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Framing Adult Learners: From Heroic Victim to Capable Comrade

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Abstract: This qualitative research synthesis of portrayals of adult literacy learners identified five types of "characters" that can have a powerful impact on how the "action" of practice, policy, and research are shaped.

The 2013 results of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, (PIAAC) found that only 12% of adults scored at the highest literacy level and 1 in 6 scored at the two lowest levels. Statistics can be parsed into meaningful demographic information to establish, for example, the relationship between literacy level and age, gender, educational attainment, and race/ethnicity.   Yet statistics tell us little about who these learners are, including what experiences and resources they bring to the classroom and what challenges they face that may impede learning. Quigley (1997) advanced our descriptive knowledge of how low literate adults are portrayed in popular culture and political discourse, but to date there has been no similarly systematic analysis of the research literature to synthesize descriptions of adult literacy learners. Such an analysis is important because it can clarify and problematize assumptions that drive how we address the needs of learners in practice, research, and policy.

We engaged in this process by identifying qualitative studies that describe adult literacy learners as either their primary purpose or as background to research with other purposes. We focused on what they said about who learners are and what experiences, resources, and skills, as well as challenges and struggles they bring to the classroom. We came to realize that our search told us more about the ways in which researchers portray adult literacy learners than about the learners themselves. Therefore, the question that guided our analysis of the literature became, "In what ways are adult literacy learners portrayed in the research literature?" We argue here that these portrayals are important to analyze because they play a meaningful, if indirect, role in influencing practice, research, and policy.

Theoretical Framework

Street's (1984) socio-cultural view of literacy played a seminal role in articulating the ideological notion that conceptions of literacy are socially constructed, mediated by history, culture, and the dynamics of power and class. This suggests that how and what people read and write is specific to the setting, the task, the text, the reader/writer, and the intended audience. In this conception of literacy, what the reader/writer brings to the task is of significance, as is the social context in which literacy events (Barton, 1994) occur. What Street called an autonomous view of literacy, in contrast, assumes that literacy is a set of neutral and discrete skills uninfluenced by social context.

Research Methods

In order to address our research question, we believed a qualitative research synthesis was appropriate as a way to move beyond the rather two-dimensional portrait that can be generated through demographic analysis. While a literature review is summative and descriptive, Sandelowski and Barroso (2007) distinguish the purpose of a research synthesis as

focusing primarily on interpretation as a way to make "connections between existing studies [and] …identify gaps and omissions in a given body of research [which] enables dialogue and debate" (p. 3).

     To locate sources for this synthesis, online searches were conducted using EBSCOhost to connect to Academic Search Premier and ERIC, as well as an online university library catalogue. The searches were geared towards locating qualitative research published between 1980 and 2013in peer review journals, technical reports published by the federally funded research centers on adult literacy, book chapters, and book length studies that included substantial descriptions of adult literacy learners either in or out of class. The search terms "adult basic education," "adult student," "literacy," "student attitudes," and "adult learning" were used to generate a list of journal sources.

Ways of Looking

     Synthesizing descriptions of adult learners have not previously been based on reviews of research. Instead, they have tended to derive from analyses of non-scholarly texts, especially popular culture or literacy program materials.   (1994) and Sticht (2005) identified predominant metaphors used to describe the "problem" of adult literacy, and by extension the adults who have low literacy skills.   Ilsley and Stahl found schooling, medicine, military, and banking metaphors which suggest, respectively, that low literacy adults are like children, diseased (or the cause of societal ills), menacing enemies, or receptacles. Sticht (2005, para. 2) added the psychotherapy, business, economic, revolutionary, and parent metaphors which. These metaphors suggest that learners have low self-esteem, are customers (but not savvy consumers), capital, oppressed, and helpless. All nine of these metaphors are at worst infantilizing or dehumanizing, and at best take a deficit view of learners which negates their resources, knowledge, and experiences.

     In contrast, Fingeret (1983) conducted a seminal study describing low literate adults which was transformative for many researchers and practitioners. She argued against a deficit perspective using ethnographic field work to reveal that low literate adults are interdependent rather than dependent, as deficit theory suggests. Fingeret found that reading and writing are two of many skills that contribute to a social network in which goods and services are freely exchanged.

Literacy Learners as Character Types

     Our analysis of the literature revealed no single portrayal of literacy learners. Instead, we found that adult learner descriptions seem to fall into five types of characters: Heroic Victim, Needy (Problem) Child, Broken (but Repairable) Cog, Pawn of Destiny, and Competent Comrade.   To be clear, we are not arguing that these five represent all learners; rather they represent the ways in which learners are portrayed in the research literature.   Propp (1968) asserted that characters shape narrative action.   Although research and narrative stories are obviously different, we suggest that adult literacy learner character types featured in research do imply distinct narratives that help drive the "action" in research, policy, and practice. Making them more transparent through our analysis can clarify the ways in which adult learners are studied and described that have very real consequences for the adult literacy learning opportunities that are provided.

Heroic Victim

     Quigley's "Heroic Victim" character may be common in popular culture and public relations and marketing materials, but there are few examples of it in the research literature.   Heroic Victims experience significant turmoil and personal challenges but are not

deterred in their desire to learn and eventual success. Typically, Heroic Victim portrayals include highly personal and troubling details about learners' lives that often seem gripping but irrelevant. In general, these pieces tend to focus on who or what could undo the victimization of the learners, the triumph of individual willpower, and the redemptive power of literacy to heal deep emotional injury and trauma and overcome many situational obstacles.

Needy, Problem (Child)

The Needy, Problem (Child) character portrayed in the research literature describing adult literacy learners is common. Learners are portrayed as deeply needy, vulnerable and having huge emotional and situational challenges that may never be overcome (DeJesus, 2008; Gillespie, 2001; Siedow, 2005). Sometimes these learners were portrayed as being unaware that they are capable of academic success and even childlike (Snow and Strucker, 1998). They were also sometimes described in terms of cognitive impairments and severe learning difficulties (Snow & Strucker, 1999; Wilson & Morales, 2008). This character does not get the happy, triumphant endings experienced by Heroic Victims (Merritt, Spencer, & and Withers, 2002; Snow & Strucker, 1999). Instead, they were portrayed as mired in need and unable to rise above it. They come to programs with heavy, negative baggage about school and their ability to learn, and they need intensive personal support in order to succeed (Dann-Messier & Kampits, 2004).

Broken (but Repairable) Cog

Research that portrays the Broken (but Repairable) Cog adult literacy learner character takes a more technical approach to describing learners. Here, low literacy is just one piece, albeit broken, of many that make up the learner. "Repair" is possible as long as the right tools and strategies are applied. The causes of low literacy, as well as the solutions, seem to be emotionally, politically, and culturally neutral. The "fix" can be applied with equal success, if executed correctly, to all learners. While the Needy, Problem character seems based in the deficit perspective Fingeret debunked (1983), the Broken Cog character seems an outgrowth of an autonomous view of literacy. It shifts away from the problems of the learner toward the more abstract and disembodied challenge of reading improvement. The problems are not highly personal, and the solutions seem to be less about the person than the tools. Studies that seem to portray learners as broken cogs pointed to brain-based processing problems or misconceptions about reading and writing as causes of difficulty. Unlike the Heroic Victim and Needy, Problem characters, however, the Broken Cog descriptions of challenges were emotionally neutral and avoided gratuitous depictions of personal difficulty (e.g., Comings et al., 2001).

Pawn of Destiny

Some researchers portrayed adult literacy learners as characters whose destinies are deeply influenced by social forces. In particular, poverty and gender- and race-based inequality were assumed to have played a significant role in limiting their opportunities to become fully literate (D'Amico, 2003; Horsman, 1990). In general, "blame" for low literacy and program participation rates is assumed to lie outside the individual; instead it is attributed to disparity of opportunity grounded in inequality. In addition to placing boundaries on learning, researchers asserted that gender, race, and socio-economic status influence the ways in which learners read (Cuban, 2001), write, view learning (Earl, 1997; Garner & National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, 2008), and interact with instructors and tutors.

Competent Comrade

Research portraying the Competent Comrade character is at the opposite end of the continuum from that which describes learners as needy and even childlike. According to researchers, for example, Competent Comrades follow the same developmental trajectory (Helsing, Drago-Severson, & Kegan, 2003) and read for the same reasons as more highly literate adults (Belzer, 2006; Cuban, 2003). Their biggest obstacles to learning are similar to other adult learners: the difficulty of meeting the multiple demands of being a parent, worker, and student (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006). Although they may not be strongly capable readers and writers, these characters are portrayed as fully functional adults (DeJesus, 2008; Snow & Strucker, 1999). Like others who need help in areas where they lack skills (e.g., preparing tax returns or fixing leaky pipes), Competent Comrades' need for literacy assistance is more normalized (Fingeret, 1983). Competent Comrades were portrayed as dedicated, motivated, engaged, self-reliant, and resilient learners (Beder, 200; Reder & Strawn, 2006) who are capable of making decisions about their learning, informing research, and shaping policy.

How Characters Matter

In identifying the presence of these five character types in a body of research, we are not asserting the accuracy of any. However, we do suggest that each is likely to drive action in distinct ways because they are aligned with different ideologies and suggest distinctive responses in terms of policy, practice, and research.

The Heroic Victim character implies a "bootstraps" ideology in which learners can overcome great difficulty if only determined and motivated enough. To some extent this view of adult learners seems to absolve programs and teachers of responsibility for successful outcomes. Instead they are attributable to individual gumption, effort, and steadfastness rather than an effective teacher or well run program; programs, practitioners, and policies are often relegated the background. The implications for practice are limited to strategies that target the individual, such as bolstering motivation and addressing situational barriers to participation. At best, a policy response to this character (other than simply funding programs of any kind) might seek to increase extrinsic motivation by imposing a combination of consequences for those who fail to participate and incentives for those who do. Researchers playing their role in this narrative might seek to deepen understanding of who Heroic Victims are, how they differ dispositionally from other learners, and how programs and policies could cultivate deep intrinsic motivation that might give all students the same kind of commitment to prevail that is demonstrated by this type.

The Needy, Problem (Child) descriptions of adult learners tend to perpetuate a deficit narrative and can mask learners' resources, skills, and competencies that could be used as resources for learning. They can also obscure the structural challenges of poverty and inequality that create barriers to participating and progressing. When descriptions of adult literacy learners equate them with younger learners, it suggests a narrative in which it is appropriate for practitioners to borrow liberally from the research base on literacy instruction for children, especially in the absence of similar research on adult learners, despite limited evidence that this is appropriate.

The fixer-upper approach implied by the Broken Cog character fails to take into account how complex and multi-faceted both literacy and adult learners are. It seems to operate in a narrative which denies the influence of learner identity and experience, as well as the purpose and contexts for literacy specific to the individual (Street, 1984). This suggests that teachers need not tailor instruction to the particular contexts their learners live in or aspire to. Instead, they are impelled to seek the "perfect" instructional tools or program structure and assume they will be effective under all circumstances. The research action in this narrative is scientific,

focuses on skill development, and assumes clear causal and generalizable relationships between instructional interventions and outcomes. The policy climate in this narrative pushes for standardization and focuses on easily measured and quantitative outcomes.

The research and practice narratives for the Pawn of Destiny character would seek to understand and respond to the ways in which social and cultural conditions influence the construction of meaning regarding literacy and participation in literacy programs. In turn, this narrative would complicate policy rather than the usual tendency to simplify and seek a unified metanarrative (Roe, 1994). However, acknowledging the complicated and challenging ways in which socially constructed learner characteristics mediate and sometimes limit opportunities for learning can also let programs off the hook as failure to have an impact on literacy abilities can be attributed to forces external to and beyond the control of learners, teachers, and programs. A Competent Comrade view of learners suggests that they can and should be integrally involved not only in classroom and program decisions, but in research and policy making. Although lacking literacy skills, they are viewed as well resourced in other ways . Researchers in this narrative actively involve learners as participants, not subjects, in knowledge generation to help the field understand their experiences and more effectively meet their needs.

Conclusion

We have argued here that adult literacy characterizations in research drive research, policy, and practice action just as key characters do in narratives. There is no sense in arguing that one character type is a better or more accurate portrayal of adult learners than another. Rather, it is important to acknowledge that the narrative that emerges is shaped by the foregrounding of different characters. The characters that can be found in research depend on which aspect of adult literacy learners researchers choose to focus. This seems to us to be a choice that can be consciously made, but often is not.   The fact that the view of learners is so variable and without empirical imperative suggests how important it is to be aware of the ways in which narrative action in research, policy, and practice is shaped by the characters with which researchers, policy makers, and practitioners populate their work. These views lead to very different consequences for learners as they participate in programs, and likely contribute to different outcomes as well. Different characters will drive the action toward different endings. After this examination, perhaps the question to pose is, what is the narrative's intended ending?

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