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Kimberly R. Burgess
Western Governors University, USA

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Teachers’ Responses to Accountability in ABE Practice
Kimberly R. Burgess
Western Governors University, USA

Abstract: Accountability policies in most states strongly shape how adult education literacy is defined and delivered in adult education programs. This paper examines how teachers in this study respond to the pressure and demands of a performance-based education system.

Every adult basic education (ABE) program, and therefore all teaching practice conducted within the program, takes place within the framework of a specific situation or context comprised of dynamic elements, and is profoundly influenced by those elements (Kowalski, 1988). In a dissertation study of factors informing and shaping teacher choices in adult basic education, accountability emerged as a major influence on how teachers constructed their practice and made decisions in the classroom (Burgess, 2003). The purpose of this paper is to explore how teachers in adult basic education settings interpret and negotiate the demands of state accountability systems.

Accountability as an Influence on Practice in Adult Education

Although research on the various influences on teaching choices in adult education is growing and varied (Brown, Cervero & Johnson-Bailey, 2000; Dirkx, Pratt & Taylor; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998; Pratt & Associates, 1998; Tisdell, 1993; Young, 1997), discussion on the specific influence of accountability is sparse. Sparks & Peterson (2000) discuss at-depth the varying definitions of accountability that exist within the field of adult education and how those differences impact what is measured and delivered. They acknowledge the pre-occupation with numerical outcomes at the government and public levels in what they term a “technocratic discourse” of accountability, but add that experts, or practitioners, define accountability according to their own beliefs concerning learners’ needs, even if these beliefs contradict with learners’ own choices.

In Florida, adult education monies are allocated to local educational agencies through a funding formula based upon prior year funding (85%) and the attainment of literacy completion points (LCPs) and reported placements (15%) (State of Florida, 2002). Students earn LCPs as they achieve eligible gains from one level to the next according to TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education) scores, mastering subject matter competencies, or ultimately receiving the GED (General Education Diploma). At the local level, this means that funding relies on both last year’s performance as well as this year’s performance against the state core indicators.

Methods and Data Sources

The original research study explored the question, “What are the cultural and contextual factors that inform and shape practice in adult basic education?” Fifteen ABE/GED teachers from two school districts in Florida were purposefully sampled. Primarily borrowing from ethnographic traditions, data for this study was collected through in-depth interviewing, participant observation, and document analysis. Data were coded and analyzed in a constant, comparative format (Merriam, 2002). Common themes were identified across the data. Four teachers were interviewed for a third time to triangulate the initial themes.
Findings and Discussion

Although all teachers understood the importance of literacy completion points (LCPs) as they relate to their individual classrooms, their responses – that is, how they incorporated that process into their everyday decision making differed between two different groups. In the first group, the achievement of the measurable outcomes was an integral part of their thought processes, and profoundly influenced their decisions. They spent the majority of time navigating the system and fashioning “tricks of the trade” to achieve greater results. They utilized primarily individualized or teacher-directed instruction, relied heavily on the commercial materials available, and refrained from enrolling students in content that was unlikely to produce positive results. They did not concentrate on these goals because they agreed with the ideals of the policy, nor did they necessarily equate success with progression or completion. On the contrary, these teachers shared a sense of urgency in gaining LCPs purely as a means of job survival.

In contrast with teachers who emphasized outcomes, other teachers in the study instead verbalized a desire to focus on content and learning, regardless of outcomes. Instructional practices in these classrooms included group work, reflective practice, and peer instruction. Content in the classroom focused on life beyond completion, such as public speaking or workforce development. In interviews teachers voiced a lack of concern for the consequences of not meeting their goals, and believed that an emphasis on measurable outcomes would be in conflict with their own conceptions of what teaching really should be.

Despite the differences in approaches to the influence of measurable standards, most teachers embraced the notion that the catalyst for student success lies in the achievement of basic skills. The instructional practices in these programs reflected a definition of literacy as skills (Beder & Medina, 2001; Fingeret, 1992), characterized by teacher-centered instruction, reliance on commercially published materials, organized and chronological lessons, emphasis on traditional subject areas, and a high degree of teacher-learner/learner-teacher interaction. Beder (1991) argues that this approach is “generally effective” because it is systematic and organized (p. 145). These practices are supported by state policy, because they move learners toward state-defined goals for adult basic education and satisfy accountability measures. Amstutz (2001) argues that it is this decontextualized instruction that drives learners from adult education programs.

Teachers should be held accountable for the quality of adult education instruction as well as the outcomes of such instruction. In addition, they should be provided with curriculum that provides contextualized literacy instruction without sacrificing the achievement of measurable goals. This will allow teachers to focus on instruction rather than navigation, and to include learners’ experiences into the discussion.

Selected References

