

Complex Pathways – What motivates adults to upgrade their literacy and numeracy skills?

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Complex Pathways – What motivates adults to upgrade their literacy and numeracy skills?

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Abstract: Grounded in the words of participants, this research presents data from a 5-year longitudinal study of 46 Adult Basic Education (ABE) learners. The research examines initial motivations for upgrading as described by participants. Over the study participants also describe what conditions supported their success.

Key Words: Adult literacy and numeracy upgrading, motivations for ABE students, success factors

Introduction

Many Canadian adults upgrade their math and English skills at post-secondary institutions or community organizations to access post-secondary studies or enhance employment opportunities ("Canadian Council," 2007). Longitudinal studies of such adult education students are, however, lacking (Myers & Broucker, 2006). As a result, post-secondary education policy and practice is often based on short-term studies (Nesbit, 2013; Slowey & Schuetze, 2012).

Roths (2016) reports that motivation is a key element to understand students' engagement, satisfaction, and level of achievement in learning, but that adult or nontraditional learners' motivation for learning remains a scarcely studied area of research. St. Claire (2016) states that one of the fundamental research questions in Adult Literacy Education (ALE) remains unclear: "What motivates people to upgrade their skills and how can this be made easier for them?" This study shares the words of adults:

Ask yourself: What am I doing this for? Am I doing it for me? Am I doing it for the future or my future generations? Anytime you start to feel frustrated or think I can't get through this, go back again and remind yourself because nobody is going to do it for you. You've got to do it yourself. You've got to remind yourself, this is why I'm here. Every time it gets hard, you have to remind yourself of those reasons why you are here.

Research Objectives and Design

The project followed three cohorts of adult upgrading students at a Canadian post-secondary institution for a period of 5 years each. This research explores the long-term effects of returning to education on the lives of adults. Cohort start dates occurred in consecutive years; the research is now in its eighth year.

The study focuses on longitudinal interview data augmented by quantitative survey data. A semi-structured interview protocol was used, including reflective and retrospective elements. The common experience of the cohort was enrolment in academic upgrading at or below the Grade 10 level.

Summary

Over five annual interviews, participants reflected on and discussed their complex pathways through education, employment, and other areas they designated as important. Participants shared detailed stories about their goals and motivations for upgrading and the steps that brought them to enrol in literacy and numeracy courses, as well as their experiences during and after enrolment. Participants described how they were successful on their varied, non-traditional pathways and what factors supported their success.

I've been out of school for like over 12 years, and for me to be here it's a big, big step.

... you know, I had a really low education. Like I always been one of those persons that have always like struggled in work with like when it comes down to reading, writing or problem solving math.

During the initial interviews of 46 adult learners, all participants described their motivations for upgrading. Some of the reported motivations follow:

I want to do my adult upgrading and then continue on with post-secondary education just to open up the doors of you know, better jobs, better paying jobs, more stability for the future.

I would like to have a career. I would like to be in a job that I enjoy, that I can get up in the morning and be proud of.

Participants discussed their upgrading pathways and what factors supported success. Motivation, early successes, persistence, learning support/atmosphere, and accessing resources were frequently reported.

Even when I am going through a struggle with my mental health which I have, I still – I'm struggling. But the fact that I can still do it you know it's very hopeful because it shows me that I don't have to be cured or perfect or better in order to keep going. I can do both.

I think it's confidence more than anything. I think coming back to school and doing all the upgrading, its allowed me to know that I can do it.

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