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Abstract: *This presentation reports the results of a study of adult literacy education classroom behavior in which twenty adult literacy classes were observed twice in seven states. It was found that in adult literacy classes the predominant mode of instruction closely parallels the initiation, response, evaluation (IRE) mode that Mehan (1979) identified in his study of an elementary education classroom.*

Introduction

In the United States, the federally-funded adult basic education program is the primary mechanism for serving the approximately 40 to 44 million adults (Kirsch et. al., 1993) who are in need of basic literacy education. Although from the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) and the National Evaluation of the Adult Education Program (NEAEP) we know a great deal about adult literacy education programs and their learners, we know very little about what happens in adult literacy education classrooms. Indeed, a literature search uncovered but one comprehensive study of classroom dynamics (Mezirow, Darkenwald & Knox, 1975) and that study is over twenty years old.

Methods

The present study is an analysis of the adult literacy education classroom behavior. Twenty classroom sites were selected to maximize program and learner diversity, and to that end, classes were selected to represent 18 characteristics which previous research had shown to be "shaping variables" of adult literacy instruction (e.g. geographic location, program type, urban/suburban/rural, instructional level of the class etc.). Classes were selected in seven states. For each class, data were collected on four occasions. First the class was observed by a trained observer. Then the teacher was interviewed. A second observation followed and finally students were interviewed when possible. The teacher interview was open-ended and was focused on the first observation in order to gather data about the teacher's intentions for and perceptions of the class observed. The interview also afforded the observer an opportunity to discuss with the teacher any episodes in the observation that needed clarification in respect to their meaning or purpose. After each data collection, detailed and comprehensive field notes were completed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data were analyzed using a grounded theory methodology. First, after thoroughly studying the over seventy sets of field notes which were 15 to 20 pages in length, a preliminary set of thematic categories was identified by the researchers. These categories were primarily descriptive of classroom dynamics and interactions. Then the field notes were entered into the NUDIST computer program for qualitative analysis. Starting with the preliminary categories, three researchers then coded the data and in the process identified new themes and refined and elaborated the initial themes. Periodically the coding of the three analysts was merged using the QSR Merge Computer Program and categories were collapsed, renamed, and expanded as necessary.

Findings

The Structure and Content of Instruction

The organizing unit for adult literacy education was a teacher-prepared and teacher-directed lesson. In reading, for example, learners were typically directed to read a passage selected for its perceived interest value to learners. In writing, learners were directed to write a passage such as a brief memoir or account of an experience. In math, learners were directed to solve a set of problems. In structure, the great majority of classes we observed closely paralleled the initiation, response, evaluation mode (IRE) identified by Mehan (1979) in his observational study of an elementary school classroom. Following initiation of the lesson, there followed response in the form of what Mehan termed an elicitation – a series of question and answer episodes designed to gauge whether learners had per-

formed the exercise correctly and to convey content.

The overwhelming predominant form of elicitation was a type Mehan defined as product elicitation, a sequence of questioning and answering designed to elicit correct, factual answers. Process elicitations, those that sought learners' opinions or interpretations, were much less common. Metaprocess elicitations, those that ask learners to reflect on the process of making connections, were extremely rare, and this is important because metaprocess elicitations can lead to higher order skill development such as critical thinking. After each elicitation episode there typically was a brief evaluation in which teachers praised learners with the correct answers or corrected those whose answers were wrong. During the initiation, elicitation and evaluation process, communication was almost always teacher to learner and learner to teacher. Communication among learners was rare.

Learners almost universally accepted the pre-eminence of the teachers' role as being legitimate. When teachers directed an activity, there was nearly universal compliance, sometimes after some good natured grumbling over less popular activities. In terms of what is taught and how, adult literacy education looks very much like the elementary education Mehan described. Moreover, the predominance of product elicitation suggests that adult literacy is strongly directed towards basic skills acquisition rather than towards higher order thinking and problem solving skills. We infer that the close parallels between elementary education and adult literacy education are a product of teachers' socialization in elementary and secondary education. Nearly all the teachers we encountered had been trained as elementary or secondary education teachers and the great majority had experience in the public schools. Most learners had also been socialized in this context at least up until the time they dropped out.

Classroom Interactions
While in its structure and content the classes we observed were similar to elementary and secondary education, norms governing classroom interaction differed in some respects from what one might expect in an elementary or secondary education classroom. In most classes there were learners who arrived up to 45 minutes late. They were rarely sanctioned negatively and usually fit into class with minimal acknowledgement or class disruption. In many classes there were students who tuned out for periods by leaving class for self-determined breaks, by staring out into space, by putting their heads down on the desk or table, by engaging in personal conversations not related to class and even by sleeping. This behavior was seldom sanctioned negatively by the teacher or other students. After tuning-out, learners usually re-engaged and it was rare that a class was disrupted because of learners' tuning out behavior. Teachers tended to attribute tuning out to learner fatigue, although observers' comments suggested that boredom was sometimes a factor. Learners usually chose where they would sit and cliques based on age, gender or ethnicity were evident in most seating selections.

Norms regarding helping and correcting varied among classes. In an extreme case, a class that was highly individualized, the teacher believed that only she should correct and help. She moved from student to student, usually in the order that students arrived, correcting their individualized work and delivering a mini-lesson based on their errors. Each of these sessions lasted about 20 minutes, and learners who had completed their work had to wait for the teacher's attention before they were permitted to move on. In many cases teachers directed learners to work in pairs or small groups where they corrected each others' work and helped each other. This was most common in math, in which case learners worked on math problems together, and in writing where learners sometimes edited each others work. In some classes students helping students was very common and natural. A student would write a sentence on the board, for example, and another student would correct it before the teacher had the opportunity, or a learner would ask another learner for help on a math problem because the teacher was busy elsewhere.

In nearly every case, teachers indicated that they were striving to create a nurturing, trusting classroom atmosphere and this was evident in observation. Teachers verbally rewarded learners when they were correct and virtually never took a punishing stance when learners made mistakes. Teachers attempted to reduce the social distance between themselves and learners through humor and by brief personal accounts of their likes and dislikes and personal out-of-class activities. In classrooms that were used exclusively for adult education, there was typically a bulletin board with student work dis-

played and other adult symbols. In such classrooms, students usually sat at tables or u-shaped arrangements rather than in rows.

Shaping Factors

Just as the structure and content of instruction and classroom interaction shaped what and how learners learn, classroom behavior was in turn shaped by factors internal and external to the classroom. Because teachers controlled instruction, their perspectives and backgrounds had a powerful influence on the classroom. When teachers were asked about what they intended to achieve in classes we observed, "to meet learners' needs" was the most common response followed by such things as to teach life skills, create a positive learning atmosphere and to engage and interest learners. These commonly expressed goals all focused on helping learners in ways that went considerably beyond the mere teaching of reading, writing and mathematics. Teachers said they were concerned with helping– helping learners to grow and develop, helping learners to become successful. In this respect, teachers clearly intended to act in learner centered ways. Yet an analysis of instructional structure and content leads to the conclusion that adult literacy education is primarily teacher directed. Teachers selected materials, created and delivered lessons, and directed learners to engage in activities. Learners almost always complied. There seems to be a contradiction here. If teachers intend to be learner centered, and if they control the classroom, how can a teacher-directed rather than a learner-centered classroom result?

We conclude that there are two intersecting meaning structures at work among teachers. On one hand, teachers are socialized to be teacher directed. That is what they know how to do. That is how they believe teachers are supposed to act. That is what their learners expect. That is what the system at large expects. For adult literacy education teachers, part of the very meaning of being a teacher has to do with being teacher-directed and that meaning is so deeply instilled that many teachers may not be cognizant of it. On the other hand, the meaning of being a teacher has a duality to it; in their attitudes, beliefs and aspirations for their teaching, teachers are decidedly learner centered. What results is a hybrid. While the conduct of the adult literacy class is primarily teacher-directed for all the reasons we have outlined, in their personal, affective relationships and interactions with learners, teachers behave in caring, supportive "learner centered" ways. In this sense, being learner centered is not a teaching technology or teaching methodology; it is a set of values that guide teacher-learner interactions.

A very powerful shaping factor is program configuration, defined as how the program is organized in respect to such factors and the number of hours per week classes meet, continuous or closed enrollment, and mixed or homogeneous learner skill levels. Hours of instruction per week varied from six to over 30. In some cases learners who were essentially illiterate were assigned to the same class as learners who were ready to pass the GED, while in others learners were at approximately at the same skill level. In continuous enrollment classes, students could enroll at any time and there was a constant flow of new learners, while in closed enrollment classes learners entered as a cohort and remained a cohort.

Together, these three components of program configuration influenced the ability of the class to function as an effective social system. When classes met only several hours a week, it was more difficult for shared meanings to develop regarding the purpose of activities and for rapport to develop between teachers and students and among students. More importantly, when the same learners were not present each week due to attrition and continuous enrollment, learners were less able to learn classroom routine and the meanings associated with classroom exercises and social interactions. Comparing stable classes that met 20 or more hours a week or more and had stable enrollments to less stable classes, in stable classes teachers seemed to attempt activities that were more complex and to conduct them more successfully. Learners were adept at helping each other and there was a smoother transition from activity to activity. More importantly, much more was accomplished in a given hour of instruction.

Mixed levels caused problems for teachers, especially if the ranges in skill level were substantial. Faced with this situation, teachers had three choices. They could teach to the entire class, in which case the activities were either too difficult or too easy for some learners. Indeed, some tuning out behavior was due to the boredom and/or frustration this sometimes caused for learners. Alternatively, they could use highly individualized instruction in which learners worked on their own with materials

selected at their skill level. These materials were usually kept in portfolios of folders. Although learners worked at an appropriate skill level in individualized classes, there was minimal social interaction among learners. Finally, teachers could group learners according to level, have them work individually or collaboratively on activities, and rotate from group to group to help and correct. This alternative was only possible when there a sufficient number of learners to establish groups and it presented difficult classroom management problems for teachers. Some teachers adopted an eclectic approach in which learners worked individually part of the time but were taught as a group when the material warranted.

Major changes in enrollment, student flow, and skill levels reeked havoc in two of the 20 sites. One class was a family literacy class originally comprised of welfare mothers whose children were in the early childhood component. Welfare reform had decimated the population of welfare learners, and to maintain class numbers, community members were invited to enroll. Previously, the commonality associated with gender and parenthood, and well as participation in child-parent activities, had caused the class to bond, but when the commonality disappeared, the class ceased to function well as a social system and the teacher never adapted. In a GED preparation class, a small class of learners who paid a fee to enroll was changed the next semester to a large open-enrollment, mixed level class into which the small class was merged. Although the teacher was reluctant to short-change her the original group of learners by starting at the beginning, she was faced with many new students with low skills. At the time of the second observation, the teacher used the same activities that had previously worked successfully with the small class, but these activities were now either too difficult or misunderstood by many new learners. The teacher, who sensed this from new learners' non-responses to her questioning and answering, became exasperated and responded with sarcasm directed towards learners.

Student characteristics such as age, ethnicity and gender were another shaping factor. In regard to age, in two classes there were a number of teenage dropouts who disrupted the class with joking behavior and loud personal conversations. In two classes of mixed racial composition there were mild inter-racial confrontations. In another class of primarily foreign-born, activities failed because the learners did not understand the teacher's directions. On the positive side, in a class of female welfare recipients, learners were able to discuss gender issues a personal level, something that probably would have been impossible had men been present, and a class of mixed ethnicity used immigration as a unifying theme for reading and writing.

Conclusions and Implications

When learners and teachers share meanings regarding classroom activities and the goals of instruction, and when classes are stable in respect to enrollment so that these shared meanings can develop, adult literacy education classes function as an effective social system directed toward learning. This finding suggests that policy makers should consider classroom stability to be a major factor contributing to instructional success. Continuous enrollment, classes that meet but several hours a week and mixed enrollments are practices that should be discouraged.

Although teachers strive to create a trustful, non-threatening learning environment, and to make the content of instruction relevant to learners, they control the process and content of instruction. The centrality of the teacher suggests that teacher competence is critical for instructional success. Accordingly, staff development should be expanded in both quantity and quality and access to it should be improved.

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