can tell they really care and I feel like if I had any issues or problems—again, very open. I would have no hesitation about going and talking to them about it."

This comment touches on another key function of the site coordinator that goes beyond creating a welcoming environment for tutors. Arguably the most important role for a site coordinator from the tutors' point of view is his/her function as a resource to allow tutors to maximize their impact. As one tutor put it, "Having an on-site coordinator really makes it helpful. If I really got stuck, I might just say, 'Hey, can you come over? We're stuck with this.'" Site coordinators allow tutors to improve in their role by connecting them with information they need to work with their students in enhanced ways and overcome challenges they might face.

This in turn allows them to feel that they are making a greater impact because they can turn to the site coordinator for help in making progress with the student when challenges arise.

The value for the majority of tutors in having a site coordinator who returns to the site for multiple years is less in terms of personal attachment as it is recognition of the benefits received from having a more experienced coordinator who knows the school. While site coordinators have the option to reapply to the program after their initial 11-month AmeriCorps term is complete, tutors recognize the tendency toward turnover in the site coordinator position. As another tutor mentioned, “The...two [site coordinators] have just been welcoming and supportive and very clear about the curriculum, organized, efficient, and dedicated to what they’re doing. I always feel very proud of the coordinators that I work with.” As this comment helps illustrate, tutors are focused on particular characteristics of site coordinators that are seen as making them effective in their role, particularly in terms of supporting the tutors in making an impact. In this respect, having a site coordinator return to the site for a second year increases his or her ability to provide resources to the tutor because he/she is already familiar with the program, students, and tutors. The second year site coordinator can thus function as a better resource, providing more individualized and effective support to tutors earlier on in their second year than they could in the first. With the AmeriCorps model, it can be difficult to get such continuity from year-to-year, as site coordinators make a commitment to serve with the program for a year and often move on after that program year is complete.

Some tutors recognized the potential for Program Managers (or Coordinators) to function as a resource in addition to the site coordinator. Each Program Manager (PM) or Coordinator (PC) manages several reading centers in a particular region, visiting the sites on a weekly basis to check in with site coordinators and ensure things are running smoothly at that school. This

includes observation, coaching, and conversation with tutors. In cases where tutors maintain fairly regular contact with the PM/PC they were able to gain additional insight into working with their student. The PM/PC position could potentially be leveraged to fill in the resource gap left when site coordinators do not return for a second year. They are familiar with the students as well as school and can serve to bridge the gap while the new site coordinator becomes acquainted with the circumstances at that school. As a tutor pointed out, managers are not able to completely fill the gap left by a site coordinator because they are not in the center on a daily basis. However, they could be instrumental in easing this transition and providing tutors with the resources they are seeking to feel they are maximizing their impact for students while the new site coordinator is learning the environment.

Site coordinators are also important in terms of making tutors feel appreciated. I asked tutors if they felt appreciated for their work with Reading Partners and while they agreed almost universally that they do, much of this stemmed from their contact with the site coordinator. While PMs and PCs can also fill this role, most tutors had too little interaction with them to feel that they are a regular source of appreciation. Many tutors recounted appreciation efforts centered around students, including mid- and end-of-the-year events designed to bring together tutors, teachers, students, and their families. Thank you cards from students that are organized by the organization were also discussed. In addition, tutors mentioned ways that site coordinators made them feel appreciated through their daily interactions. This is not limited to expressed gratitude but also includes other day-to-day moments of consideration. For instance, when asked whether they felt appreciated by those in the organization one tutor explained that it was support from the PC and site coordinator that made him feel appreciated. In response to being asked about the extent of the appreciation he had experienced, the tutor explained:

I feel like I never had any issues with that. They were always available for questions or thoughts and things like that. Attentive to whatever the needs of the student might have been. Like I mentioned, the first [student] who had those problems at the beginning—I didn't feel like I was alone in dealing with that. Both of them helped and kind of stepped in when it was necessary to do so.

While both the PC and site coordinator played a role in making this tutor feel appreciated it was this kind of day-to-day interaction that was often mentioned by tutors as opposed to an explicit expression of appreciation. Given the Reading Partners' model this affirmation is more likely to come from the site coordinator on a regular basis as opposed to other staff members. Since site coordinators are an important part of making tutors feel appreciated through their daily interaction, this is something that could be worthwhile for the organization to explore in terms of training goals for this position.

#### *Organizational Goals and Primary Functions*

All tutors were also asked to explain what they considered to be Reading Partner's goals and main functions as an organization. The latter question was phrased as "activities" early on but as the interviews progressed it became clear that phrasing this as "functions" made it less confusing. For goals, it was explained that tutors were not expected to produce a restatement of the mission statement but rather to think about what the goals might be based on their experiences with and understanding of the organization. Due to the confusion the question of activities often caused (even rephrased as functions), it was followed up with an example of key functions or activities that I would perceive on the part of San Jose State University from the perspective of a student. The two I selected were providing classes with high quality instruction (something most students would assume to be an activity carried out by the university) and having someone who is easily accessible at the university to answer questions when they come up (personally important to me but not necessarily everyone). By framing my example in this

way the intention was to elicit a range of responses from tutors ranging from the “obvious” to the more individually oriented.

While the question of goals provided a variety of responses from tutors, some of the main themes that arose were bringing students up to grade level in reading, getting them more comfortable with reading, helping as many students as possible, and using reading as a stepping stone for life success. Tutors’ responses corresponded with what they conceived to be their main purpose within the organization in terms of helping students move toward grade level in their reading abilities and helping them gain confidence both at school and in their lives generally. They also reflected on what they saw as being broader organizational goals along the lines of allowing as many students access to the program as possible, which may be a goal of the tutors as well. Finally, tutors’ comments reflected their perspectives on the potential life impacts of Reading Partners beyond reading, such as building confidence. This emphasis on the holistic impacts of Reading Partners and the importance of this aspect of the program for tutors is something that was manifested throughout the interviews. One tutor summarizes the various goals he perceives Reading Partners as having, saying that the organization works at “helping the student with what their needs were in terms of improving their reading skills, improving their speaking skills, and having it be pretty personalized to what their needs were.” Such responses covering several different aspects of the program were common amongst tutors.

The range of responses to the main functions of Reading Partners was also broad. One of the frequently mentioned functions was providing a well-organized curriculum that is easily accessible to tutors and does not require the commitment of a large amount of time outside of Reading Partners in order to be successful (e.g. lesson planning). The fact that the curriculum is updated regularly is also important to tutors to ensure that they have quality tools to use when

working with the students. One of the tutors explained the value of organizing the program in this way, especially compared to her prior expectations:

I think it's pretty much on par with what I expected. If anything, I'd say it's exceeded my expectations. The format of the tutoring sessions and everything, it at least seems that a teacher developed the lesson plan. It's highly organized. It's really nice that the books are already divided out into reading levels. The kids aren't just learning to read but they're also learning a specific lesson that day. So learning how to make inferences or whatever else, that's really nice.

Other functions that came up, albeit less frequently, had to do with Reading Partners' provision of a location for tutoring; its hosting of events to bring together tutors, students, families, and teachers; recruiting tutors and pairing them with students; and providing a quality site coordinator and selection of books.

It is also important to note what tutors did not mention as goals and essential functions of Reading Partners. Tutors did not mention that it was necessarily an important function of Reading Partners to facilitate increased contact between tutors. While this did come up in suggestions from various tutors, it was not recognized as being a core function of the organization. Similarly, learning more about education or the challenges facing the education system in the United States was not mentioned in the interviews. For many tutors, their involvement may relate to the fact that they already identify issues in education and their volunteer work with Reading Partners is the way they are addressing them. This is in contrast to an idea of Reading Partners involvement as a springboard to greater educational activism. While tutors did not reject such activism it is clear that this is not an issue that currently engages the volunteers I interviewed. Since Reading Partners has an interest in engaging volunteers in a broader movement toward educational reform in the future, it is clear that additional efforts on the part of the organization would need to take place beyond what is currently occurring to achieve this goal.

### *Reading Partners' Service Model versus Tutor Reciprocity*

One of the central findings of this study is a degree of disjuncture in the way that Reading Partners considers its engagement with tutors and the way tutors perceive their involvement with the organization. Within Reading Partners, volunteers are often seen as the recipients of a service provided by the organization. The organization provides a service to the students who receive the tutoring as well as to the volunteers in the form of their tutoring experience. This experience can include personal benefits for the volunteer, not least of which is the relationship he or she may build with the student. To understand this idea of the volunteer experience as a service produced by Reading Partners it is helpful to consider it within the literature on service design. At the foundation of this literature is a fundamental separation between goods and services traditionally based on four key characteristics of services, which are intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability (Zeithaml et al. 1985). While more recent research in the field of services has added to and critiqued these characteristics (see Sangiorgi 2011), they are highly applicable to understanding the idea of Reading Partners tutoring as a service provided by the organization. Although there are services being provided at multiple levels, including from both the organization and tutors to students (the actual tutoring) and from the organization to tutors (the tutor experience), it is important to consider how these services are interpreted differently by the various stakeholders. This is particularly true for the differences in emphasis that occur between tutors and the organization when considering the production of the tutoring experience.

When understanding tutoring as a service provided to volunteers, it is useful to think not just about the way these four characteristics are manifested in the organization but also the ways that Reading Partners has adapted to the unique aspects of services. As Zeithaml et al. suggest in their piece, organizations may be more focused on efforts to address these challenges instead of

the challenges themselves because they have already internalized them as an inherent part of providing a service (1985). Thus, thinking about the steps the organization has taken to address issues related to the four characteristics can shed light on the existence of these characteristics within the tutoring experience, assisting in an understanding of tutoring as a service produced by Reading Partners for consumption by volunteers.

One of the key differences between goods and services is intangibility, which is the idea that “services are performances, rather than objects, they cannot be seen, felt, tasted, or touched in the same manner in which goods can be sensed” (Zeithaml et al. 1985:33). The tutoring experience, like the experiences of volunteers in numerous other contexts, is highly intangible. Reading Partners has worked to address the potential challenges that can arise from intangibility by using some of the strategies discussed by Zeithaml et al. in their piece. In the area of intangibility, promoting word-of-mouth communication and a strong organizational image are among the key strategies recognized by the authors that are also being undertaken by Reading Partners (Zeithaml et al. 1985). For instance, the organization works to cultivate word-of-mouth communication by asking volunteers to reach out to members of their networks who might be interested in tutoring, recognizing this as an important form of recruitment because of the insight that tutors can provide about their experiences. A strong organizational image is cultivated through standardization across reading centers, use of the Reading Partners logo and other branding efforts that help tutors perceive their experiences as those of a distinctly *Reading Partners* tutor.

The characteristic of inseparability holds that services are produced and consumed at the same time (Zeithaml et al. 1985). Zeithaml et al. quote Carmen and Langeard in their observation that “inseparability ‘forces the buyer into intimate contact with the production process’”

(1985:34). The act of tutoring is consumed by staff, tutors, and students as it is being produced. Due to this inseparability, those who are in contact with consumers play an important role in the quality of the service, something that can be seen in the importance of the Reading Partners site coordinator to the experiences of tutors. Similarly, the literature suggests that attention to the training of “public contact personnel” and management of consumers is an important way to address the challenges arising from inseparability (Zeithaml et al. 1985). Reading Partners trains site coordinators to work with volunteers and makes sure that site coordinators have expertise in the program to be able to effectively communicate it to tutors.

Heterogeneity refers to variation between different services and between the perceptions of different consumers about the same service (Zeithamal et al. 1985). Both of these factors are important in terms of the tutor experience with Reading Partners. First, the quality of the service comes through as a consideration for tutors as they compare their tutoring with experiences volunteering with other organizations. Positives that exist for Reading Partners in comparison to these other experiences include the organization and quality of the curriculum, the ability to be an effective tutor without having to put in extensive independent preparation ahead of sessions, and opportunities for personalization. Tutors who took part in other tutoring programs in the past were able to identify differences in both the “essence and quality” of these experiences (Zeithaml et al. 1985:34). Differences in perceptions of the service between volunteers are also an important consideration for the organization. Zeithaml et al. incorporate the analysis of Levitt, who suggests that one strategy for dealing with this challenge is to utilize “specific techniques to substitute organized preplanned systems for individual service operations...: this strategy is the opposite of customization” (1985:35). The use of a consistent Reading Partners curriculum is one example of this type of strategy within the organization. Instead of having tutors create their own

lesson plans, the materials provided by the organization not only make the process simple for participants but also help to give their experiences consistency.

The final characteristic of a service that is addressed by Reading Partners is that of perishability. This characteristic centers on the idea that services, unlike goods, cannot be stored or saved for later use (Zeithaml et al. 1985). Like the other characteristics of services, this is also applicable for the tutoring experience with Reading Partners, which is something that can only be consumed at the particular time when the tutor is working with the student. A main issue arising from this characteristic is that of differences between supply and demand, so Zeithaml et al. identify the strategy of making adjustments to demand and capacity as an important one for organizations providing services (1985). This can be seen at Reading Partners, where demand for the tutoring experience fluctuates at different times during the year and the “supply” of students referred for tutoring may be higher at times when there are few tutors available. To address this challenge, site coordinators may become involved in outreach efforts to recruit tutors when the supply of students is high and demand is low or they might have tutors start as substitutes without being assigned a specific student, particularly toward the end of the semester when the supply of new students is low but demand for taking part in tutoring may have increased.

Within the service sector, Bryson et al. identify various types of services present in the contemporary economy, which is useful for further contextualizing tutoring as a service provided to volunteers (2004). One type of service identified by the authors is that of the experiential service, which they define as needing the “presence of the customer or user who expects to experience something tangible or intangible” (Bryson et al. 2004:33). In the case of Reading Partners, the organization is built around volunteers who begin tutoring expecting to have a particular experience. While this expectation is shaped by their previous life experiences, it is

also influenced by the information the organization communicates to the potential tutor about what their role will involve. Furthermore, this service fits within what Sangiorgi argues is a general shift in the way services are conceived of, in which they “are no longer considered as an end in themselves but are increasingly considered as an engine for wider societal transformations” (2011:30). Reading Partners utilizes the service it is providing to tutors and students in an effort to make social change, allowing tutors to share in this understanding of the service and further shape their expectations for the role.

Like volunteers throughout the nonprofit sector, tutors at Reading Partner have their work “set out according to the rules, procedures, and practices of the host organization” (Barnes and Sharpe 2009:180). While tutors are able to embellish upon the curriculum and are regularly surveyed to make programmatic adjustments, their work is nonetheless bounded by the materials provided by the organization as well as coaching and training to make sure these materials are utilized optimally. This also helps ensure the experiences of tutors are standardized throughout Reading Partners, which is important for the organization as a service provider. In addition to trying to create a more consistent tutor experience these boundaries are designed to facilitate tutor impacts, especially for those who do not have a background in education. Reading Partners uses its curriculum to transfer literacy instruction knowledge from educators within the organization to all tutors regardless of background, which is fundamentally important given the organization’s responsibility to also facilitate a service for students. The curriculum provides tutors with a system for working with students that is built in part on the five pillars of literacy (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) identified by the National Reading Panel in its report on reading instruction (Cassidy et al. 2010). By providing specific activities based around these areas of instruction as well as corresponding texts, tutors

are given the tools to provide their service to improve students' reading abilities. Although tutors are positioned as the recipients of this knowledge, it also allows them to create impacts they would not necessarily be able to make without the expertise of the organization. In this way, Reading Partners can make a solid argument for using a model that provides volunteers with an experiential service while requesting that they follow a set of guidelines in order to facilitate impacts.

### *Tutor Reciprocity*

Tutors do not necessarily perceive their relationship with the organization in the same way that Reading Partners does. Their views on the interaction with Reading Partners are often focused more on a reciprocal relationship with the organization that results in a greater balance of power in the exchange between tutors and Reading Partners. This conceptualization looks not just at the services being provided but also takes into account the relationships that are built in the process, which are often viewed as mutually beneficial. Reciprocity is important to consider within Reading Partners in terms of both tutor-student relationships and the relationship of the tutor with the organization. Lebra characterizes reciprocity as an interaction between two parties who transfer something (X) between themselves (1975). The relationship between the two parties is of fundamental importance in reciprocity: "The particular X transferred may well be an economically measurable commodity, or a piece of objective information, but it inevitably transmits, or becomes converted into, a social value which governs, manifests or changes the relationship between [the two parties]" (Lebra 1975:550). The act of volunteering to tutor a student creates meaning around this action for the tutor, while tutor interactions with the organization reveal another sort of reciprocal relationship where a service is exchanged for the resources to make an impact.

Reciprocity between the student and tutor is focused on the service provided by the tutor and the personal benefits that they receive from doing so. Wuthnow argues that volunteerism represents a combination of both tangible and intangible benefits obtained by the recipient (1991). He cites the example of a tutor working with a student, commenting that the tutoring is a “discrete commodity or object that he transfers to his student [that] has both real and symbolic value” because it not only provides the student with education but also shows them caring (1991:89). This coincides with Lebra’s conception of reciprocity, where the nature of the relationship creates symbolic value around a tangible object or service such as tutoring (1975). Tutors related to the idea of the dualistic nature of tutoring where both discrete skills and less tangible benefits are transferred to the student. One tutor explained how working with their student went beyond simply teaching them reading skills:

I think he just really needed someone to listen to him on some stuff. I think that’s what would benefit the student, at least. It’s not just about learning to your grade but I think it’s the ability to have that bond with them and let them know, “Hey, I’m here for you.”

Within this reciprocal relationship with students the tutors also perceive themselves as receiving benefits, which are often intertwined with perceptions of impacts. A tutor explains how this aspect of her tutoring experience came as a surprise: “I didn’t realize I was going to grow a connection with her as much as I did. So that was good. It definitely exceeded my expectations. I wasn’t sure how to help her learn or not and she actually did learn a lot. So I was glad it was successful.” These personal connections with the student are an important part of what tutors feel they receive as a benefit from their tutoring. Tutors can also gain a feeling of success from their tutoring, especially when they perceive an impact from their efforts.

Reciprocity has additional importance for tutors in their interaction with the organization. At this level the reciprocal exchange becomes far more focused on maximizing the impacts for

students. Tutors exchange the service they provide the student for the resources that Reading Partners provides to allow them the possibility of that service as well as the ability to then further their impact. Yet this sense of exchange is based on tutors' feelings that they are making a contribution to the tutoring process, which serves to differentiate their experiences from that of simply service recipients. Tutors do not merely reiterate verbatim the materials that they are provided by the organization. Instead, they value the opportunities to use their life experiences and background knowledge to inform the way they approach the curriculum. As one tutor explained about her Reading Partners experience:

You get challenged. Some places you volunteer you get challenged and other places it's like, "Well, you may have ideas but here are our ideas," and it's like "Alright, *whatever*." I like the fact that while we have your ideas and they are the crux our brains are worth something too. I like that. There's a challenge for me just interacting with each kid, figuring out her or his problem.

Tutors appreciate the individualization they are able to add to the program through their personal connection with the students and understanding of their unique needs. This gives tutors a greater sense of ownership over their impacts as opposed to just following the curriculum without supplementation. It is also a fundamental part of what tutors see themselves as bringing to the program in this reciprocal exchange.

In return for the individualized service they provide for the students, tutors perceive that they are receiving resources and support in their endeavors—including in the form of the site coordinator—as well as the logistical know-how that Reading Partners brings to the relationship. This can also affect tutors' sense of feeling appreciated because they see what they are doing as part of an exchange in which they already receive a satisfactory amount in return. Tutors generally did not feel they needed further appreciation shown to them beyond what is already

being done, suggesting that their conception of this exchange is a factor in feeling that they are already getting plenty out of their involvement with the organization. As another tutor put it:

Personally I feel like it's the gift that I give so I don't expect anything back. Just having the plan, the organization, having the politics of getting them in the schools—I understand all the drama that must go on [laughs]. And the funding. But no, I get satisfied just doing it and the [site coordinators] that I've dealt with are all really good.

Although this tutor does not require a demonstration of appreciation to feel that the reciprocal exchange is fulfilled she does feel that she is receiving something from Reading Partners in the form of logistics. Tutors reported understanding when they signed up as volunteers that they were giving their time and thus not feeling a need for additional appreciation, as this tutor's comment also demonstrates.

While reciprocity involves an exchange between two parties it does not guarantee that what is exchanged by each side is “equal” in an objective sense (Lebra 1975). This is also important to consider in terms of the reciprocity that takes place between tutors and Reading Partners. Research on reciprocity explores two different forms, which are symmetrical and asymmetrical (Lebra 1975). In the former case the items being exchanged have the same value, which is not true in the latter case. It is this latter situation that becomes relevant in the exchange between tutors and the organization. As Lebra states:

Reciprocal alliance is likely to emerge between the actors whose assets and liabilities are mutually contrasting. The person who needs help is ready to be allied with a person who wants help. Dependency need is gratified by the need for being depended upon and vice versa. [1975:557]

As the earlier tutor quotation indicates, this statement is particularly applicable to the tutor-organization relationship. Reciprocity between tutors and the organization is possible because each is exchanging what the other needs or values. The organization is able to provide tutors with the logistical considerations, materials, and school partnerships necessary to enable the

volunteer's service. On the other hand, the Reading Partners model does not make it possible for staff to have the impact alone that they are able to have with volunteers. As in Lebra's comment, Reading Partners depends on tutors just as tutors can benefit from the "need for being depended upon" (1975). While this point is certainly relevant to a variety of organizations that utilize volunteers it is important in this case because this perception of reciprocity is clear on the part of tutors and takes less precedence where the organization is concerned.

Understanding tutors' perceptions of their involvement with Reading Partners in terms of a reciprocal exchange can help orient the organization toward a more asset-based perception of tutors to complement the service model. Instead of thinking narrowly about the service the organization provides to tutors as far as facilitating their volunteer experience, this orientation takes into account tutor understandings of what they bring to their tutoring when they volunteer. Tutors feel that their life experiences and understanding of the students enhance their ability to tutor, which are considerations that Reading Partners can build upon in negotiating a more balanced relationship with tutors that is further aligned with the one they themselves perceive with the organization. While this is not to say that tutors do not also need guidance and support it does give greater credence to what they bring to the organization. Both the service model and reciprocity can be seen within the tutor experience at Reading Partners but the extent to which one is perceived to be accentuated over the other depends on one's position in the organization. As Reading Partners continues to expand, the implications of failing to take this into account in terms of future goals and objectives become more serious.

Much of this is due to the fact that tutors do not see themselves as necessarily lacking in their abilities as service-providing tutors. While a number of tutors suggested that the more they could learn to improve their tutoring the better, others were satisfied with their current tutoring

abilities and felt that the structure of the curriculum made the process easy enough that they did not need additional support. Since tutors are in the position of ultimately providing the service to students, this will be enhanced if they feel empowered in their role and perceive they have something valuable to contribute to the tutoring. At this time, tutors certainly feel this is the case but this may not be so if the organization were to require increased adherence to the curriculum. Tutors mentioned the unhappiness that they would feel if they ever felt that the organization were “getting in the way” of their tutoring by imposing rules that they perceived as unnecessary to their efforts to provide a quality service and make an impact on students. Guidelines that are seen as facilitating tutor impacts may be viewed as beneficial as opposed to those that tutors perceive to impose barriers to the successful execution of their tutoring. This also corresponds with the previous tutor’s comment that Reading Partners is an organization that accepts the ideas of its tutors instead of imposing its own strategies unilaterally. Furthermore, it suggests that while Reading Partners could achieve success in terms of curriculum adherence, the organization could in turn find that tutors do not feel invested in their work or enjoy the experience as they did before, decreasing the quality of their experience and potentially the service they are providing to the students.

#### *Local Engagement and Organizational Disconnect*

As Reading Partners continues its national expansion, the issue of local engagement coexisting with disconnect from the broader organization will persist in its significance. The experience of tutoring at Reading Partners is an intensely localized one for volunteers. They are connected with the students and site coordinators at individual schools but see themselves as having little interaction with the broader Reading Partners organization. As one tutor explained, “I appreciate the organization, I appreciate the progress reports. I’m there for the students so my

connection is the students.” Even when asked about organizational connections, volunteers frequently still refer to the organization at the local level, such as expressing an interest in potentially gathering more feedback from other tutors at the center or feeling like a part of the organization when they attend an end-of-year event. It took further probing to get to the point where tutors were considering the organization beyond their school.

While some tutors expressed an interest in what happens at the upper levels of the organization, others were uninterested. Tutors are primarily concerned with making an impact on the students they tutor and appreciate the functions that enable them to do this successfully. The other logistics might be appreciated but don’t necessarily need to be known for tutors to succeed. One tutor explains their sentiments on this issue:

I don’t need to spend a lot of time bonding with the organization itself. It’s the kids and the lessons and the site coordinators all working together that counts. I didn’t sign up to be part of some sort of Junior League organization where I spend time socializing with other members just so we can bond.

While it is possible that tutors can be oriented more organizationally and there was no evidence to suggest resistance to this idea, this is not currently valued by tutors. Instead, they are locally-oriented to the point that the broader organization is rendered unimportant because it is not seen as directly contributing to impacts with students on the ground.

### **Application of the Empowerment Evaluation Model**

When looking for ways to apply the information gathered from my interviews with Reading Partners tutors I wanted to design a project that would focus on the issue of student progress monitoring. Being able to measure students’ progress is an important way for tutors to track their impact but can be difficult on a day-to-day basis. The organization assesses students at the beginning, middle, and end of the year and uses this data to provide specific suggestions to volunteers about areas of focus for their individual students. While tutors often cite using these

assessment scores to determine their student's progress, the time between these assessments is frequently marked by ad hoc efforts to gauge this progress on a personal level. These efforts are often shaped not only by the student but also by what the tutor considers to be progress, such as the student reading out loud with increased confidence or selecting more challenging books to read. This is important in light of the findings of Andrews et al. in their efforts to use empowerment and other participatory forms of evaluation with community-based organizations, where they found that the personal investment of workers at the organizations led them to "trust their own and their colleagues' informal perceptions of what works and how to make improvements..." over more formal evaluative approaches (2005:96).

While these efforts allow tutors to informally calculate their impact during the semester, the goals selected are not always measurable and do not necessarily coincide with those established by Reading Partners for that student. The findings of Andrews et al. suggest a partial explanation for these conflicts as they found that workers who used their informal perceptions to determine what was working "...are frustrated by requests for external accountability that imply a mistrust for their way of learning" (2005:96). Resistance may result if contradictions exist between the tutor's observations of their student and the observations of organization staff that request tutors modify their tutoring approach accordingly. Building evaluative capacity amongst tutors can help them to better measure their students' progress by reducing the need for informal observations and diminishing the issues that can arise when tutors' perceptions of their students disagree with those of the organization. Tutors are also better able to measure their own impacts in a systematic way.

Through conversation with Dr. Darrah it became clear that an empowerment evaluation model could be used to explore these challenges, giving tutors a voice in addressing the issue of

how a tutor can know what a student is learning from one tutoring session to the next. Fetterman defines empowerment evaluation as the “use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster self-improvement and self-determination” (2001:3). Expanding on this definition while emphasizing outcomes, empowerment evaluation is further defined as:

An evaluation approach that aims to increase the probability of achieving program success by (1) providing program stakeholders with tools for assessing the planning, implementation, and self-evaluation of their program, and (2) mainstreaming evaluation as part of the planning and management of the program/organization. [Wandersman et al.2005: 28]

Further consultation with Dr. Fetterman provided a better understanding of how this process could be adapted to fit the needs of Reading Partners and its volunteers.

It was necessary to consider constraints such as time while remaining focused on the spirit of this evaluative process. The goal was to have this session early during the spring semester so both volunteers and the organization could make the most use of the information. It was also decided to focus this evaluation session at one school for reasons of feasibility, connection with the volunteers, and to allow for greater consideration of the particular circumstances present at that school and among its students. As Fetterman comments, “contextualization enables program participants to interpret data meaningfully and to anticipate specific influences on program operation” (2001:96). Not only is the situation at this school different from that at other schools but this context is also necessary to determine the constraints that exist on proposed changes from the evaluation. In his discussion of the use of empowerment evaluation Fetterman argues that taking these constraints into account is an important way to ensure that the goals set are achievable given available resources (2001).

### *Considering empowerment within organizations*

The idea of empowering members of organizations has gained increased focus with the refinement of approaches such as participatory action research and the development of empowerment evaluation (Quinn and Spreitzer 1997). However, within organizations there is often a tension between gaining the benefits of self-determination and innovation that can come from empowerment and the issues that could arise if it is taken to an extreme that undermines cohesion within the organization (Quinn and Spreitzer 1997). In their discussion of empowering workers Quinn and Spreitzer identify two main approaches to empowerment within organizations, which are mechanistic and organic (1997). The mechanistic approach tends to be top-down, highlighting tasks, roles, and accountability while the organic approach works from the bottom-up, building teams to facilitate cooperation and supporting “intelligent risk-taking” (Quinn and Spreitzer 1997:N.P.). The authors argue that combining these approaches is the most favorable option for facilitating empowerment, something that can be considered within the Reading Partners tutoring context.

Quinn and Spreitzer offer several suggestions for bringing together these two conceptualizations of empowerment within an organization. Their first strategy is to promote a “clear vision and challenge” so that those within the organization understand its vision and the steps being taken to achieve it, allowing them to innovate and “stretch their capabilities” within this broader understanding (Quinn and Spreitzer 1997: N.P.). The second part of this approach is “openness and teamwork,” which makes members of the organization feel valued and like the organization is receptive to their ideas (Quinn and Spreitzer 1997). “Discipline and control” are another important aspect, providing clear guidelines and chains of authority so that all participants know their obligations and understand how they can be achieved within the

organization (Quinn and Spreitzer 1997). Finally, “support and a sense of security” provide the context within which members of the organization can try new things (Quinn and Spreitzer 1997). While the authors apply these strategies to employees within organizations, they are also useful guidelines for understanding how “empowerment” can fit within the Reading Partners model while still providing clear guidelines for tutors. Based on the suggestions of Quinn and Spreitzer, providing clarity of roles, “task responsibilities,” and goals within the organization are not necessarily incompatible with empowerment efforts and can in fact strengthen these efforts when opportunities for trying new things are also made possible (1997). It is within this context that empowerment evaluation and other participatory models can be considered for use within Reading Partners.

#### *Empowerment evaluation's roots in participatory action research*

One of the methods from which empowerment evaluation draws its approach is that of participatory action research (PAR). PAR focuses on creating knowledge that can enhance the lives of those within the communities where it is undertaken (Sangiorgi 2011). The PAR approach is also one “which integrates research into social change processes in ways that help people learn from their own experiences and share them with others” (Andrews et al 2005:88). Fetterman summarizes the shared elements of action research and empowerment evaluation as being “...concrete, timely, targeted, pragmatic orientations toward program improvement” that necessitate cyclical reflection and action “...and focus on the simplest data collection methods adequate to the task at hand” (2001:11). Key differences between the two approaches include the greater emphasis on self-determination and collaboration involved with empowerment evaluation, while action research can be undertaken individually and is not necessarily internalized by the program to the extent that empowerment evaluation is intended to be

(Fetterman 2001:11). Despite these differences, it is important to understand how empowerment evaluation fits within the larger context of participatory research approaches. These differences have implications for Reading Partners in terms of future engagement with these methods and the degree to which they are appropriate to the work of the organization at a given time.

*Use of the empowerment evaluation model for this project*

The empowerment evaluation model is relevant to this situation for a variety of reasons. Fetterman writes that empowerment evaluation is necessarily a democratic approach that requires participation in the process of “examining issues of concern to the entire community in an open forum” (2001:3). In this case, the focus was on the community of volunteers at a particular school. While empowerment evaluation often includes those at various levels of the organization, the purpose of this project and geographic distance between managers and other staff even within the Bay Area meant that the process took place in a more horizontal than vertical fashion. However, two other current Reading Partners site coordinators participated in the process, as did the former site coordinator at the school. While we focused on student progress due to the limited time available, tutors were also able to look at the issues within this topic that were of particular concern to them. Undoubtedly the same session undertaken by a group of site coordinators and managers would have produced different results. Fetterman quotes Vanderplaat’s broader commentary about the discourse on empowerment as saying that what differentiates it from past approaches “is its acknowledgement and deep respect for people’s capacity to create knowledge about, and solutions to, their own experiences” (2001:6-8). By focusing this session on tutors and their views, I hoped that the opportunity would be provided for them to create knowledge about what allows them to know what their students are learning.

This idea also ties in with the previously quoted mission of Reading Partners as an organization. In explaining the theoretical basis behind empowerment evaluation, Fetterman also quotes the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which states that “we’ve long been convinced that problems can best be solved at the local level by people who live with them on a daily basis” (2001:12). This comment coincides well with the mission statement of Reading Partners and helps demonstrate how an empowerment evaluation model is pertinent to an organization like Reading Partners that is focused on empowering communities to provide instruction to students. It is a logical step to carry this empowerment beyond tutoring to allow these same community members to “create knowledge,” identify the challenges they face, and consider ways to improve upon them. Using the empowerment evaluation framework provides not only the practical function of involving those working with students on a daily basis in exploring the challenges and potential solutions to determining student progress but reinforces the organization’s mission as well.

It is also important to consider the application of the empowerment evaluation model in terms of the evaluation that is already being undertaken by Reading Partners both internally and by external evaluators. Participatory evaluation processes, such as the empowerment evaluation model used in this project, can be viewed in this context primarily as a method for building evaluative capacity among tutors as opposed to the evaluation that Reading Partners uses for its own programming purposes or for reporting impacts to stakeholders. While this sort of evaluation will not take the place of the official “stamp of approval” provided by external evaluation it can be a valuable complement and allow tutors an increased sense of control over monitoring student progress (Schnoes et al. 2000:60). As Schnoes et al. found, a commitment to empowerment evaluation and other participatory models requires a commitment to putting in

place the structures that will allow for this kind of capacity building and monitoring over time (2000). This can be a challenge given that results may not be immediately apparent and are instead developed over time as capacity develops as well (Schnoes et al. 2000). In the observation of Schnoes et al., this was a challenge for participants from community organizations their team worked with who “appeared to define empowerment more in terms of the degree of enhancement they saw in their immediate short-term program advocacy functions, rather than as perceived increases in their capacity to build evaluation structures to meet long-term program accountability goals” (2000:61).

Part of the challenge addressed in the literature for organizations implementing empowerment evaluation is the issue of committing the time and resources to the participatory processes necessary for its success. As the experiences of Schnoes et al. suggest, organizations may feel that committing to empowerment evaluation takes more resources (human and otherwise) than they are able to provide comfortably without getting the perceived legitimizing benefits of an “objective” external evaluation (2000). Lackey et al. had a similar experience with the grass-roots organizations they worked with, finding that “one of the chief motivating factors in continuing or ending the evaluation work was access to resources—particularly the availability of volunteer hours” among those working with the organizations (1997:140). They found that evaluation was considered by organizations to be not only a means of determining program outcomes but also as a way to get additional funding, have others recognize the organization, and legitimize their program (Lackey et al. 1997:142). While the former perception of evaluation is compatible with an empowerment evaluation approach, the latter reveal uses of evaluation that are more related to the “expectations of their institutional environments” (Lackey et al. 1997:142).

Based on the challenges identified in the literature, there are a number of important considerations to take into account when applying empowerment evaluation or other participatory models in the Reading Partners context. Given that Reading Partners already makes considerable efforts at both internal and external evaluation of its program impacts, the emphasis on internal accountability among peers in this approach works well for capacity building within the organization as a complement to the data being collected for external stakeholders. As Dr. Fetterman further explained, empowerment evaluation functions very well for furthering development in an organization through the process of collecting feedback to make modifications. However, this approach does require a commitment to participatory processes on an ongoing basis to provide consistency and the best possibility for positive results. As other evaluators using this approach have noted, it is far less effective if the organizations being engaged do not choose the use of this model for themselves (Lackey 1997). Finally, the issue of resources is certainly a consideration when adopting this model within Reading Partners. Keeping the evaluation at the local level amongst tutors at a particular school not only has benefits in terms of community building at that location but can also keep it manageable for organization staff. Technology could also be introduced to help address some of the issues of committing time to this process, which will be discussed further in Scenario 1.

*Adapting the empowerment evaluation model to Reading Partners: Creating a Statement of Purpose*

Time was one of the key considerations for the tutor forum held at a Reading Partners site using the empowerment evaluation model. The monthly trainings held by Reading Partners are an hour each and this is generally the duration of most other tutor events. For this forum we were able to use two hours, which went beyond other tutor events but still required adaptation of the

empowerment evaluation model to fit in the various steps of the process. The first part of an empowerment evaluation brings participants together to create a mission statement related to what they hope to achieve as a group going forward. Given that the objective of this forum was to focus on student progress, the mission statement created reflected this aim. In order to keep the process moving I asked volunteers to RSVP to the event and then spoke to those who would be attending about what they hoped to get out of the forum. Based on these conversations I drafted a statement to encompass the goals and ideas of the volunteers for the session.

There was substantial overlap between tutors in terms of what they were hoping to accomplish with the forum. Many of the comments had to do with the desire for an opportunity to meet and learn from other volunteers. This was especially important to volunteers in terms of being able to learn from each others' strategies and experiences to help improve their own tutoring. The similarities between tutor comments made drafting a statement of purpose a simplified process. The text of this statement is as follows:

Our purpose with this meeting is to learn from each other about the strategies we use and the observations we make to know what our students are learning. We are coming together as part of the community of Horace Mann tutors to learn from each other and use this information to support our students. We recognize that there are many ways to know what students are learning in Reading Partners and that this learning goes beyond the curriculum to other information that tutors share with students.

Our mission is to find new ways to support our students and their progress in Reading Partners, in school generally, and in their broader lives.

When I met with the tutors at the beginning of the forum I read this statement and asked if they were comfortable with it. They agreed and we were able to move on to the next phase of the process.

In addition to the desire to learn from one another this statement was created to capture other key ideas mentioned by tutors both for this event and in my earlier interviews. One of these

was the idea that learning in Reading Partners is often defined by tutors as going beyond the reading skills that are conveyed through the curriculum. Instead, learning also encompasses impromptu lessons that a tutor might teach a student based on what they happen to be reading or working on that day. In an interview, one tutor described reading in the prologue of a John Steinbeck novel about the author's recollection of his struggles to read as a child. She brought this in to share with the student but also showed him information from the San Jose State University course catalog about entire courses that could be taken about the author to explain to the student his importance. This is one example of the efforts tutors make to share knowledge with their students beyond the curriculum, something that came up repeatedly during my research. Similarly, this statement acknowledges that Reading Partners tutors envision their impacts as going beyond the reading center to benefit the student not just in school but also in his or her life holistically. This sentiment helps demonstrate the importance tutors place on their work with students because of its possibility to have a positive impact on students outside of Reading Partners.

### *Taking Stock Phase 1: Brainstorming*

After the tutors approved this statement we moved on to the first stage of taking stock based on the empowerment evaluation model. Fetterman explains that during this stage participants are “generating a list of current key activities crucial to the functioning of the program” (2001:24). For the purpose of our forum participants were asked to identify the most important activities occurring within Reading Partners for determining what students are learning from one session to the next. Five tutors as well as two current site coordinators and the previous site coordinator at the school participated in this and the following phases of the session. As tutors brainstormed ideas I wrote the comments on a page of chart paper, adding notes as tutors

provided further explanation for their thoughts (see Appendix B for the list from this phase).

Tutors came up with a wide variety of activities including those that they undertake on a personal level, those which require information from the organization, and activities they would like to see happen more.

In the first category of activities undertaken at a personal level tutors came up with a variety of responses for how they measure whether a student is learning. Examples include reviewing the previous lesson to find out what information the student has retained, observing the student making connections beyond the text to demonstrate understanding, and finding vocabulary or comprehension difficulties even when a student might be reading fluently. On the whole, these are strategies that a tutor is able to put into place with a minimal amount of training and can be applied on a day-to-day basis. In other cases tutors might also measure a student's progress by observing changes in their self-confidence, seeing things "click" when a student has a sudden moment of understanding, or recognizing when to go back and review instead of continuing to move forward in the curriculum. These activities are more subjective in nature, depending to a greater extent on the tutor's perception and his or her experience with tutoring. This is especially true in terms of recognizing when it is appropriate to go back and review, as tutors may often feel that forward progress is necessary.

Other comments from tutors suggest areas in which the organization is currently involved and can continue to strengthen its support. This includes understanding what the student specifically needs to work on as well as conveying assessment information to tutors to help them better understand its meaning. While there are strategies in place to address these areas and let tutors know the implications of the assessment data for their tutoring, tutors still reported having difficulties interpreting this information and using it effectively to work with their students. In

addition, tutors also mentioned that the time of day when a student is tutored affects their learning as does whether they are taking books home and returning response forms, and communication with teachers and parents. These comments refer back to some of the core aspects of the program's structure, such as how students are scheduled, encouraging them to read at home, and conveying information to others in a student's life who are concerned with their education.

The final significant category to arise from these comments included suggestions for new or different activities Reading Partners could engage in that tutors believe would allow for better measurement of student progress. These suggestions include having the student participate in tracking his/her own progress, setting measurable goals with the students, and creating a semester-long student project. These activities are intended to bring students into the process of measuring their learning and taking pride in their accomplishments. Tutors also mentioned additional tools that they felt would help them do their jobs more effectively, which include making adjustments to the tutor notes format and providing more information on literacy development so tutors could more confidently assess their student's progress. Finally, tutors also expressed a desire for a better understanding of the resources available at the school for addressing student challenges (e.g. vision screening, learning disability identification) so they could be more aware of the process through which students could get services should such issues arise.

During this initial taking stock stage tutors were able to address a variety of activities either currently occurring within Reading Partners or that they would like to see more of in order to better support their assessment of the student's learning. While tutors do have strategies that they utilize on a daily basis, their experiences with the organization have also given them ideas

for how to improve the preexisting structures within Reading Partners and even provide new options. Tutors' level of experience and background (such as training in the field of education) also contributed to their identification of these activities. Due to the structure of the empowerment evaluation model, tutors were able to hear the rationale for a particular approach and consider the points made by the others, gaining exposure to ideas that might not have come up for them before. This list provided a useful range of options for tutors to consider as they went through the second phase of taking stock.

#### *Taking Stock Phase 1: Prioritization*

Tutors took a brief break while my colleague Hannah Hart and I copied the initial list of activities over to a new sheet of chart paper, writing them down more succinctly than I had during the first part of taking stock. This phase allows participants to “prioritize and determine which are the most important activities meriting evaluation at this time” (Fetterman 2001:24-25). Tutors were each given five dot stickers to mark their choices in terms of which activities they considered most important. Based on the empowerment evaluation model they were informed that they could choose to allot their dots in whatever way they preferred, be that putting all the dots on one choice or splitting them up. I also explained that a record would be kept of all suggestions for future consideration by the organization even if they were not among the top ten that would be discussed that day in further detail.

With these votes in place, I wrote out these activities on another sheet of chart paper, leaving spaces for tutors to make numerical rankings for how well they perceive things are going with each of these activities. The top ten activities determined during this stage can be found in Table 1 (the full list is available in Appendix C).

**Table 1: Prioritizing Activities**

Activity	Number of Votes
Self-confidence and motivation	5
Understanding what the student needs to work on	4
Knowledge of child literacy development	4
Communication with parents	4
Understanding assessment data	3
Student keeping track of their own progress	3
Identifying vocabulary difficulties for fluent readers	3
Making connections beyond the text	3
Communication with teachers	3
Knowing when to go back or slow down	2

*Taking Stock Phase 2*

During this phase, tutors wrote down their own numerical rankings for each activity based on their observation of how well the activity is taking place currently in the organization. The rankings were from one to ten, with ten indicating that the activity was going very well and one indicating that it was not really being carried out at present. After tutors wrote down their individual responses, they were asked to share them for each activity. Fetterman explains that during this stage “the rating process then sets the stage for dialogue, clarification, and communication” (2001:25). Once I had recorded each tutor’s rankings we focused on several of the activities to discuss why tutors had chosen a particular number. Throughout this process, I asked tutors to think about why they had not chosen either a lower or higher ranking for each category in order to better understand their perspectives (Fetterman 2001). There was some initial confusion over whether the rankings were supposed to be for the activities seen as most important or how well the activity is taking place, but we were able to continue after additional clarification.

Tutors gave the highest rankings to seeing changes in the student’s self-confidence and motivation, understanding what the student needs to work on, and knowing when to go back and slow down. All of these are activities that tutors are able to engage in on their own to some extent, although they may also be facilitated through student data and communication with the site coordinator. The group of rankings that received the next highest scores were those for understanding assessment data, seeing the student make personal connections, and identifying vocabulary challenges for students who are generally fluent readers. The activities receiving the lowest rankings were communication with parents and teachers, knowledge of literacy development, and students keeping track of their own progress. It is significant to note that these last three activities received numerous zeros but were off-set by particularly high scores on the part of one tutor who had opportunities to engage in these activities beyond the others. Table 2 shows the averages for each activity as provided by tutors and the two current site coordinators who were present. Scores are not shown on an individual level but rather averaged for these two categories with the highest and lowest scores also indicated for tutors, who had a higher degree of variability within their rankings. Site coordinators reported that they tried to give rankings as if they were a tutor, as opposed to from the position of an organizational staff member (see Appendix D for all individual rankings and comments made by tutors about their rankings)

**Table 2: Tutor and Site Coordinator Rankings by Activity**

Activity	Tutor Average (n=5)	Tutor High	Tutor Low	SC Average
Self-confidence & motivation	6.2	8	5	7
Understanding what student needs to work on	6.1	8	3.5	5.5

Communication with parents	2.4 (mode = 0)	10	0	2
Knowledge of literacy development	1.8	4	0	5
Understanding assessment data	4.6	7	2	5
Communication with teachers	2.6	10	0	4
Making personal connections	4.6	8	2	7
Vocabulary (but fluent reader)	4.8	6	3	4
Student keeping track of own progress	2	2	0	2.5
Knowing when to go back or slow down	6.6	10	5	5

Based on these rankings, tutors appear to associate the activities where they have the most control as those that are occurring most successfully. Generally, the further removed an activity is from a tutor's control the lower a score it received from many tutors. For instance, parent and teacher communication is generally handled by the site coordinator, who then channels this information to tutors. Site coordinators came very close to tutor rankings in some activities but diverged significantly in others. Knowledge of literacy development and observing students making connections showed the greatest differences between site coordinator and tutor perceptions. This would be an interesting area for further discussion between site coordinators and tutors to learn more about the degree to which their respective perceptions of these activities differ and the reasons for the difference. A possible explanation could be that site coordinators are trained to see the broader picture organizationally—including from a more theoretical perspective—while tutors are looking at impacts on the ground without necessarily having this rationale.

We were also able to discuss the ratings tutors gave for these activities. Based on the time available we ended up focusing on four main activities, which were communication with parents

and teachers, knowledge of literacy development and students keeping track of their own progress. Tutors provided their reasoning for each rating and I added notes to the ratings based on their comments. Having more time in the future for such a forum would hopefully allow for exploration of a broader cross-section of the ratings and further consideration of differences between site coordinator and tutor perceptions. This would have been particularly interesting to explore for those activities where site coordinators and tutors gave similar rankings to find out whether these similarities were the result of different evidence influencing the perceptions of each group.

### *Planning for the Future*

The final aspect of the empowerment evaluation process consists of participants taking time to look at the activities and deciding “Where do we want to go from here?” (Fetterman 2001:30). This can include examining both the areas viewed as most successful and those seen to be in need of additional efforts. In this area the limited amount of time was particularly obvious and we were not able to fully explore ideas for the future. However, tutors did contribute ideas of what they would like to do based on the information shared at the forum. One of the ideas mentioned was to further support students in relating the texts read during Reading Partners to life experiences, including through use of available tools such as maps. Another tutor discussed information from her training in education in terms of using reflective listening and praise words. She clarified that this meant asking students how they think they are doing as opposed to simply telling students they have done a good job. Another tutor responded with the challenges this would present for the students she works with, which offered a chance for tutors to discuss the idea and consider the extent to which it might be applicable for them. This interchange showed the potential for ideas to be brought up and then discussed amongst tutors in terms of

applicability, keeping in perspective the limits that might exist. Providing space for the evaluation of such ideas demonstrates the potential for additional expansion in this area in the future.

### *Commentary on the use of the Empowerment Evaluation Model*

Using the empowerment evaluation process with volunteers at a Reading Partners site provided information for the organization as well as an opportunity for tutors to share their experiences and strategies with each other. Tutoring with the organization often includes minimal interaction with other tutors because volunteers come to the reading center for the purpose of working with their students. Any socialization that occurs is generally undertaken within the few minutes before or after a session. Since tutors are scheduled for specific sessions during the week there are many tutors who never see each other or have the opportunity to meet. The events during the semester that provide chances for tutors to meet each other are the monthly tutor trainings as well as end-of-semester events, which are difficult for all volunteers to attend. This forum provided another such opportunity for tutors to come together but also allowed them to shape the discourse and communicate with each other to a greater extent.

One of the main challenges of this forum was the limit on time. There was an important balance to be considered in terms of not creating an event that was so long it would deter tutors from coming but would be long enough to accomplish its purpose. While drafting a statement of purpose in advance allowed the time spent on this activity at the actual forum to be kept to a minimum, the process was still condensed at the end when it came to goal setting. Although there was minimal time left over for this part of the process it was interesting to see that it started to occur spontaneously. After taking stock and discussing the ratings given for various aspects of the program tutors started to share things that they were interested in applying that were discussed or they were prompted to think of based on the conversation. While we were not able

to discuss goals in full, tutors were clearly motivated to think about what their personal next-steps would be following the forum.

I found that being the facilitator of this process was a learning process as well. When we initially made introductions at the beginning of the forum tutors mentioned how long they had volunteered with the program as well as a few details about the students they tutor. During this time I learned that many of the tutors present have been with the organization for at least as long if not considerably longer than I have. This made an interesting dynamic with any power differentials that might have existed due to my position as the facilitator as well as a Reading Partners employee. It also gave me an opportunity to learn from the experience and perspective of tutors who had seen developments within the organization over a longer period of time. I appreciated this in terms of the taking stock activities because it meant that tutors could base their ratings on time spent working with a number of site coordinators.

In addition to learning from the long-range perspectives of the tutors present I also learned beneficial lessons about facilitating the process itself. One of the main challenges that occurred was in terms of explaining the second part of the taking stock exercise where the volunteers were asked to rank the ten activities that received the highest votes in the previous round of voting. Following my explanation for this part of the process confusion remained over whether these rankings were based on the importance of each item or how well it was being carried out at present. A few participants reconsidered and then revised their rankings once this was more fully explained. When using this process again in the future I would adjust the explanations I gave for each step to ensure that they were more understandable. Having researched the process, I had a perspective on how each part of the evaluation fit within the broader context and process. This was not the case for the other participants coming into it,

meaning that this is something that I would take into account more fully were I to facilitate a forum using this approach again.

Within the forum it was also interesting to note who participated and who did not. As mentioned previously, all tutors present were returning and had volunteered for at least part of the 2011-12 program year. Younger tutors such as high school and college students were not in attendance, although several college students expressed interest but were unable to attend due to scheduling conflicts. More women attended than men, although it would be interesting to see whether this is actually reflective of demographics within the broader tutor population. Were future efforts to be made to have similar forums it would be valuable to determine the impacts of reaching out specifically to some of these under-represented groups to increase their participation. While scheduling was the stated reason given by tutors who explained why they could not come it would be worthwhile to talk with other tutors who did not mention why they were not present to learn more about what might be affecting their participation.

Finally, this process provided an interesting perspective on empowerment amongst the participants. Those who participated had been with the program for at least two semesters and were interested in engaging thoughtfully in these issues. They had time to experience the program as well as reflect on the experience and what they would like to see improved. These tutors had a comfort-level that spoke to a preexisting level of empowerment within the organization, especially in terms of being able to speak their minds about what goes on in the program. Thus, as opposed to enhancing their self-determination within the organization it instead primarily played the role mentioned previously of allowing community members to create knowledge about their experiences and express their concerns in an open forum. Perhaps the self-determination aspect would have been strengthened with further exploration of goals and

steps for action but the participants involved may also have had a strong effect on the direction the forum took.

### **Ethnographic Evaluation in the Reading Partners Context**

Throughout this project, the use of ethnographic evaluation allowed for a more thorough understanding of the tutoring experience from the perspectives of tutors themselves than would be possible using other approaches. Spradley explains that ethnographic field work “involves the disciplined study of what the world is like to people who have learned to see, hear, speak, think, and act in ways that are different” (1979:3). As participants in the Reading Partners organization, volunteers bring with them their own ways of thinking about their service that may overlap but do not necessarily completely align with that of the organization. While the way volunteers tutor is certainly an important aspect of understanding the impacts of the program, it is also essential to understand *why* volunteers tutor the way that they do as well as why they choose to remain active with the organization. While Reading Partners may have a vision of what tutor engagement currently means and what it could mean in the future, the differences between these views and those of tutors has significant, real-world impacts on the provision of the tutoring service. Reading Partners’ evaluations have demonstrated the efficacy of the program but this ethnographic analysis gives deeper insight into the worldviews of those who make it possible. Furthermore, an understanding of tutor impacts is enhanced by the tutors’ own explanations of how they were produced.

Spradley also highlights what makes the ethnographic approach unique, commenting that “rather than *studying people*, ethnography means *learning from people*” (1979:3). The methods used throughout this project reflect such an orientation. The use of ethnographic interviews allowed tutors to express their own opinions, responding not only to questions that were relevant

to this project and the organization but also providing their feedback on other issues of interest to them personally. Several tutors commented that engaging in these interviews made them feel appreciated by the organization because they showed willingness on the part of Reading Partners to ask for their input and learn from their experiences. I also learned from the tutors throughout the process, shifting my interview questions as I gained an understanding from the participants about the aspects of tutoring that were particularly salient to them instead of imposing my own views about the meanings of these experiences. This data collection process also influenced the way I approached my role as a site coordinator as I increased my knowledge of the issues that matter most to tutors. Throughout this project, I was able to make adjustments in my approach as both a researcher and site coordinator through a process of learning, reflection, and action undertaken as a result of the interviews.

The use of the empowerment evaluation model provided a further opportunity to learn from Reading Partners tutors. This model coincides with aspects of the ethnographic approach as it provides a space for participants to express their own perceptions about the functions of the organization in an evidence-based way. Fetterman also links the development of empowerment evaluation back to community psychology and action anthropology, reinforcing the complementary nature of these approaches (2001). The role of the facilitator in the empowerment evaluation model is not to dominate the process but rather to serve as “a critical friend,” who works to “establish a positive learning climate in which the views of all stakeholders are respected, input from all parties is solicited, and the conversation is guided so as to encourage comments that are constructive and improvement oriented” (Fetterman et al. 2010:N.P.). Like the idea of studying as opposed to learning, this helps to address some of the issues of power that can arise in both the researcher and facilitator roles, since the facilitator

should be considered as a “trusted colleague” in the process (Fetterman et al. 2010:N.P.). Additionally, the anthropologist-as-facilitator role is beneficial in such situations because of a tendency identified by Goldschmidt for anthropologists “...to look under the surface of events for latent functions and deeper meanings” (2001:427). Similarly, the facilitator in an empowerment evaluation supports the process and its participants because “they believe in the merits of a particular type of program but they pose the difficult questions (in a diplomatic fashion),” working to “leverage and maximize the potential of the group” (Fetterman 2009:201). Within applied anthropology there is also often a commitment to allowing project participants to take a role in determining the outcome of the project, a concept that works well with the empowerment evaluation approach as we were able to focus on the issues that were of particular interest to participants at the forum. This process also allows for the acceptance of a variety of viewpoints because of the focus on allowing individuals to provide their opinions so long as they are backed up by evidence.

In this case it was possible to acknowledge and explore the differences of opinion that might occur between site coordinators and tutors. These differences—as well as the similarities identified previously—offer further information on where understandings of the program diverge between staff and volunteers. It is understandable that site coordinator perceptions would be different from those of tutors based on their position within Reading Partners. Exploring these areas of difference can provide a wealth of data for the organization. Unlike other evaluative approaches, the ethnographic perspective sensitizes the analysis to these differences of opinion and allows for their thorough exploration without making a judgment about which view is “right.” The reality experienced by tutors will inform the way that they tutor, regardless of the extent to which this lines up with the organization’s perception of reality.

As an anthropologist this project also allowed me to consider the importance of context in thinking about empowerment. The question arising from this evaluation was not so much one of how to empower tutors but rather how space could be made within the organization for them to act in empowered ways. As the participants demonstrated during the forum, many tutors are already making empowered choices based on their own experiences. There are opportunities for the organization to build upon these actions to improve the service provided to students as well as the experiences of tutors. Allowing tutors to share their experiences and strategies not only benefits the tutors themselves while promoting community but also allows ideas to make their way up through the organization, starting with those who are working with the students every day. Given that the research reaffirms the importance of training, structure, and oversight for the efficacy of supplemental tutoring programs (see Woolley and Hay 2007), it is necessary to think about how empowerment can exist within this structure. These required aspects of the program allow tutors to make greater impacts and tutors generally express appreciation for them. Thus, it is not an issue of trading one for the other but considering ways to encourage empowerment within the system.

### **Organizational Recommendations**

Based on my interviews with the volunteers, I made several recommendations to Reading Partners during the client presentation that could make tutors feel more effective and improve their experiences with the organization.

#### *Tutor Training 1: Online Training Option*

The first is to provide the option of online training materials to tutors. This is an issue mentioned by tutors in surveys but based on this study it continues to be highly relevant. The current format for tutor trainings is to hold one training per month for every four to five schools in a region based on a particular topic set at the organizational level. These topics range from more in-depth coverage of using the phonics and comprehension curriculums to providing information on student motivation. The time associated with tutor trainings continues to discourage even highly dedicated tutors from participating in them. Tutors will also choose not to expend the time on tutor trainings when they feel that they have already achieved competency in that content area, meaning that online training resources will allow tutors access to the materials they see as being most relevant to their personal development. While this does not necessarily provide the function of standardization in the way that the current tutor trainings do, it coincides with the reciprocity model that tutors perceive within the organization. This training material could take a variety of forms from video presentations to documents but would serve the function of providing tutors the resources they personally feel are necessary to be more successful in their roles.

#### *Tutor Training 2: Comprehension Curriculum*

Providing this training information is especially important for the comprehension curriculum, which is designed to help students build critical thinking skills once they are already comfortable with the foundational skills of reading (such as phonics). Among tutors who spoke specifically to the differences between the phonics-oriented Beginning Readers curriculum and the comprehension curriculum there was a general sense that the comprehension curriculum is more challenging for tutors, requiring more preparation and care to teach effectively. The Beginning Reader curriculum was described as effective and well-suited to the time available for

teaching it, while instilling the skills in the comprehension curriculum (e.g. making inferences and predictions) is more challenging. Tutors offered a variety of suggestions for strengthening the comprehension curriculum, including making the phrasing used more accessible for English Language Learners and addressing its abstract nature to make it more manageable for both tutors and students. While such suggestions would require more extensive efforts on the part of the organization, providing additional in-depth training materials online on how to teach comprehension skills could be an interim step to help tutors feel more confident in their use of this curriculum.

### *Tutor Training 3: Annual Student Motivation Training*

Another aspect of tutor training that can receive attention is the annual student motivation tutor training. Given the importance of student focus and engagement for tutors, orienting this training around these issues could provide the information they are seeking to maximize their impact. Offering the training twice a year early in both semesters would provide tutors more opportunities to access this information, which could make a difference in their experiences during the rest of the semester. Based on this study, some tutors who have had challenges with student focus will still not see this as an issue worth receiving training. For this reason, having site coordinators who are well-trained in managing student behavior is also an important factor. This is something that could be factored into the site coordinator training at the beginning of the year through information on classroom management and other related topics centered on addressing student behavior issues. By providing site coordinators with the resources to address student focus challenges they can better support tutors regardless of whether the tutor attends a tutor training.

### *Student Focus: Reading Center Layout*

Student focus can also be a consideration in terms of reading center layout. Several tutors mentioned student focus challenges resulting from having other students close by during tutoring. Although it is not possible to completely eliminate such distractions, considering the flow of traffic in the room and making sure the number of students and tutors present is suitable for the specific space will help to ensure that these issues are factored out to the greatest extent possible. Orienting such decisions around this consideration will not only enhance the tutor experience but will also strengthen the service provided to the student. Balancing maximum tutoring capacity in a particular reading center at a given time with the challenges it will present for student focus can help address these concerns on the part of volunteers.

#### *Tutor appreciation efforts*

The final recommendation is a thoughtful approach toward tutor appreciation efforts. The appreciation efforts that tutors encounter most frequently are those offered by the site coordinator on a daily basis and site-specific efforts that often center on students. This latter group of appreciation efforts can provide broader connections with families and the school community as well as other tutors. Both types of appreciation have an immediate impact on the volunteer experience of tutoring with Reading Partners. Meanwhile, tutors mentioned concerns that organizational appreciation efforts such as a hypothetical appreciation dinner or gifted item might divert attention and funds from the students who they are there to serve. In this respect such appreciation efforts might not only distract from their intent but could cause frustration for tutors who feel that they are counterproductive to the broader cause. They are also less connected to the lived experiences of tutors in the reading center. Taking into consideration the appreciation efforts that are most meaningful to tutors ensures that these efforts will serve to enhance the overall tutoring experience.

## **Scenarios for Future Application**

### *Scenario 1: Ongoing Use of the Participatory Evaluation Models*

The preliminary use of the empowerment evaluation approach in this project indicates that there are further applications for participatory evaluation models within Reading Partners. The response of tutors to the forum demonstrated a desire for such opportunities to connect with other tutors and provide feedback to the organization. While scheduling continues to be a challenge for maximizing the number of tutors who are able to participate, I received a great deal of positive feedback on the idea. This feedback went beyond what I regularly get for a tutor training, which could be due to a variety of factors including novelty, tutors viewing it as something different than the monthly trainings or the explanation of my personal connection to the event. Tutors have asked me subsequently about how things went and expressed interest in attending in the future if such an event is held again. Responses before, during, and after the event indicate that there is interest on the part of the tutors for such a forum and more opportunities to participate could help address the scheduling issues that inevitably occur with any one event.

While the idea of this forum appealed to tutors and shows promise for future use within the organization it would be important to clarify expectations in terms of areas which are most feasible for tutors to exercise self-determination. The degree of self-determination required for an authentic empowerment evaluation is something that the organization would need to consider given the necessity of providing structure and guidance for tutors while making tutoring accessible to all volunteers regardless of whether they have a background in education. Committing to such an approach would involve making sure that the organization has thought about what tutor empowerment would look like and is “ready for change” (Andrews et al. 2005:92). While there could be a time in the future when this would be established, a focus on

building evaluative capacity in the meantime can provide tutors important skills while the organization works out how to approach these different considerations within Reading Partners. Continued use of similar tutor forums can benefit tutors and the organization as the role of empowerment for tutors is considered further.

To continue utilizing the forum approach while addressing the issues of scheduling and time constraints raised by tutors, it would be beneficial to expand the opportunities for participation. There are also a variety of topics that could serve as focal points beyond the issue of student progress. Hosting two forums spaced out during the semester would provide more opportunities for tutors to take part as well as the potential to explore additional topics relevant to the tutoring experience. Keeping the forum specific to one site allows tutors to get to know those who also volunteer at that school as well as keeping in mind the constraints and potentially useful structures already existing at that particular school.

### *Incorporating Technology*

Technology also provides a means to expand the participation of tutors beyond those who are able to gather together at a particular time. For those tutors who were interested in participating but unable to attend I offered the opportunity to get involved by asking for their thoughts on issues of student progress monitoring and how this process is currently working out for them. This practice could be further expanded in the future to involve more tutors. Tutor responses throughout the process could be requested via email and compiled by the facilitator. As Dr. Fetterman discussed in a conversation on adapting the empowerment evaluation process, the results from each stage could be published to a website where tutors could comment and provide feedback for revision before moving on to the next stage.

Bowman's experiences with empowerment evaluation also show ways technology can be incorporated into the process to bring together a group of people who are not necessarily able to meet in person and whose membership changes regularly (2010). This example is particularly instructive because the facilitators faced the challenge of working with participants who experienced a high turnover rate in their roles (Bowman 2010). In order to address this issue, participants were asked to think about what they would have appreciated the program had been like for themselves as new participants (Bowman 2010). Given that tutors might be less inclined to participate if they don't foresee themselves having long-term involvement with the program this is a way of framing the forum that could encourage participation regardless of the duration of their commitment. In order to facilitate the process for participants who were not in physical proximity, much of the work done by Bowman's group took place online (2010). Thoughts for the mission statement (as well as drafts) were transmitted between group members electronically, while survey software and online voting made the steps involved with taking stock possible (Bowman 2010). When necessary, participants could be brought "face-to-face" through teleconference (Bowman 2010). The timing of Bowman's empowerment evaluation is also relevant, as the author discusses having participants come together mid-year to make adjustments to the program and again at the end of the year to share their thoughts on what would be beneficial for the next cohort (2010).

In this scenario, regular forums using the empowerment evaluation model are held with tutors at a particular school to help them apply principles of evaluation to their tutoring and encourage the creation of knowledge about their experiences. This would also provide frequent feedback to site coordinators and other Reading Partners staff about modifications that could be made to best support them, aiding in the organization's own process of self-evaluation. The focus

of the event could be rotated to address different aspects of the program. In order to democratize this process an online survey would be made available to allow tutors to vote on suggested topics from the organization as well as submit their own ideas to see if there are common themes that emerge. Once the topic has been decided a date and time would also be selected for the evaluation. While technology can be used to leverage the process to include more tutors, it is clear that being able to meet fellow tutors and share strategies is desirable for numerous volunteers. Having an in-person option makes this possibility available for tutors who are interested in it.

Participation could be encouraged in advance by providing tutors opportunities to weigh-in on the topic in order to compile a mission statement to post online for feedback prior to the event. The forum could then be held following the steps outlined for the empowerment evaluation process. To aid with issues of participation and time, the forum could be continued online following the in-person event. Documenting the process on a blog (including pictures) would allow tutors who were not able to attend to see how the process unfolded and add their feedback, as well as enhancing the credibility of the forum. Goals and strategies for achieving them could also be added in more detail online, allowing a record for tutors to look back on over the semester to help measure progress toward these goals. Evaluation would also be extended beyond a single event to encompass longer-term involvement with the issues. Tutors would be able to report on how their progress toward goals is occurring while sharing strategies with each other. By combining technology and in-person evaluation the process could be opened up to include other tutors who might not be available to meet in person. Expanding the process beyond a one-time event also fosters an ongoing commitment to evaluation within Reading Partners at the school site, something that is a key objective when utilizing this model.

### *Scenario 2: Tutor Web Portal*

During both the interviews and forum the topic of providing additional educational materials to tutors was mentioned as something that would be highly beneficial. As was discussed previously, not all tutors will actively seek out this material but having one centralized online location where they could find relevant resources would streamline this process for those looking to improve their tutoring. In addition to the benefits of having a centralized location for such resources this could also be used as a way to maintain consistency and communication among Reading Partners tutors nationally. While this online resource could begin as a simple database to compile materials on tutoring and literacy development more broadly, it could be adapted over time to provide more forums for tutors to communicate with each other and Reading Partners staff outside of their time in the reading center.

The first stage of setting up a Reading Partners tutor web portal would involve uploading or providing links to materials that tutors could use to improve their knowledge of literacy development and tutoring techniques. Preexisting powerpoints and handouts from current tutor trainings could be added to allow access to tutors who are not necessarily able to attend these events. In addition, materials could also be provided from books or articles on literacy development or the relevant standards for a particular state. Such materials would allow tutors to more clearly understand skills that their students are expected to have both developmentally and based on their grade level in order to better understand what they need to work on with that student. Short videos or blog posts from Reading Partners staff explaining different elements of the curriculum as well as their rationale could also be added at this point. Over time more in-depth training videos could provide another way for tutors to get this information. Information from teachers and other school staff about what they would like the tutors to know when working

with students would also give tutors guidance while allowing the schools to have a voice on what information tutors receive training on. Having everything organized into categories (e.g. “Literacy Development,” “Curriculum Materials”) would be key to ensuring volunteers can access this information with ease.

In addition to content from the organization, tutors’ stories and best practices could also be made accessible on such a website to allow tutors to learn from each other to improve their tutoring. This was mentioned repeatedly over the course of this project as information tutors would appreciate having. However, making this information available online alleviates some of the scheduling constraints tutors face when trying to communicate with one another as well as allowing all tutors access to the material no matter how interested an individual is bonding with others at his/her site or within the organization. Like the other materials made available on the website, this information could also be arranged topically depending on the challenges addressed. Categories such as “Student Motivation” and “Games and Activities” would allow tutors to easily choose the information that best suits the challenge they are dealing with at the time. The interviews from this project offer a starting point for strategies that could be included in this section. Additional information could be collected by site coordinators or other program staff based on observations of “best practices” on the part of tutors. Using tutors stories fits in with one of the main requests from tutors, which is that they be able to learn from the experiences and challenges faced by their peers. Frequently issues of time and scheduling create barriers to such information being shared, meaning that an easy-to-search section of a website devoted to tutor strategies could be highly useful for tutors who may have hit an obstacle in their tutoring and are looking to see what has worked for others.

While the initial stage of development for the tutor portal would be focused on uploading and posting information that could be of use for tutors, the second phase would allow for greater interaction. Setting up the website to also include moderated forums would provide a way for tutors to communicate with each other both in the specific region where they are tutoring and across the country. Volunteers could utilize the tutor strategies section to post their own ideas or challenges in order to get a response from other tutors. Reading Partners staff would be able to moderate these sections to monitor the content as well as post their own responses to particular tutor concerns. Such forums could also be used to implement online-based empowerment evaluation strategies amongst tutors from different geographic regions. Finally, a few tutors might be contacted to blog weekly for a finite period of time (e.g. two months) about their experiences with tutoring. This would provide a more in-depth perspective on the tutoring experience that would not only be beneficial for current tutors looking to learn more about the experiences of their peers but could also be used to let potential new tutors know what they might be able to expect from their tutoring experience.

Creating a tutor web portal allows for the centralization of useful information for tutors throughout the organization nationally. Tutors would be able to access this information at their convenience and in response to their specific needs. At its most basic level this website would be a database for information provided by the organization on tutoring strategies and literacy development that could help tutors in their day-to-day tutoring activities. In addition, collecting best practices from tutors who have found ways to address challenges with their students would be a positive way to help tutors learn from each other. After this initial stage the website could be expanded to provide more interactive opportunities for tutors such as forums and a tutor blogging

spotlight. This stage would facilitate connections between tutors nationally and allow them to become more invested in the web portal.

### **Questions for Future Research**

In the process of conducting this study, several topics were mentioned infrequently that nonetheless pose worthwhile questions for further research into the experiences of Reading Partners volunteers.

#### *Required Community Service Hours for College Tutors*

One of the first questions is with regards to mandatory college service hours and whether tutors continue with the organization after they have completed them. This is an important issue because of the number of tutors who initially become involved in this way but do not necessarily stay on after they finish their hours. A reason for this retention issue may be rooted in a tension for college students and young professionals between altruism and focusing on their personal future, be it their studies or professional development. Several students I spoke to in this study were very aware of over-committing their time as volunteers, which was a concern even when there was not a direct scheduling conflict. This analysis of the costs and benefits of giving time to tutor also coincides with Musick and Wilson's analysis of the subjectivity of these concerns, reinforcing the idea that there do not have to be direct scheduling conflicts for tutors to perceive that they personally do not have enough time to volunteer (2008). Furthermore, the authors' research suggests that there is increased social pressure to volunteer as one becomes older, meaning that in addition to these time considerations college students and young professionals may not have external motivations to volunteer to the extent that someone who is older might (Musick and Wilson 2008). Required service hours may help bridge this tension for college students because the school imperative to do community service allows students to do something

that benefits themselves and their future while still being altruistic. It would be interesting to assess the degree to which this dynamic as well as perceptions of available time and external pressure to volunteer affect college students in their decisions about continuing to tutor once their hours are completed.

#### *Donations to the local reading center*

Another interesting issue for future exploration is how tutors feel about making donations to their specific reading center as opposed to the broader organization. This was mentioned by a tutor in terms of being able to better trace the impact of her donations. Due to the highly localized sense of connection expressed by tutors, some who do not wish to donate on an organizational level might feel more inclined if their contribution impacts their center directly. This could be taken even further to see if in-kind donations of books and supplies (e.g. a “supply drive” at some point during the year) offer an appeal to some tutors that may not exist with financial contributions. Although there are tutors who already feel comfortable making monetary donations to the broader organization this might be a method of engaging additional volunteers in a way that they are comfortable with and would be beneficial for the reading centers. While this issue did not come up broadly in the interviews, the other data about tutor connectivity suggests it is a logical area for further consideration.

#### *Tutor and site coordinator age differences*

Tutor-site coordinator age differences and their impact on communication and relationships also came up briefly but bear mentioning in light of the centrality of the site coordinator to tutor experiences with Reading Partners. Depending on tutor demographics at a particular reading center, site coordinators may be substantially younger than many of their tutors, which could potentially affect the degree to which they are able to relate to each other.

This was not an issue raised in the majority of interviews but because site coordinators are an important resource for tutors to enhance their impact it is plausible that generational differences could interfere with the extent to which the site coordinator is considered an authority.

#### *Tutor best practices*

Another area of volunteering to think about is the organizational conception of what a model tutor “looks like,” in terms of the behaviors that they exhibit and the way they tutor. The reason for this is to begin bridging the gap between tutor perspectives on what they bring to the program and the perspectives of Reading Partners staff at all levels of the organization (from site coordinators up) on what good tutoring looks like and the best practices already being demonstrated by tutors. This is especially important in terms of tutor compliance with the curriculum as opposed to individualization. By clarifying these expectations on the part of the organization at a basic level we can work to build on the assets that tutors possess when coming into the program and empower them within the Reading Partners model with the objective of improving their experiences and retention from year to year.

#### *Generalization of results*

Finally, the extent to which these results can be generalized to other Reading Partners regions is worth consideration. While there was a high degree of overlap in the data from tutors at the three elementary schools, it would be worthwhile to see if these issues extend to volunteers beyond the Bay Area. Although the issues raised by tutors form a central part of the Reading Partners experience for volunteers, there is always the chance that tutors in other regions feel differently. Extending the study beyond these three schools would allow for exploration of these themes on a broader level.

### **Conclusion**

An ethnographic evaluation of tutors' experiences with the Reading Partners organization provides information on the way their perspectives on their work and the organization influence understandings of the tutoring experience. This project provided volunteers with an opportunity to not only share the aspects of the Reading Partners experience that they enjoy but to also voice their feedback to the organization for future improvements. The majority of tutors interviewed during the course of this study were very positive about their time spent tutoring with Reading Partners, indicating considerable satisfaction with the process. However, this study also makes clear the significance of allowing tutors to voice their opinions on their own terms. The tutor forum held at one Bay Area school provided additional perspective on the importance of this aspect of an ethnographic approach as differences of opinions between tutors and site coordinators could be explored. Effectively communicating the broader organizational picture to tutors can help to bridge the differences that can occur between tutor and staff perceptions of the same activities.

As Reading Partners continues its national expansion, the perspectives of tutors will remain fundamentally important. Finding effective ways to channel information from the organization to tutors and back again plays a key role in this process. Making information that tutors are looking for to help further their impact readily available on an as-needed basis can empower tutors to seek out the tools they feel will most benefit their particular situation. Expanding beyond the current survey system to encourage use of models such as empowerment evaluation and other participatory forums (or even interviews) can help tutors know that their voices are being heard by the organization and that their opinions are being taken into consideration. It also provides the organization with a consistent and valuable source of information for modifications. Given the perceived distance tutors experience between

themselves and the national organization, these efforts can help foster communication beyond the local level of Reading Partners. This communication also takes into account the sense of reciprocity that tutors have in their involvement with Reading Partners, viewing this perspective as an asset that the organization can build on for future planning. Reading Partners has demonstrated the power of its model over the last decade and by analyzing volunteer understandings of their own experiences with tutoring the organization can help further empower tutors to provide a quality service to low-income elementary school students nationally.

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### **Appendix A: Open-Ended Interview Guidelines**

Theme: Background questions

- 1) How did you find out about Reading Partners?
- 2) How long have you been a Reading Partners volunteer?
- 3) How do you describe your ethnicity or your country of origin?
- 4) What is your age (or an age range)?
- 5) How many sessions per week do you tutor?

Theme: Tutor experiences volunteering with Reading Partners

- 1) Think about a day when you had a great tutoring session. What happened?
- 2) Think about a day when you had a negative tutoring session. What happened?
- 3) What does a typical day tutoring your student(s) look like?
- 4) How does your experience with Reading Partners compare to your expectation before you began the program?

Theme: Goals

- 1) What would happen for you to consider yourself a successful tutor?
- 2) When you began volunteering with Reading Partners, what were your goals for yourself as a volunteer?
- 3) What are your goals for your student?

Theme: Scheduling

- 1) Has it been necessary for you to rearrange your schedule to accommodate tutoring with Reading Partners? If so, what did you have to change?
- 2) Where do you fit tutoring in during your day?

Theme: Appreciation

- 1) What makes you feel appreciated as a volunteer? What specific things does the Site Coordinator or Reading Partners as a whole do that makes you feel appreciated?
- 2) How could Reading Partners help you to feel more appreciated?

Theme: Reading Partners as an Organization

- 1) How would you describe Reading Partners' goals?
- 2) What do you think are the most important activities/functions that Reading Partners engages in?

Theme: Reading Centers:

- 1) Have you ever been in another reading center other than \_\_\_\_\_? If so, what are some of the specific differences between that center and this one?
- 2) [Interviewer will provide a map that is an outline of the reading center] Can you show me where things are in your reading center? Where do you go when you come into the center?

Theme: Interpersonal Connections

- 1) Who do you talk to when you are in the reading center? When do you talk to them?
- 2) When do you feel like you are part of Reading Partners as an organization? When do you not feel like this?
- 3) How would you rate your connection (scale of 1-10) with your student? Site coordinator? Program Manager? The broader organization?

## **Appendix B: Important Activities around Student Progress (Tutor Forum)**

1. Review previous lessons
2. Understand what students need to work on (what's missing?)
3. Student keeping track of own progress (Student note? What should they be doing?)
4. Know when to go back (where are they at?)
5. Self-confidence (excited to read)
6. See things “click”

7. Resources available for student testing (Learning disabilities, vision, etc. Who raises the red flag?)
8. Vocabulary difficulties (can read fluently) — picture walk
9. Time of day
10. Making connections
11. Feedback from teachers
12. Take Reading Home participation
13. Communication with parents
14. Setting measurable goals for students
15. Tutor notes (behavioral scale)
16. Student project (semester-long)
17. Assessments—what do they mean?
18. Child development (*later clarified to literacy development*)

### **Appendix C: Voting on Activities (Tutor Forum)**

Activity	Votes
Review previous lessons	0
Understand what student needs to work on	4
Student keeping track of own progress	3

Know when to go back/slow down	2
Self-confidence and motivation	5
See things “click”	1
Resources available for student testing?	2
Setting measurable goals	1
Vocabulary difficulties (but fluent readers)	3
Time of day	0
Making connections	3
Take Reading Home	0
Communication with teachers	3
Communication with parents	4
Tutor notes	0
Student project (semester-long)	2
Understanding assessment data	3
Knowing about child (literacy) development	4

**Appendix D: Individual Activity Rankings and Comments (Tutor Forum)**

Activity	Tutor 1	Tutor 2	Tutor 3	Tutor 4	Tutor 5	SC 1	SC 2
Self-confidence/ motivation	5	7	8	6	5	7	7
Understand what student needs to	5	6	6	3-4	8	6	5

work on							
Communication with parents	0	2 (recitals, maybe)	10	0	0 (form RP PTA?)	2 (recital, student pick-up)	2
Knowledge of literacy development	2 (teacher feedback, lecture)	4 (testing)	0 (state standards)	2 (compared to own experience)	1 (book)	5 (student specific)	5
Understanding assessment data	7	3	7	4	2	7	3
Communication with teachers	0 (behavior, some in class, not from students)	1 (time for teachers, what are we doing?)	10 (reaffirmation)	2 (what's going on in class)	0 (no contact)	5	3
Making personal connections	5	3	8	2	5	6	8
Vocabulary (but fluent readers)	6	3	5	5	5	5	3
Student keeping track of own progress	0	2 (review, lesson repetition)	0	0	2 (self-motivate)	3	2
Knowing when to go back or slow down	7	6	20	5	5	6	4