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Academic vs. Integrated Functional-Context Literacy Programs: Responding to the Needs of Low Literate Clients of Welfare

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Abstract: The "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996," promises to usher in a new era of literacy programming as practitioners attempt to design short-term programs that address the academic and employment needs of low-literate welfare recipients. A comparative analysis of academic and integrated literacy/occupational skills programs is presented.

Introduction

In August, 1996 the U.S. Congress passed, and President Clinton subsequently signed into law, the "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996." This welfare reform legislation promises to overhaul the federal system of welfare that has been in place for over 60 years. With the intent of providing a system of incentives and disincentives to compel welfare recipients to exercise personal responsibility via acquiring and keeping a job, the new legislation passes control over the welfare system to the states. Using block grants of federal money, states will now be primarily responsible for designing their own replacements for current welfare programs with the goal of unsubsidized work for recipients. Cash assistance will be limited to a total of five years in a lifetime and able-bodied adults will be required to work within two years (Aukofer, 1996). However, as states attempt to implement programs under the new legislation they will likely discover that the literacy levels, occupational knowledge, and work experiences, of a substantial proportion of welfare recipients are incompatible with the knowledge requirements of the jobs for which they are being targeted.

The experiences, of several states at the forefront of welfare reform suggest that the new initiatives being launched nationally will have the effect of shifting the focus of educational programs that target welfare recipients. For example, during Wisconsin's new welfare-to-work initiative, state-level JOBS (i.e., Job Opportunities and Basic Skills) studies found that "remedial education has the lowest successful completion rate" of any of the JOBS program components (Jobs Annual Report - State of Wisconsin, 1994). Consequently, the employment counselors assigned the responsibility of assisting the employment efforts of welfare recipients decided that traditional literacy programs were a low priority for their clients. Students were directed to withdraw their participation and interested welfare clients were denied approval to participate. Welfare recipients were directed to participate in learning programs, e.g., Job Assessment, Job-Readiness/Motivation Training, Job Skills Training, and others that more effectively assist them in meeting the employment requirements of local employers.

The demands for employment relevance comes with a value judgment which implies that school-taught knowledge is not a legitimate means to assist learners in the acquisition of job-related skills. This perspective has compelled literacy practitioners in states at the forefront of welfare reform to shift from efforts to build the general literacy skills of welfare recipients, to the development of short-term educational programs that integrate literacy and occupational-skills training designed to assist them in the immediate acquisition of jobs (Cohen, 1994).

The experiences of literacy practitioners in these states suggest the new legislation will usher in a new era of literacy programming which will require literacy practitioners to radically transform their mental models of "how" and "why" literacy programs should be designed and delivered. This paper presents a comparative analysis of the traditional "academic" model of literacy provision and an emerging "integrated functional-context model that is believed to be more responsive to the needs of welfare recipients.

Characteristics of Welfare Recipients

Welfare recipients are typically described via deficit terminology that directs attention to shortcomings in their character, life experiences, abilities, achievements, and/or personal life styles. The act of receiving welfare has become stigmatized and individuals identified as recipients are labeled as social deviants regardless of other redeeming attributes. There is considerable diversity within this population. Therefore, in interpreting statistical data on welfare recipients, programmers should be careful not to judge all recipients as characteristic of the norm.

Demographic Characteristics

Nationally, it is estimated that the current number of recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children hover between 14 and 15 million (NIL, 1994). Two-thirds of this number are children. In terms of age, the 4.6 million parents on AFDC are a young population: more than 50% are under 30, and about eight percent are under twenty, i.e., teenagers. However, about 42% of all single women currently receiving AFDC originally gave birth as teenagers (Cohen, 1994). Recipients represent diverse racial groups: 39% are African-American, 38 % are White, and 17% are Hispanic. Only a very small percentage of AFDC recipients, about 15%, receive continuous assistance for eight or more years. Most recipients are on and off the rolls for briefer spells (i.e., discrete periods of continuous receipt of AFDC). Approximately two-thirds of welfare recipients collect cash assistance for less than 2 years at a spell. About 50% of this population return at some point over the next five years, during another period of unemployment or hard times.

Educational Attainment and Skills

As a group, welfare recipients have significantly lower educational attainment and achievement than the general adult population. Cohen (1994) suggested that nearly 50% of welfare recipients have less than a high school diploma, as compared with 27% of the general adult population. In a study of the literacy skills of 106 randomly selected welfare recipients in Arkansas, Marsh II et al. (1990) differentiated three levels of literacy within the sample: 36% of the sample possessed "advanced literacy," i.e., functioning at nearly the eleventh-grade level in both reading and writing skills, and possessed average cognitive ability; 17% of the sample were functionally

literate, but were below average on cognitive ability; and 47% were functionally illiterate and were significantly below average on cognitive ability.

The findings by Marsh II et al (1990) were corroborated by Zill et al. (1991; cited in Cohen, 1994) who pointed out that there is considerable diversity within the population of welfare mothers in terms of literacy and employment experience. Nearly one quarter have cognitive achievement scores that are average or above, and 20% have at least two years of work experience in the previous five years. Therefore they are considered to "job ready." Those in the bottom half have extremely low literacy skills and meager employment skills that, when combined with feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, pose a very different challenge to education and employment programs. Also, Zill et al. (1991; cited in Cohen, 1994) observed that women who are long-term welfare recipients have lower cognitive achievement scores, less education, and somewhat lower self-esteem than short-term recipients. In addition, many welfare mothers suffer from conditions such as high levels of learning disability, poor physical health, depression, substance abuse, and low self-esteem, which can all pose severe barriers to success in education and employment programs.

The 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) also sheds some insight into the literacy proficiencies of welfare recipients. Although it did not address the question of welfare specifically, it did ask respondents if they received food stamps. It found that 27 to 31 percent of respondents in the two lowest levels, (i.e., levels 1 and 2) on each of the three literacy scales, (i.e., prose, document, and quantitative literacy) reported receiving food stamps compared to only 4 percent of respondents in the two highest levels (i.e. levels 4 and 5). The NALS also demonstrated a similar connection between literacy and poverty and employment. Nearly half (41 to 44 percent) of all adults in the lowest level on each literacy scale were living in poverty, compared with only 4 to 8 percent of those in the two highest proficiency levels. In terms of employment, on each of the literacy scales, more than half of the adults who demonstrated proficiencies in Level 1 were out of the labor force, i.e., not employed and not looking for work, compared with only 10 to 18 percent of the adults performing in each of the two highest levels.

The above literature suggests that many welfare recipients face numerous barriers to obtaining appropriate literacy skills. As a result of prior school experiences many may have low self-esteem and little confidence in their capacity to learn. As parents enrolled in adult literacy programs, they will likely be faced with competing demands on their time and attention. Cohen (1994) suggest that they also experience up to four times as many life events, e.g., such as loss of housing due to fire or eviction, family illness, unsafe housing conditions, domestic violence and neighborhood crime and violence requiring change and readjustment than other individuals. These events upset family stability and often interfere with efforts to persist in adult literacy programs. However, having survived poverty, stigmatization, and family and community crisis situations, the great majority of them have the fortitude and strength of character to persist in learning programs (even mandated programs) designed to address their learning needs (Friedlander and Martinson, 1996). Literacy providers are now faced with the question of how to provide the most appropriate learning opportunities for such learners.

Characteristics of Literacy Programs: Academic vs. Integrated

The need for welfare recipients to acquire a significant level of literacy within a two-year time

frame has prompted an increasing number of literacy providers to embrace an integrated approach to literacy and occupational skills training as a means to improve literacy instruction, knowledge retention, and students' motivation (Cohen, 1994). This transition from the more traditional "academic" approach represents a significant change not only in the philosophical orientation to teaching literacy skills, but in the entire scope of designing, implementing and evaluating the literacy effort. In Table 1, eleven categories of program attributes are depicted where the program types differ in their approach to the development of literacy skills among welfare recipients.

Academic Approach

Proponents of the academic approach believe that it is important to develop the generalized knowledge and skills of recipients. They place a premium on "symbol manipulation" where the learner is encouraged to master symbolic rules of various kinds (Resnick, 1987). Instructional objectives, course materials, and class instruction are organized around the identification, manipulation, and mastery of symbols, e.g., letters, words, numbers, formulas, etc., that are abstractions from contextual situations. In addition, academic programs also value the learner's ability to think independently, without the aid of physical and cognitive tools, e.g., notes, calculators, etc., (Resnick, 1987).

Proponents also, believe that recipients should be taught symbol manipulation and independent thinking skills via a focus on coding and decoding of abstract concepts (Resnick, 1987). The planning should be conducted by subject specialists and guided by the curriculum of K-12 schools (Mezirow, 1996). In this view, students learn best in classroom situations via drill and practice exercises conducted in individualized (and small group) sessions with the aid of teacher-made materials, workbooks, and computer programs.

Table 1.
Characteristics of Literacy Programs: Academic vs. Integrated

Program Attributes	Academic	Integrated
Purpose and Goals	Teach generalized knowledge and skills that are transferable to a wide variety of situations	Teach situation specific knowledge and skills that are applicable to a particular contextual situation, e.g., a particular job (Cohen, 1994)
Skills Developed	Symbol manipulation; independent thinking (Resnick, 1987)	Contextualized reasoning; employment of knowledge tools (Resnick, 1987)
View of Learning	Individualistic activity comprised of coding and decoding abstract concepts (Resnick, 1987)	Social phenomena occurring in specific situations that are applied to complex problems (Anderson, et al., 1996)
Planning	Guided by K-12 knowledge requirements and performed	A negotiated activity involving literacy personnel,

	by literacy directors, teachers, and others (Mezirow, 1996)	occupational skills specialists, clients, employers, payers and other stake holders
Curriculum Content	K-12 Subject Matter (Mezirow, 1996)	Academic skills w/in the context of occupation (Cohen, 1994)
Instructional Materials	Teacher made, workbooks, computer programs, and others (Mezirow, 1996)	Teacher made, computer-based simulated environments, authentic problems encountered in the workplace, case studies, and others (Resnick, 1987; and Anderson, et al., 1996)
Delivery Format	Individualized, groups, lecture and others	Coaching, small groups, lecture (Cohen, 1994)
Location	Classes, communities, homes, and others	Jobs skills centers, classrooms, workplaces, and others
Instructor Qualifications	Literacy specialists and generalists	Literacy instructors and occupational skills instructors
Time-Frame	1-Wk. to 3 (or more) years	Several days to 20 weeks
Student Outcomes	Certificates, e.g., GED, HS diploma (Mezirow, 1996)	Competence to perform in specific contextual situations

Integrated Programs

Integrated literacy/occupational skills programs attempt to integrate basic skills training with functionally meaningful content. Proponents of this approach argue that training by abstraction is of little use to adult low-literates seeking immediate entry into the workplace. They believe that to be truly skillful in a functional context, learners must develop situation-specific forms of competence, and they view learning as inherently a social phenomena, i.e., occurring in specific situations (e.g., work, family, etc.) that should be done on complex problems (Anderson, et al., 1996). Recognizing that in out-of-school learning situations most mental activities are engaged intimately with knowledge tools, (e.g., calculators, templates, procedural rules, and others) they argue that learners should be allowed to utilize the knowledge tools found in typical work environments and required to display their skills in complex workplace situations. Therefore, students learn new materials more efficiently as they use knowledge of their jobs, and the knowledge tools of the workplace, to develop literacy skills. In this way, education is made more meaningful as it elicits greater participation (and buy-in) from learners who need to see the relevance of what they are learning (Keeley, 1991).

Integrated programs are typically located in Job Centers, community agencies, and literacy centers. They attempt to closely simulate the targeted job setting and integrate basic skills education and job skills training. Occupations are targeted that have a demonstrated lack of

workers and only twelve to twenty clients are allowed to participate in each program. The programs range from several days to twenty weeks in duration. They are typically designed by administrators in negotiated arrangements with potential employers, social services representatives i.e., payers), curriculum planners, and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

National welfare reform will likely usher in a new era of literacy programming for adult literacy practitioners. As states design their versions of welfare reform, the pressure on literacy practitioners to provide a quick fix to the literacy needs of long-term welfare recipients will likely increase. Given this pressure it is tempting to make programming decisions on the perceived surface benefits of a particular approach to literacy.

Although both the academic and integrated approaches to literacy offer some appealing attributes to practitioners interested in effectively assisting welfare recipient in the transition from welfare-to-work, the jury is still out on their effectiveness with welfare recipients in both the short and long-term. More research and testing of the appropriate "mix" of attributes from each approach are required before committing limited resources to a particular approach.

References

Note: references will be provided upon request.