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Engagement: A Necessary Ingredient for Participation in Adult Basic Education

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Abstract: Education plays varying roles in efforts to reform the nation's welfare system. Some states provide adult basic education as a precursor to employment and career advancement. This study examined psychological and programmatic factors impacting this group of participants in adult basic education. Engagement was found to be a key variable.

Introduction

Education plays varying roles in the effort to reform the welfare system in the United States. Reports on the characteristics of adults who receive welfare show that more than 53% (Fox, Boyer, Cunningham, & Vickers, 1998) do not have a high school diploma or a GED. While some states have disregarded these low educational levels in a "work-first" philosophy, others have developed programs to provide basic-skills education and training as a precursor for employment and career advancement. Even though adult basic education programs are available to welfare recipients, along with childcare, transportation, and cash assistance for living expenses, not all who enroll attend regularly. Attendance has been a critical issue for adult basic education programs in this country. Statistics from various federal (Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1993) and state sources (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, 1992) indicate that from 26-70% of adults entering adult basic education do not complete the program.

According to the literature, four categories of factors appear to influence participation in adult education activities: (a) demographic characteristics of adult learners, such as age, race, gender, learning disabilities, and prior educational level (Dickinson, 1996); (b) psychological factors, such as self-esteem, locus of control, goal clarity, determination, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Beder, 1991); (c) situational factors, such as transportation, day care, health, and employment (Cramer, 1982; Jha, 1991); and (d) program variables, such as class size, program design, quality of instruction, and availability of counseling (Perin & Greenberg, 1994).

Research Focus

Motivation for participating in educational activities is complex. The complexity increases when participation is tied to receiving welfare benefits. The literature provides a framework for understanding the factors that impact participation in adult education. Do these same factors influence the participation of welfare recipients in adult basic education when their participation is part of a welfare-reform program? Demographic and situational factors have received considerable attention in evaluation of states' welfare-reform programs. At the time of this study, psychological and program factors had received little investigation. We were interested in

knowing if these factors contribute to participation in an adult basic education program for welfare recipients. From this perspective, attendance seemed to be one indicator of an individual's involvement or commitment to pursuing educational goals. This study examined a group of six exemplary adult basic education programs that reported higher than average attendance of welfare participants. The purpose of the study was to identify the program variables that might have led to this above average attendance in the programs studied.

Sample, Methodology, and Limitations

A purposive sample of six exemplary programs was identified based on a list of criteria that included enrollment, class attendance; and geographic location. In addition, program supervisors and professional developers recommended excellent teachers. Programs meeting the criteria were invited to be part of the study, and all those invited agreed to participate. Each program that met the criteria offered at least one class exclusively for welfare recipients that met for 20 hours a week. The small but diverse sample included programs that represented different regions of a southern state; was located in both urban and rural areas; and occurred in a variety of settings, including an adult education learning center, a public housing development, and a one-room school. The teachers were professionals who had at least three years' experience teaching adult basic skills to welfare recipients and more than five years of instructional experience in other educational settings. Participants were 31 welfare recipients who volunteered to participate in the study. Teachers and participants in the study were female, and the sample was multiethnic. The average age of the participants was 30 years. To be eligible to participate in an adult basic-skills program, participants had a literacy level below ninth grade as measured by a standardized achievement test. Most had left public school before they were 18, and more than 40% had been enrolled in a public school special education class. Half of this sample reported that they had had a negative school experience-the other half reported that they had not.

The research methods of this exploratory study were qualitative because this methodology provided the rich description necessary for discovering the attendance factors. Based on a description of these factors in the literature, we designed several types of data collection instruments, including a self-report questionnaire for teachers and adult learners, interview guides for teachers, an observation check list, and an essay question for learners that was administered by their teacher. Interviews were audiotaped, and all data were transcribed. Observations were conducted by the research team at each site during the visits. The adult learners wrote essays as a part of their regular instructional activities on the question, "What makes you want to keep coming to this class?" All data collected were analyzed for recurring themes at each site and then the data were analyzed across sites. No descriptors were used that would identify the participants.

The small purposive sample limited the breadth of the study but also provided the depth to begin identifying factors that added to participation. The study contributed interesting observations and raised questions concerning attendance and participation in adult education geared to welfare recipients. Researchers had informal conversations with and collected essays from participants.

Findings

Given the rich descriptive information obtained from the various data collection methods, we identified several factors that might have led to the increased attendance in our study sample. Findings were clustered into perceptions that were identified by two groups of respondents, teachers and participants. Teacher findings emerged from the data obtained from interviews, observations, and the preliminary teacher survey. Participant findings came from the data obtained from written essays, observations, and the preliminary learner survey.

Perceptions of Teachers

Three factors emerged from the data that described the teachers' perceptions of the reasons the participants in their classes had good attendance. These included the teachers' beliefs, relationships, and learning environments.

Beliefs describe the teachers' reasons for teaching that guide their instructional practice. All of the interviewed teachers related similar beliefs that can be summarized as "the desire to make a difference in someone's life." They expressed the belief that participants in their classes deserve respect and appreciation for their life journeys. Teachers persisted in helping participants achieve their goals, regardless of the obstacles. "You have to keep on," one teacher said, "and if this technique doesn't work, then you have to find another technique." Teachers believed that the participants in their classes could learn and that it was their job as teachers to figure out the best way for them to learn.

Relationships describe the connection a teacher makes with participants. While welfare clients who qualify agree to participate in adult basic education, they, according to several of the teachers interviewed, have concerns about what the experience will be like and, at times, question their decision. Teachers explained that they are very intentional about establishing a positive relationship with the participants in their classes. "It is essential that they know that we, as teachers, are on their team and we're pulling for them." Being respectful, appreciating learners' accomplishments, and viewing participants' past histories in a positive way are three means teachers utilize to develop positive relationships with the participants. Relationships also described the way teachers help foster rapport among the participants. Teachers related that relationships are fostered through teamwork, collaboration, peer coaching, and learners' assuming leadership roles because these activities lead to a sense of shared experience and common purpose. As one teacher said, "I'd rather they teach than I teach them because that empowers the person doing the teaching." Collaborative activities develop a sense of group cohesion. Another teacher said one of her most important tasks is to help connect a new learner to others in the class.

Learning environments describe a teacher's ability to create an effective educational setting and provide relevant content that meets learners' needs. Teachers reported that establishing an easily accessible and comfortable environment for the participating adults was important. Once the learning environment was created, providing relevant content that had meaning for the participants and was applicable to helping meet their needs was essential. Providing incentives and recognition was a strategy that teachers used to affirm and encourage achievement of learning goals. Incentives included both verbal expressions of approval and more tangible expressions, such as a luncheon in a participant's honor.

Perceptions of Adult Learners

The data collected from adult learners were similar in some ways to the teachers' perceptions and in other ways quite different. Perceptions that emerged clustered into three main categories: beliefs, relationships, and goals.

Beliefs describe the participants' reasons for attending adult basic education classes. Most of the participants related similar beliefs that can be summarized as "the desire to make a difference in their children's lives." Believing that they could "make something of myself" was a common thread mentioned by participants as well as believing it was important to "show others that I can do it."

Relationships, from the participants' perspectives, means belonging to a group-being cared about by others and helped through difficulties. "This class taught me a great deal," wrote one participant, "and all of these people care about me and they want me to make it. I know that I can with their help. I can never express in words how much this class and these people mean to me." Another wrote, "We help each other and we have a lot of fun." Participants viewed their teacher as someone to whom they could go with their questions, a person who was approachable. Relationships also described the relationship that participants have with their children. Being a role model for their children was the predominant reason adult participants gave for attending adult basic education and persisting, despite obstacles. One participant said, "I keep coming to this class for me and my children." Another said she continues to come to class "to better my life for me and my son." Most participants said their children were a compelling reason for them to learn and achieve. Even when talking about accomplishing personal goals, their children were often a part of their reasons.

Goals describe what participants hope to accomplish as a result of their participation in adult basic education classes. Some goals are short term, such as getting a driver's license. Other goals are intermediate, like passing the GED (General Education Development) test. Some goals are more long term, like getting a good job with benefits. Most participants linked their participation in class to obtaining their goals. "I never thought I was totally stupid," said one participant, "but after I dropped out of school to go to work, I knew that I would never have decent job." Participation in adult education is linked to obtaining a "decent job"; and, for many, the decent job is linked to creating a better life for their children.

Both teachers and adult learners were able to articulate the factors that contributed to attendance, and some items overlapped. With the exception of a few participants who mentioned learning work skills and comments by teachers about planning meaningful activities, the perceptions of both participants and teachers about the reasons for attendance in their classes were predominantly about the learning process or the learning environment rather than the subject matter or learning content.

Discussion

The findings in this study are consistent with the literature on the psychological and programmatic factors that appear to influence participation in adult basic education. However, the findings cluster into a group of factors that seem to imply that participants connect to the

program through particular means. We have used the term engagement to explain this connection that led to higher than average attendance in the classes in this study. Engagement is a phenomenon that connects an individual to an experience in a meaningful way. While engagement (Courtney, Jha, & Babchuk, 1994) is not a new concept, it has numerous applications in adult basic education. The data suggest that engagement is a stimulus for attendance and must be in place for learning to occur.

According to the participants in the study, engagement has at least three important interacting variables: (a) beliefs about teaching and learning, (b) relationships, and (c) the learning environment. The presence and interaction of these variables form the beginning of an engagement model of adult education. Engagement contributes to participation and, ultimately, to learning.

Beliefs About Teaching and Learning

The first variable in the engagement model is belief about teaching and learning. Teachers' beliefs that they can "make a difference" in someone's life translate into a positive image of the participants who attend their basic education classes. Teachers believed that adults were able to learn basic skills, regardless of their past history in educational activities. Perseverance was the word one teacher used to describe her talent of finding ways to teach participants, even when the participants had a barrier to learning, such as a learning disability. Most participants reported that they believed that attending the adult basic education class was worthwhile and that this was a way they could "make something of themselves," which for many meant living on their own without public assistance and having a job that provided benefits for them and their families.

Relationships

The second variable in the engagement model is a set of relationships: the relationship between the teacher and the participant; relationships among the participants; and the relationships the participants have with their children, families, and friends. The relationship between the teacher and the participant plays a key role in engagement. Teachers expressed the positive regard and respect they have for the adults who bring a variety of life experiences to an educational activity. Most see themselves as a mentor or an advocate for the participant in the complex bureaucracy of welfare-reform programs. The teacher's intentional effort to establish rapport contributed to the participant's ability to connect with the teacher. Interactions between teachers and participants showed a mutual respect and acceptance. Teachers created multiple opportunities for participants to form relationships with each other because these relationships helped mitigate the sense of isolation experienced by some participants when they enter an educational program as an adult. Teachers designed learning activities in which participants worked as teams, collaborated on projects, and acted as peer coaches. Learning activities that helped participants "connect" to one another fostered mutual support and formed the basis of a social network inside the classroom.

Participants said their relationships with one another made a difference in their ability to succeed. They reported a feeling of belonging, being cared about by others, and being helped through their difficulties. Through formal and informal activities, participants had the opportunity to learn together. Participants also described the relationships they have with their children as being a compelling motivator to learn. Although the children were not physically

present in this study, they appeared in many of the essays written by participants. Most participants' goals involved their children and their desire to make a better life for them. Relationships provided a platform on which the participants could engage in the educational endeavor.

The Learning Environment

The third variable in the engagement model is the learning environment, and teachers take responsibility for establishing this. The teachers in this study said that a learning environment should be accessible, especially for adults who have been away from a formal educational setting for some time. In addition, based on observations, the location was suitable for adults, with space to work together on teams or in groups. Teachers experimented with a variety of methods and materials to help engage participants in the learning process. Active participation in class, including assuming a leadership role, contributed to establishing a favorable learning environment.

Conclusion

Although adult basic education is available and even extends the period that welfare recipients can continue to receive benefits, many do not take advantage of this opportunity. Of the factors thought to impact the participation of adults who receive welfare, program factors are most directly under the influence of the teacher. This qualitative study identified that programmatic factors that six exemplary programs with higher than average attendance of adult learners had in common. This research suggests that these teacher-and-learner-identified factors cluster into an engagement model over which a teacher exercises significant control, which then influences attendance in the adult education classes of welfare recipients. If so, the possibility exists that variables can be strengthened in other programs, thereby increasing engagement and attendance and, therefore, learner success.

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