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Adult Students and Adult Literacy Practitioners Disconnected: Differing Perspectives of Adult Students' Needs

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to identify adult literary students' needs by interviewing both adult students enrolled in a variety of literacy programs and adult literary practitioners instructing and administering these programs.

Introduction

A large portion of low-literate adults in the United States does not participate in adult literacy programs (Hayes, 1988). A reason for this might be that students feel that their values and past experiences are not accepted by adult literacy programs (Ozanne, Adkins, & Sandlin, 2005). If this is going to change, adult literacy programs need to be tailored to meet the diverse needs of adult students (Wagner & Venezky, 1999). But how do programs know what their students need and what they should do to meet these needs? The purpose of this paper is to describe the needs of adult students as defined by students and adult literacy practitioners.

Relevant Literature and Theoretical Framework

There have been very few articles written about the needs of adult students (Darkenwald & Hayes, 1989; Sissel, 2001). They state there had been "few attempts made to assess adults' attitudes toward continuing education" (Darkenwald & Hayes, 1989, p. 197). This same statement was made twelve years later by Sissel (2001). Sissel claimed that since 1981 "the experiences of adult learners, and their learning needs, interests and styles have not been well attended" (Sissel, 2001, p.103).

Hayes and Valentine (1989) identified three main categories of needs that adult students themselves had identified: everyday reading and writing tasks, math and measurement tasks, and special literacy tasks (Hayes & Valentine, 1989). Venezky (1990) defined three levels of literacy: basic literacy as "the level that allows self-sustained development in literacy" (p. 11); required literacy as "the literacy level required for any given social context and which might, therefore, change over time, place, and social condition" (p. 11); and functional literacy as "a general designation of abilities above basic literacy, allowing some level of functioning through print in society" (p. 11).

Quigley (1997) stressed that adult practitioners should take a more active role in figuring out their students' needs. They need to know what their current students need from an adult education program as well as the needs of "non-participating adults" (Quigley, 1997, p. 241). Once adult practitioners know the needs of both of these groups, they can make the teaching and/or programmatic changes needed. Quigley's framework allows each practitioner to know what their students needs – the needs of adult students in a border town might be quite different from the needs of adult students in the Midwest. Applying Quigley's (1997) practitioner driven framework to this study, practitioners might realize that they are" more than passive participants in a system governed by political and public initiative" (Quigley, 1997, p. xii).

Method

During the spring of 2005, I analyzed data gathered from a pervious study that had been conducted with adult students and adult literacy practitioners throughout the state of Texas. The purpose of this study was to determine the needs of adult learners. The adult students consisted of adult literacy students enrolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE/GED) and English as a Second Language (ESL), while the adult literacy practitioners were adult literacy directors, supervisors, coordinators, teachers, volunteers, tutors, and professional development specialists working in state funded, community based, and faith based literacy programs.

Sample

A total of 171 individuals participated in the 22 focus group interviews conducted during Fall 2004. Of the 171, 96 were adult students enrolled in an adult literacy program and the remaining 75 individuals were adult educators. In total, there were 13 focus group interviews conducted with adult learners. At times, Adult Basic Education (ABE) students and Adult Secondary Education (ASE/GED) students were interviewed together because they were both taught by the same instructor. Out of the 96 adult learners, 35 were enrolled in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class, 25 were enrolled in an ABE class, and 36 were enrolled in an ASE/GED class. All of the adult students were at various stages of their course work. Their interview schedule consisted of questions dealing with why they were in the program, what they expected to achieve while in the program, what characteristics make individuals successful workers, parents, and community members. The adult students participating in this study were compensated 15 dollars for their time.

Of the 75 adult practitioners interviewed, 7 were from professional development agencies in Texas and the other 68 were a mix of adult literacy directors, supervisors, coordinators, teachers, volunteers, and tutors. Their interview schedule was very similar to the adult learners' schedule. Questions on the adult literacy practitioners interview included why they thought individuals enrolled in adult literacy programs, what are students learning in their classrooms/programs, and what characteristics make individuals successful workers, parents, and community members.

Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, generic qualitative analysis (Merriam, 1998) was used to analyze the focus group interviews. The two groups of focus group interviews (the adult students and adult educators) were analyzed separately. After coding the data, similar codes were grouped together to create categories. After categories from the two data sets were completed, they were compared with each other which resulted in the findings presented of this paper.

Findings

When comparing the two data sets (categories developed from the adult learners; interviews and categories developed from the adult practitioners' interviews) I noticed the adult students and the adult educators did not identify all of the same needs. During the interviews when the adult students discussed how they were community members, parents/family members, and workers, they described the characteristics they had which made them successful community members, parents/family members, and workers. This contrasted with how the adult educators'

responded to the questions dealing with how adult students were community members, parents/family members, and workers. They focused on what skills/knowledge the students did not have. These lacking skills/knowledge were identified as the students' needs.

Adult Students' Needs

While analyzing the data, I noticed that only when asked about their best and worst class experiences did the students discuss what they needed. The needs mentioned by students included: 1) having comfortable learning environments; 2) having support networks; and 3) obtaining better-paying jobs.

Comfortable learning environments. Many of the adult students discussed how they needed to feel comfortable to be able to learn. Most of them compared the feeling of comfort that they felt in the adult education program to that of the discomfort they felt while attending high school. ABE student:

> I'm more comfortable here than in high school. There was too much pressure and too many things going wrong. If you fell behind, they just passed me because they wanted to. Here, you take your pace. If you don't know how to do it, you ask questions, they help. That's what's good about it. They have the time and they take time to teach you the right way. They don't try to push out the door, 'Well, I don't have time for you'. Everybody learns at their own pace, yet they all learn at the same time. I enjoy it, I really do.

Support networks. Some students grew up in an environment where they did not feel they were supported. Most of the adult students interviewed had quit school early and never received a high school diploma, but they were at time in their lives when they felt they could go back to school – they felt supported. GED student:

> My home upbringing, it wasn't as well as it should have been and I didn't have a whole lot of self-esteem to finish school. When I didn't want to come to school, I didn't have to come to school.

Better paying jobs. Even though many of the adult students interviewed were not employed at the time of the interview, many of them said the reason they were in the adult education class was to get a better paying job. GED student:

> The reason I want to get my GED is because here is real low in employment and I wanted to get one of the high paying jobs here. It's a good town, but I just wanted a better paying job.

The adult students did state that they were in the adult literacy programs to learn reading, writing, and math, but they did not state it as a need. The only time they discussed reading, writing and math was when asked why they were enrolled in the program.

Perceived Adult Learners' Needs by Adult Literacy Practitioners

The findings for the adult literacy practitioners were categorized into one main category - perceived adult learners' needs. Adult literacy practitioners mentioned several needs that they perceived adult students in their programs lacked. These needs were grouped into 4 categories: the students needed to have: (a) certain knowledge, attitude, and skills, (b) basic needs met, (c) jobs, and (d) a support network; General Educational Development (GED) Diploma.

Knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The adult literacy practitioners described how adult students that came into their classrooms were lacking academic knowledge (applying what was taught in

the classroom to their lives outside of the classroom), a positive attitude (students being motivated, optimistic, and having high self-confidence) and lacking a number of skills including academic skills (reading, writing, and mathematics), interpersonal skills (communicating with others, time-management, organizational skills, problem solving, and goal setting), workforce skills (team work skills, job-readiness, multi-tasking, and technology), and critical thinking skills. GED instructor:

A lot of times we even do a mock interview, that I'll give assigned students something to do, they've got to apply for this job... an activity where we put them in situations.
ESL instructor:
I put my ESL students on computer right off when we start classes twice a week. And most of them have, don't have computer at home and don't know anything about the computer. Within a week to two weeks, they can go on by themselves, they can find the program they are working on, and you just see the confidence building in them.
Adult Literacy Program Coordinator :
What we cover in our orientation is about commitment… establishing realistic goals for one self and committing to those goals. When is it okay to give up on a goal? That you're not a failure because you didn't achieve a gold letter. You might have to redirect, you have to be flexible.
GED instructor:
We want them to learn team work. We want them to learn the social skills that they need when they go into the work place because of all the students that come back to us saying that they gotten fired, it's not learning, it's not learning all the basics.
ABE instructor:
I also want our students to walk away with better critical thinking skills. I think if you can read and then analyze and understand what you've read and then can be able to communicate that to someone, it helps you do the other things, like be able to communicate either with the written word or the spoken word.

Basic Needs Met

Many of the practitioners mentioned that adult students needed basic needs -such as transportation, child care, money, and shelter- met before they completed an adult education program. ESL program supervisor:
There's a point at which they can't respond well to curriculum and to things until some of those basic needs have been taken care of.

Support Networks

Some adult education practitioners believed that their more successful students, students who were able to complete the program, had a support network made up of family and friends. GED instructor:
Another thing that I've seen that helps students a great deal is a support system. They can have all this motivation and all these plans and all these desires but if they get no support at home or at church or in school. They need a complete support system.

Jobs

Even though most of the adult students in adult education programs were not employed, adult education practitioners stated that they needed jobs. The adult education practitioners

explained that without a GED and limited job skills, a lot of the adult students would not be able to apply for jobs. GED instructor:

> A lot of the students that don't have a high school diploma yet or GED are relying on lower-end jobs. And many of them are femoral, they jump from one to another. And when they get a chance for something better, they jump at it. And as a result of that, in many cases, some of the students are not able to finish the month.

Getting a GED

The adult education practitioners believed that adult students needed to earn their GED, because many of the adult students did not have a high school diploma. Having a GED meant that they could apply for more jobs and for post-secondary education, such as trade school, community college, or university. GED instructor:

> The students see their need for a GED or some kind of high school completion for employment or for higher education and a few of them just come because they just want to they feel a personal need for high school completion.

Discussion

Some of the needs identified by the students were not the same needs identified by the adult educators. Needing comfortable learning environments and support networks were not mentioned by educators, while having basic needs met and earning a GED diploma were not mentioned as needs by adult learners. Both groups did discuss all of these issues. Students did talk about earning a GED, but they did not see it as a need – perhaps because they were presently enrolled in a program working towards a GED. Educators did explain that it was important for the students to have support networks, but they did not see it as a need – perhaps because they could not teach how to develop a support network, it is something that the students have or do not have.

Applying Quigley's framework, I noticed that some of the adult practitioners are in touch with their students needs - both the students and educators identified jobs as one of the learners' need. However, the students needed better paying jobs, not just jobs. Over half of the students interviewed when asked if they worked, said that they worked part time or were in between jobs. They thought that by earning a GED diploma or learning English they would be able to compete for a job, a better paying job. The educators also mentioned that the students having a GED diploma or learning English would help them obtain a job. This suggests that educators might be Quigley's (1997) passive participants in that they are not focusing on the needs of the students or potential students. Instead they are focusing on external factors, such as program needs, funding issues, and community support, to determine what they teach in their classrooms.

This difference between the perceptions of students' needs is in line with what other studies have suggested. Ozanne, Adkins, and Sandlin (2005) report literacy education programs have very little understanding of what their students already know. These programs often assume that students are deficient in some way and through participation in education programs their needs will be met. Bean (1997) states that adult students' needs cannot be taught in the classroom by using workbooks, but by teachers valuing the students' diversity and life experiences. However, these studies do not actually identify the needs of the students, while this study did.

This study has potential implications for both adult education theory and practice. The apparent disconnect between the teachers' perceptions of students' needs and the students' own

perceptions of those needs suggests that there is a lack of communication between the two groups. The adult practitioners interviewed appear to have decided what is to be taught, how it is to be taught, and perhaps most importantly, why it is to be taught. The result of this is that the very people who are the actual participants of the adult literacy programs (Cervero & Wilson, 1994) are being taught by a by a group of professionals claiming they know what is best for the learner. This is a critical issue to the credibility of the field and additional research is needed to further expose this disconnect.

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