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Shannon Frey

The Pennsylvania State University, ssf124@psu.edu

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Success, Literacy, and Learning: Experiences of Adult Basic Education Students

Shannon Frey
The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract: This qualitative study examines how six Adult Basic Education (ABE) students perceive success. The findings elucidate the connections between students' and organizations' notions of success and potential agreements and conflicts.

Keywords: adult basic education, success, literacy, literacy identity

Introduction

Throughout their academic lives, students are often told what it means to be successful. Much of the current research on adult basic education (ABE) student success is quantitative and measures success by the number of students achieving certain government- or institution-set goals. This study explores how ABE students define success and how they use literacy to achieve their ideas of success. Gaining insight into students' views could help inform teaching strategies and policy decisions in ways that benefit adult learners, including how classes are taught and programs are funded.

Literature Review and Methods

Success, when considered in conjunction with ABE students, is primarily discussed in adult education literature in two ways: (1) a description of how students can achieve success, often emphasizing the positive economic effects of program participation and completion (e.g., Comings & Soricone, 2007; Hamilton, 2002; Purcell-Gates et al., 2000; Tyler, 2005); and (2) a critical examination of discourses of success in scholarly literature and adult education practice (e.g., Sandlin, 2004, 2006; St. Clair, 2004). Literature that takes the first approach predominantly recommends specific methods for achieving student success, and many authors connect student success in literacy programs to economic success. The second group of articles exposes and problematizes the underlying societal views that define success for educational programs and adult learners. Although existing literature explores success in these ways, much of this scholarship does not address the topic of success from students' perspectives.

To further explore this gap, this study focused on the following research questions: (1) How do ABE learners define success in their current role as students and in life? (1a) What motivates ABE learners toward their ideas of success? (1b) How do students see their participation in ABE classes as contributing to their success, if at all? (2) How do literacy learning and literacy practices figure in ABE learners' perceptions of success, if at all? (3) How do students' perceptions of success compare to organizational discourse about success?

I used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2012) to select six participants who were enrolled in ABE classes in one of two rural locations in a mid-Atlantic state (see table). Each participated in two face-to-face interviews (30-60 minutes) and chose an activity to complete between interviews (e.g., a journaling or photography activity).

Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Race	Gender	Last high school grade attended	Employment status*	Class location
Bill	37	White	Male	11	Employed	Watermill
Brianna	19	Black	Female	12	Employed	S. Bricksburg
Dee	42	White	Female	10	Unemployed	S. Bricksburg
KC	26	Black	Male	12	Employed	S. Bricksburg
Kiki	37	Black	Female	12**	Unemployed	S. Bricksburg
Miriam	56	Biracial	Female	9	Employed	S. Bricksburg

*Includes full-time, part-time, or significant volunteer time

**Completed 12th grade at an alternative high school

Using narrative inquiry allowed me to emphasize how participants represented their own stories and made meaning from events in their lives (Gee, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993). The process of interpreting life events into stories reveals events in the participant's life while situating them in a specific context (Bruner, 1990; Riessman, 1993). Clandinin and Murphy (2009) remark that "lives are lived, told, retold, and relived in storied ways on storied landscapes" (p. 598). Narrative inquiry also permitted me to focus on the participants' words and personal experiences and to hear their perspective on what success means.

Findings

How do ABE learners define success in their current role as students and in life? Most of the participants' definitions of success could be categorized as relating to emotions, finances, academics, or recognition. Emotional motivation was the most common way participants related their notions of success, commonly describing success as: facing fears, "feeling useful", feeling respected, noticed, and appreciated, and meeting goals. One student, Brianna, expressed her ideas of success as: "that was success because I faced a fear." Another participant, Dee, expressed a desire for respect as a primary component of her idea of success, stating: "I want something with respect because I've been in construction almost my whole life. There's no respect there." Other participants described an emotional motivation for success relating to their commitments to others, such as KC commenting: "Success is when you can make sacrifices and you can handle your responsibilities." These emotional connections were strongly linked with participants' notions of success.

Finances were another way that participants described their ideas of success. The most common notions of success that participants expressed included: providing for others (usually family), owning property, and financial independence. When referring to an example of success in his life, Bill, an avid motorcyclist, described the process of buying his first bike: "I built my credit up enough to buy [a motorcycle]. Just from working and saving and everything else." Participants also defined success as relating to financial goals, such as owning homes or property. KC referred to one aspect of success as: "being smart and putting money away. . . . I'm looking into getting some property to own." The idea of financial contribution and stability, particularly relating to family, was strongly connected to *success* for most participants.

Academic progress and accomplishment were also common ways students described their ideas of success. Participants used examples of obtaining high(er) scores, such as on GED and TABE tests, further learning, Career Pathways goals, additional education, and progress in class as ways they viewed success. For example, Dee equated success with her accomplishments in class, stating: "When I do my worksheets and I get most of them right and other days where I say I'm never going to get this stuff." Similarly, Kiki linked success in academics as measurable, saying, "I see the results. When I'm ready to take the test to see if my, if I reached a higher level, that's how I know I'm doing what I'm supposed to do." When participants described success in terms of academics, they often used more measurable descriptions (e.g., scores) than when linking success to other aspects of life.

Less common but still present in several participants' discourse was a view of success as *recognition*, described both as public recognition and as simply being noticed. When providing an example of success in her life, Miriam described recognition from others at her volunteer

work, saying, "I always [work hard]. So they always told me, Miriam, we appreciate what you do. So I get compliments from everybody." Similarly, other participants described instances of recognition ranging from positive comments from teachers to public awards as one way they viewed success.

When participants defined qualities leading to success, the most common words they used were persistence and motivation. Interestingly, participants' descriptions of success were often not necessarily equated with formal education. As participants defined success in people they knew, they often looked toward family members or close friends as their examples. As they explained what made these people successful, these qualities were the most often mentioned: caring, persistence, sacrifice, time for family relationships, patience, stability, hard work, and respect. Students also mentioned personal interest in specific topics, hard work, their choices, and determination as integral to success. Notably, wealth or finances were not used to define success in their examples.

As participants described success, they often mentioned barriers that currently or in the past made their ideas of success challenging. These obstacles included: interruptions to education, past and present (transitions, children, work); negative past formal educational experiences contributing to leaving school previously; dropping out of school (often in response to negative school experiences, e.g., bullying, fights; technology; having a child at a young age; emotional barriers; early caretaking; mental health; not trying or having a negative attitude; lack of support from teachers or family; discouragement from not reaching past goals; incarceration; and relationships. This list was extensive for many participants and contributed to their feelings and approaches toward success, both in educational endeavors and other aspects of their lives.

It is important for adult educators to note that participants frequently equated non-material outcomes, especially those related to emotions, with success (e.g., feeling useful or respected, finishing something, independence). These descriptions of success differ from the standard organizational discourse focusing on passing the GED exam, financial gain, and higher TABE (Test for Adult Basic Education) scores. Knowing how students define success for themselves and view success in others could help adult educators and program directors assess how they portray success in their classrooms. If there is a significant difference between how students and instructors view success, both in and out of the classroom, the difference could lead to conflicting goals. However, if their views of success can be aligned, students might have new ways to see how success in the classroom and program compliment their own goals. To some extent, students see the need for the classes and exams or they would not attend the program; however, making more explicit connections could help students understand how specific activities are integral to their success. Conversely, adult educators should consider how

the lessons and goals in the classroom align with students' expressed goals. Potential areas of conflict include required activities, such as TABE assessments, which programs often need for funding accountability, but that students scarcely mentioned and may not be concerned about. Adult educators also must consider obstacles to success, which were often significant and deeply rooted in past experiences, and contemplate how these barriers might continue to affect their students' current work.

What motivates ABE learners toward their ideas of success? All participants described family as a motivation for success. Dee viewed success as helping her disabled son achieve some degree of independence, saying: "My main goal is to get [my son] up and on his own. He needs to. Because mom's not gonna be around forever." Kiki described success as being able to help her nine year old daughter with her schoolwork, mentioning that "What I'm learning here can benefit or help [my daughter] with her homework" and describing pleasure in that accomplishment.

Being a role model for others, often family, was motivation for many. When talking about her daughter, Kiki mentioned, "You have somebody who looks up to you now. So if you don't get that education, how can, when she gets older, how can you make her go to school and work hard when you're not doing it? Kids seem to reflect off of what their parents do. I realize when I went back to school, I have to do this for her." Two students mentioned children who had nearly completed high school as being part of their motivation, wanting to accomplish their goals just as their children were doing. A "good life" was success for many participants, which included home ownership, reliable, enjoyable work, providing for family and supporting themselves.

Several participants described being able to help others as a strong motivation for working toward success. Descriptions of helping others included financially providing or contributing to family finances, caring for family members, and obtaining employment in a caring profession. Money was not directly mentioned as a motivation; however, the effects of having more money (e.g., financially providing, owning property) were stated as motivators for many participants. Other motivations included being part of a supportive family system, "freedom", and good credit.

As adult educators consider how to help their students achieve success, the factors that motivate them must be of primary consideration. If instructors and administrators attempt to help students toward a goal that may be invisible to them (e.g., TABE score gains), students may not feel motivated. If adult educators can consider factors that motivate students and incorporate them into the students' work, it could help students to focus on their reasons for attending the classes and influence their work positively.

How do students see their participation in ABE classes as contributing to their success, if at all? Many participants defined success using some variation of the idea of having a “good life,” which included home ownership, reliable, enjoyable work, providing for family, and supporting themselves. Participants commonly described their participation in ABE as a means to obtain one or more of these goals. Most students enrolled in ABE classes with the goal of obtaining their GED diploma. Passing the GED test was viewed as a required step toward participants’ longer-term goals such as pursuing another educational program or securing employment. As Bill described, “I’m here, the GED, and this program is great. I probably wouldn’t have gone through with it if I didn’t have to. If it wasn’t for the school that I want to go to, I probably wouldn’t have done it.” Dee echoed this motivation, stating, “Because there’s not really any jobs out there that’s even gonna be worth the pay without at least GED. So. That’s what’s keeping me going.” Several students saw obtaining their GED credential as an accomplishment in itself. Other students focused on what the credential would enable them to do in the future but did not specifically discuss the GED test.

Participants commonly described their participation in ABE as a means to an end. Most students enrolled in ABE classes with the goal of obtaining their GED diploma. Passing the GED test was viewed as a step toward participants’ longer term goals, such as a requirement for another educational program or employment requiring a GED credential. Several students saw obtaining their GED credential as an accomplishment in itself, especially students who had been working toward that particular goal for some time. Some students focused on what the credential would enable them to do in the future but did not discuss the GED test specifically.

Participants viewed their participation in ABE classes as a necessary step to achieving their goals. The GED test was generally viewed as an intermediary step to other goals. Two students equated higher Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) scores as one measure of success, but most participants did not mention TABE levels within their discussions of success. One participant (Miriam) mentioned more time in class leading to higher scores and eventual success passing the GED test.

One notable omission for participants was that the class itself did not seem to be viewed as a social space or other students as a potential resource. Students seemed to mostly work independently and did not appear interested in forming connections, social or potentially work-related, with other students. Their ideas of success were largely independent with some teacher help.

Participants’ views of their classes or GED diploma as a means to an end supports the idea that they will only attend and participate in classes as long they see it as helpful to their own goals. The more connections instructors can make between students’ own goals and their

classwork, the more likely students are to stay in classes and work with the program. Students' brief or limited attendance in adult education classes is often cited as a problem in the field, and the less students believe classes will help them, the more likely they are to stop attending. Additionally, if programs can help connect students to each other, they may be able to use the social space to help meet their goals. This aspect may not be a particular aim of students, but if instructors can assist students in making those connections, the classes may become a more positive, helpful space.

How do literacy learning and literacy practices figure in ABE learners' perceptions of success, if at all? All participants expressed enjoying literacy activities (reading and/or writing) outside of class, and literacy practices and experiences were reported as positive when they related to personal interests. Several students discussed reading for enjoyment outside of class both currently and in the past. Their reading material included magazines, books, and ebooks, and they often expressed interest in particular topics. Some students expressed high interest in specific subjects, such as their hobbies (motorcycles) or personal interests (historical Black leaders), and their interest was a motivating factor in their enjoyment and the amount they read. Some participants wrote for pleasure, although more reported reading for pleasure. The writing that participants enjoyed had an emotional connection, such as journaling or poetry.

Students repeatedly expressed a deficit view of their literate identities with relation to previous formal schooling. Participants also frequently expressed negative experiences with past teachers in formal education, citing negative comments about their work or abilities. All participants either dropped out of school or were kicked out, often adding to their negative impressions of formal school. Students often expressed embarrassment at perceived inadequacies in their literacy abilities (e.g., they should be at a higher level or practice more). In contrast, when asked about their personal literacy practices, students usually had a positive perception of their literate identities. When the literacy activities were chosen by the students (e.g., reading for pleasure, journaling, poetry), they were more likely to describe themselves as strong readers or writers. Some students viewed their current literacy practices in class as a means to their goals with the GED as a step along the way, often without reference to future use of those practices; others discussed literacy practices as integral to their goals, such as further education or being necessary for their career. All students referenced literacy practices as necessary to some degree for them to achieve their goals.

How do students' perceptions of success compare to organizational discourse about success? Organizational discourse within ABE, such as the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA), often equates success not only with passing the GED test but also with achieving other goals. For example, WIOA emphasizes both *educational* and *economic* outcomes for students, and

government grant funding is often linked to these outcomes. Organizations may have their own or state- or federally-imposed standards for success, such as improved Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) reading and math test scores, the number of students enrolled in their program, or the number of students who pass the GED exam. In contrast, participants rarely referenced increasing TABE scores or attendance as a goal. Participants also frequently described less tangible, measurable goals as integral to success, such as helping others and being a role model. Some of the organizational goals may be invisible to students, which could lead to conflict between the organizations and students as they attempt to achieve differing goals.

Conclusion

This research shows how six ABE students viewed success in their academic and personal lives. Students often defined success in relation to emotions, finances, academics, and recognition, and viewed participation in ABE classes as a means to reach their goals. Some student views of success aligned with organizational discourse (i.e., educational and employment goals), whereas other student goals focused more on emotional and interpersonal outcomes. Students frequently adopted organizational discourse when discussing their success within ABE classes but diverged from these discourses when discussing success in other areas of their lives. These findings can inform organizational teaching strategies and policy decisions in ways that benefit those participating in the learning, including teaching strategies and funding approaches.

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