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# The Short Shrift? Policy Implications for Low-Scoring African American Students in Pennsylvania Adult Education Programs

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**Abstract:** This paper presents findings from a critical analysis of Pennsylvania adult literacy policy and program participation rates by race and educational functioning level to address the question of the provision of equitable educational services to African American participants assessed as reading at a 5th grade level equivalent and below.

## Introduction

African American and Hispanic adults comprise a disproportionate percentage of American adults at the lowest levels of literacy skill (OECD, 2013). Meanwhile, federal and state policies governing adult basic education<sup>16</sup> programs place a continually increasing emphasis on measurable, reportable outcomes related to literacy proficiency, post-secondary credentials, and career development (Druine and WildeMeersch, 2000; Hamilton & Pitt, 2011). These policy goals, while important, may have concerning implications for access, instruction, and achievement for African American participants in adult basic education programs. K-12 policies that emphasize outcomes and accountability have been demonstrated to encourage providers to target services to learners who are more likely to show gains, namely those students at higher levels of educational functioning (McNeil & Coppola, 2006/2009). Similarly, adult basic education policies that emphasize measurable outcomes and postsecondary credentials might produce the unintended result of benefitting higher-level learners and under-serving lower-level students, particularly when those policies focus on post-secondary outcomes to the exclusion of other literacy goals.

Although the national race-linked trends in literacy rates referenced above might not necessarily reflect the literacy rates among adult education program participants, my eight years of instructional experience in Pennsylvania suggested that African American students were clustered at the lower levels of assessed reading skill. This study explored the racial demographics of participation at each federally-defined educational functioning level (EFL) in Pennsylvania paired with a critical analysis of policy regulating adult basic education program operation. The following questions guided the research: 1) How, if at all, has the number and proportion of African American adult education participants assessed as reading at a fifth-grade level equivalent (GLE) and below changed in recent years? 2) What purposes, objectives and priorities have state policies emphasized, and how have these shifted in recent years? and 3) What are the implications of these questions for the access, instruction, and achievement of low-scoring African American adult education students?

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<sup>16</sup> Although "adult basic education" has different meanings, depending upon the context in which it is used, for the purposes of this study, "adult basic education," "adult literacy" and "adult education" are used interchangeably to refer to government-funded classes offered to adults who have not completed a high school diploma.

## **Methods**

To determine if the number and proportion of African American students being served in Pennsylvania's adult literacy programs who were assessed as reading at a fifth GLE and below had changed in recent years, participation and entrance reading assessment data were tallied by race and educational functioning level. To explore the purposes, objectives and priorities emphasized by state policy, this study conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 2004; Woodside-Jiron, 2004) of a Pennsylvania policy document entitled Adult Education and Family Literacy (AEFL) Guidelines. Woodside-Jiron (2004) suggested that "critical analyses of policy, rather than simply accepting the given goals of existing institutions and policies as fact, complicate policy to include inquiry into underlying issues of power and ideology embedded within the definition of the perceived problem and solution" (p.175). The CDA conducted in this study was an "historical CDA" (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011) of the AEFL Guidelines, focused on fluctuations in the policies' stated purposes, objectives, and priorities over time, with particular attention to how changes in these aspects of policy might influence educational services to African American participants reading at a 5th GLE and below.

The AEFL Guidelines are reissued each program year and are essentially a set of instructions for literacy programs wishing to apply for state and federal funding. They contain information on the intended purposes of federal and state funding streams, restrictions on the use of funding, recommendations for program operation and structure, and a glossary of terms. Although the document includes sections on Family Literacy, Even Start, and English as a Second Language (ESL), for this study, only those sections relevant to non-ESL, non-Family Literacy adult basic education funding streams were included. Data was analyzed for the program years spanning 2006-2007 to 2012-2013. The set of years selected represents the span of the earliest and most recent years for which relevant numerical and policy document data were available.

## **Theoretical Perspective**

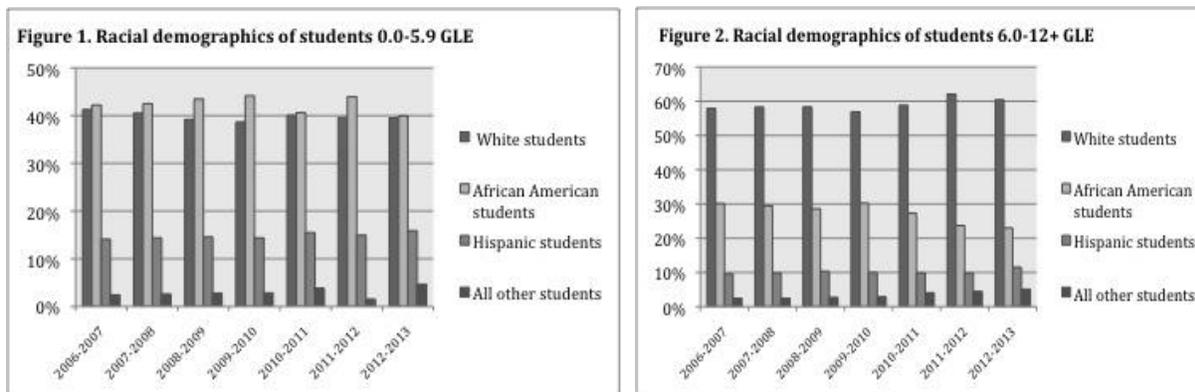
I situate my research within the 'New Literacy' school, with a sociocultural perspective that characterizes literacy as fluid, value-laden, and culture- or context-bound (Gee 1991; Purcell-Gates, 2007). Purcell-Gates (2007), drawing on the work of Brian Street, contended that "literacy is always embedded within social institutions, and as such is only knowable as it is defined and practiced by social and cultural groups. As such, literacy is best considered an ideological construct as opposed to an autonomous skill, separable from contexts of use" (p.3). Gee (1991) suggested that different literacies carry different social weight, and those which are used by dominant members of society are generally deemed more valuable than others and permit greater access to social goods. Although popular and policy discourses surrounding the development of academic reading skills largely utilize a deficit perspective of adults at lower skill levels, I reject this perspective and agree with Gee's (2003) assessment that many individuals who demonstrate limited academic reading skills are nonetheless both highly cultured and highly literate.

## **Findings**

### **Participation Rates**

As my teaching experience had suggested anecdotally, African Americans were dramatically over-represented among Pennsylvania adult education students reading at a 5<sup>th</sup> GLE for the years studied. Analysis of entering reading level assessment data showed that while African Americans were 11.4% of the commonwealth population in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014),

they were the most dominant racial group among students reading at 5<sup>th</sup> GLE and below, comprising between 39.94% and 44.15% of students for every year examined (Figure 1).



Source: Charts compiled using data in Office of Vocational and Adult Education National Reporting System's Table 1, available at <http://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OVAE/NRS/login.cfm>.

A comparison between this group and students who read at a 6<sup>th</sup> GLE and above shows the marked contrast in participation rates by race (Figure 2). White students were by far the dominant racial group in the set of students with more developed academic reading ability. African-American participation in this group never reached above 30.24% and experienced a steady decline from 2009-2010 (30.24%) to 2012-2013 (22.99%).

It is important to note that African-Americans were over-represented at *every* level of educational functioning. This is likely due in part to the higher drop-out rate of African American students (Pennsylvania State Snapshot, n.d.), but may also be a testament to the high value that African Americans have historically placed on education (Anderson, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Williams, 2005). However, their concentration at the lowest levels of academic reading proficiency in these adult programs is clear.

Another important trend that stood out from the analysis of participation data was the dramatic decrease in the overall number of students being served in Pennsylvania. In 2006-2007, the total number of adult basic education students was 38,720. That number started decreasing in 2009-2010 and by 2012-2013 was reduced by more than half, to 17,432. However, the reduction in annual number of students served was experienced differently by different racial groups. The overall number of students decreased by 54.98%; the number of African American students decreased by 59.77%; the number of White students decreased by 55.73%, and the number of Hispanic students decreased by 46.47%. Importantly, too, as the overall number of students served decreased, the proportion of those students who read at 5<sup>th</sup> GLE and below increased. For the last three years, approximately 50% of adult education students in Pennsylvania read at a 5<sup>th</sup> GLE or below, up from 42-44% in the earlier years of the study.

In sum, this analysis of participation rates and reading assessments from 2006-2007 to 2012-2013 tells us that: 1) African Americans consistently comprised the largest racial group among students assessed as reading at 5<sup>th</sup> GLE and below, roughly 40-44% in every year of the study; 2) the proportion of African American students assessed as reading at a 6<sup>th</sup> GLE and above declined steadily to its lowest rate, 22.99%, in 2012-2013; 3) as the overall number of students declined dramatically, the African American student population experienced the greatest proportional decrease, relative to other racial groups; and 4) the proportion of adult education

participants in Pennsylvania who read at a 5th GLE or below rose to, and remained at, roughly 50%.

### **Policy Analysis**

Critical attention to the language in educational policy texts is important, because policy language influences people's actions and beliefs and shapes learning opportunities in local settings (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011; Rogers, 2004; Woodside-Jiron, 2004). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of policy seeks to situate texts in relationship between micro levels of local practice and macro levels of social, institutional, and governmental practice. Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999) suggested a framework for conceptualizing these inter-connected levels of relationship: the *local context*, in which local and individual actors engage; the *institutional context*, in which social and political institutions try to shape the local context; and the *societal context*, in which governing bodies try to shape the institutional context (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, cited in Woodside-Jiron, 2004). The policy document analyzed in this study, the AEFL Guidelines, is intended to mediate between the institutional and local adult education contexts in Pennsylvania. It is issued by a bureau within the commonwealth Department of Education and has local program administrators as its policy target. The CDA in this study focused on fluctuations in policy purposes, objectives, and priorities over time, with particular attention to how changes in these aspects of policy might influence educational services to African American participants reading at a 5th GLE and below.

**General policy themes.** Generally speaking, Pennsylvania's AEFL Guidelines were characterized by an increasing emphasis on postsecondary credentials and employment as the primary objectives of adult education programs. This shift in emphasis was accompanied by an increase in regulatory, "top-down" language that emphasized hierarchical relationship rather than partnership between the local and institutional contexts and encouraged management and rule-enforcement in program-student relationships. Morality-infused language was increasingly used to characterize program obligation to the state and to delineate a deficit-based description of the character of participating adults. Policy statements asserting that student-defined needs and interests should guide the curriculum were often in conflict with other statements in the same text asserting that employer-defined or Bureau-defined needs and interests should shape curriculum and instruction.

**Policy changes of special concern for low-scoring African American students.** Two changes in policy emerged that are of particular concern for the provision of equitable educational services to African American participants reading at a 5th GLE and below. These changes have relevance for issues of access, instruction and achievement.

**1. Codified deficit perspective.** In 2010-2011, the AEFL Guidelines underwent a significant shift in organization and style. There was no longer any narrative introduction, and most information was formatted into bullet points. The style and language were decidedly more directive than previous iterations of the document, and the intended purposes of the federal and state funding streams were at the top of the first page after the table of contents. Pennsylvania's purposes for funding adult education classes included two bullet points, the second of which articulated a deficit perspective of participants' functional capacity as well as their moral condition:

"Act 143 aims for...increased and expanded adult and family literacy education programs so that adults and their families will function more effectively in their personal lives and as citizens and be better prepared for workforce training and employment that they may

become more responsible and productive members of society" (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2010, p.5).

The wording of this text comes directly from the legislation connected to the funding stream dedicated to lower-level participants, the Pennsylvania Adult and Family Literacy Education Act 143. However, the legislation from which this definition was culled has not been amended since 2001. Its sudden appearance in the guidelines for program administrators in 2010, particularly in the context of a document that has grown increasingly directive, introduces a deficit perspective of participants into recommended program operation. Oakes (2005) argued that teacher beliefs about student capacity directly influence student achievement, and Hamilton & Pitt (2011) argued that policies can shape programs' categorizations of students and alter the services they provide to fit those categorizations. Programs' adoption of a deficit perspective of lower-literacy students that defines them as dysfunctional, irresponsible, and unproductive could have negative implications on the type and quality of instruction available to this substantial portion of the student population, amongst whom African American students are the dominant racial group. This deficit perspective of these learners positions students themselves as the root of the "perceived problem" and shapes the kinds of "solutions" the policy suggests (Woodside-Jiron, 2004). It also avoids consideration of the numerous societal forces that contribute to limiting academic reading skills (Ladson-Billings, 2007).

**2. "Classroom-ready" discretion.** The second policy change of special concern for low-testing African-American students was initiated in the same year, 2010-2011. The policy suggested that programs should avoid enrolling too many students by conducting "appropriate pre-screening during the intake process...Applicants who are not classroom-ready ... should be placed on a waiting list" (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2010, p.14). The policy offered no guidance as to what constitutes "appropriate pre-screening" or what would characterize a student as "classroom-ready," nor does it suggest any procedures for helping students move from the waiting list to the classroom. This essentially grants programs the freedom to decline services to otherwise eligible students. In the context of intense pressure to demonstrate learning outcomes or lose your funding, the power to decline services to students based on individual discretion is problematic. African-American students reading at a 5th GLE and below may be at special risk of being declined; low-testing adult readers frequently demonstrate incremental gains (Comings, Parrella & Soricone, 1999) and widely-held deficit perspectives of African American intellectual ability or 'educability' have affected access issues in other educational settings (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Oakes, 2005).

### **Conclusions**

The findings in this study are preliminary, but point to issues of concern for the provision of equitable educational services to African American adult literacy students in Pennsylvania. The existence of language in a text doesn't imply a causal relationship between the words and changes in social practice (Fairclough, 2003). The relationship is more complex, as Gee asserted: "language in use is always part and parcel of, and partially constitutive of, specific social practices" (Gee, 2004, p.33). Ethnographically-informed CDA is called for to explore how these policy themes and changes influence educational practice in adult literacy classrooms serving low-scoring African American students. For now, this policy critique serves as an introduction to some of what Woodside-Jiron (2004) described as "the underlying issues of power and ideology " in Pennsylvania adult literacy policy.

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