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## **Bullied, hawked, and scrutinized: Adult literacy practitioners' affective reactions to state and institutional power**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the affective experiences of teachers and administrators at one publicly-funded adult literacy program, in order to better understand how practitioners respond to the constraints placed upon practice by contemporary policy regimes. Understanding practitioners' experiences in the contemporary era of increased top-down control of adult literacy programs can inform efforts to improve the working conditions for practitioners and, by extension, instructional quality and the educational experiences of students.

**Keywords:** adult literacy, policy, ethnography, working conditions, accountability

### **Introduction**

The 2008 economic crisis and the passage of the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) narrowed policy objectives for adult literacy programs and heightened the emphasis on the need for compliance, under threat of loss of funding. At one adult literacy agency, this threat was experienced by many practitioners as an increase in pressure, stress, and hostility in their workplace. Teachers, especially, expressed stress at the degree to which they felt monitored as the agency worked to ensure compliance with state and federal objectives. This stress influenced their relationship with the organization and their work with students. While it is well understood that the working conditions of teachers of adult basic education (ABE) are frequently characterized by low pay, less than full-time opportunities, and limited access to educational resources (Smith, Hofer, & Gillespie, 2001; Sun, 2010), the stress created by accountability regimes and the monitoring that goes along with them adds a new dimension to these working conditions. This data analysis in this paper, excerpted from a larger ethnographic study, expands our understanding of how contemporary policy constraints negatively impact the experience of teaching and working in the field of adult basic education.

## **Theoretical framework**

In keeping with the ethnographic approach used in this study, the ideas of emotion and affect in this paper are defined according to an anthropological perspective that views emotions through the lens of the relevance of culture and the importance of individual interpretation and meaning-making, rather than understanding emotions as universal or constant psychological or biological constructs (Lutz & White, 1986). Emotions and affect from this view are seen as judgments related to beliefs and ideology, rather than as instances of physical sensation. Furthermore, this research was undertaken from a critical theoretical perspective (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002) and seeks to understand how state and institutional authority shaped teachers' and administrators' affective and emotional experiences of their practice.

## **Literature review**

Practitioners of adult basic education have long worked in a marginalized field. Adult basic education has historically been under-funded, under-researched, and sometimes considered the "stepchild" of education. This may be so because the field generally serves adults who are marginalized by poverty and gender and racial discrimination (Peterson, 1996; Sheared, McCabe, & Umecki, 2000). Marginalization of the field may also result from the disproportionate number of women who act as teachers and administrators and whose literacy work is considered gendered and thus devalued (Bridwell, 2009; Luttrell, 1996; Smith, Hofer & Gillespie, 2001). This marginalization results in frequently poor and sometimes untenable working conditions, which in turn serve to reduce the quality of education practitioners are able to provide (Smith, Hofer & Gillespie, 2001) and can undermine practitioners' abilities to organize and work toward improvement (Bridwell, 2009).

Exploring the role of emotions in adult basic education runs the risk of adding an additional layer of marginalization, as the study of emotion has historically been feminized and, thus, seen as counter to rationality or irrelevant (Boyer, 1999). However, given the potential for teachers' anger and emotion to act as a springboard to action (Winogard, 2003), communal acknowledgement of these emotions can support efforts to improve working conditions, to the benefit of those who work in the field and the students who are attempting to meet their educational goals.

## **Research design**

The data in this paper were collected as part of a larger ethnographic study of the marginalization experienced by learners in one publicly-funded adult literacy class. During the course of the fieldwork, the teachers' and administrative staff's affective reactions to state and institutional control were prominently visible, affecting both their teaching practice and their quality of life at work. Further research seemed warranted. The research questions guiding the analysis for this paper are: What themes and trends are apparent in practitioners' affective responses to state and institutional exertion of power?

## **Setting and Participants**

The setting for this study was The Literacy Center (TLC - a pseudonym), a federal- and state-funded, urban adult literacy program that offered a wide range of adult basic educational services. Seven practitioners agreed to be interviewed as part of the research: a reading teacher, a math teacher, a career/referrals counselor, the tutor coordinator, and three upper-level administrators - the executive director, the director of education, and the assistant director of instructional quality. An additional instructor allowed me to observe her reading class twice and both times participated in extended conversations regarding her feelings about the current working conditions in the program.

## **Data Collection**

Data were collected using the ethnographic means of participant observation and interview (Creswell, 2007; Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007). I acted as a volunteer classroom aide for four months and conducted follow-up visits to the site or classroom once or twice a month for four more months. Observational data were collected through the use of field notes written during or immediately after visits to the class (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). During these eight months, the reading teacher was interviewed four times, the career counselor twice, and the math teacher, the tutor coordinator, and the administrative staff once each. Interviews were semi-structured and used practitioners' perceptions of TLC's and the state government's responses to the needs of adult literacy learners as a starting point. Interviews ranged in length from 20 to 108 minutes; most were in the 40-90 minute range. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed; my observations and interactions with the instructor of the additional reading class were recorded in detailed field notes. Numerous informal conversations with staff were recorded in field notes or captured during audio recordings of classroom interaction.

## **Analysis**

Analysis of data is ongoing and uses iterative qualitative methodology appropriate for ethnographic data collection (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007; Maxwell, 1996). During the process of data collection, I listened to recordings of interviews and classroom interactions, reviewed field notes, and wrote memos recording thoughts, questions, and any early sense of themes and trends in order to focus and clarify future observations and interviews (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007; Maxwell, 1996). After all observations and interviews were completed and all recordings transcribed, the qualitative software Atlas.ti was used for open coding of the transcripts for themes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). In the course of open coding, the theme of practitioner affective response to power in the workplace emerged. The analysis in this paper focuses on understanding these emotions in relationship to the policy context in which this literacy organization was embedded. Future analysis of this data will explore how these affective reactions informed teachers' practice and practitioners' relationships with colleagues and students, as well as implications for policy, practice, and research.

## **Findings**

There were two hierarchies in which power was exerted at TLC, the government hierarchy and the local, institutional hierarchy. The government hierarchy operated at multiple levels: although the outcomes measures for adult basic education programs were set by federal policy, they were instantiated within regional agencies through contracts with a state-level department which administered federal funds and collated regional and state-level data. The other apparent hierarchy was the local, institutional one at TLC, which was fairly strict and well-defined. One interviewee shared with me an eight-page diagram which outlined the structure of the agency and clarified who reported to whom. Another noted that teachers were at the very bottom of this diagram, and indeed, most program decisions seemed to be made by administrators with little input from teachers.

Practitioners' affective responses to exertions of authority varied primarily according to their position in these hierarchies and the degree of their interpersonal interactions with state- and regional-level actors. The teachers and the counselor, who were at the lowest tier of both hierarchies and had the least interaction with administrators in the state and region, expressed the greatest sense of urgency and stress in response to the agency's attempts to comply with federal and state outcomes measures. One teacher in particular felt her job was in peril if she failed to produce student outcomes. These practitioners described a general mood of "crisis," "panic," and "desperation" within the agency, and stated they felt "bullied," "hawked" – a

colloquialism for being watched like a hawk, and regularly “scrutinized” by managers within the agency. They expressed that organizational decision making seemed to have become erratic, with significant changes in procedure implemented with no warning. They were frustrated by TLC's failure to elicit or consider feedback from teachers about these changes or about the best way for the agency to meet federal and state goals, despite the fact that a number of the teachers had been in the field as long as or longer than the administrators.

At the other end of the local hierarchy, the executive director was buffered from stress by two things: his previous position as a state-level actor and his freedom to, as he put it, “devolve responsibility” for achieving outcomes to other people on his staff. He talked lightheartedly about state expectations and, perhaps because of his previous relationships with state administrators and legislators, he expressed being comfortable saying ‘no’ to the state about some issues and left it to program managers to figure out the best way to approach compliance for what remained. It seems possible that the power and authority the executive director held within both hierarchies allowed him to remain positive and optimistic about the agency’s prospects, in stark contrast to the reactions and emotions expressed by most others I interviewed.

The emotions of the mid-level managers, those who were left to make programmatic decisions about the best way to meet federal and state outcomes, were primarily characterized by frustration, though their emotions were usually more subdued than the teachers'. These practitioners expressed frustration at the state’s sometimes illogical expectations, but they also expressed frustration with teachers, who they felt were at times unwilling to engage with program efforts to improve outcomes. For one administrator, rapid program changes to meet outside stakeholder objectives were considered a regular part of doing business as an adult basic education organization. She said, "We're forever changing around here," and the contemporary federal outcomes measures seemed to her no less reasonable or realizable than any other state or stakeholder expectations she had encountered. She expressed sadness that the agency's current strict policies meant some students were being asked to leave the program because their outcomes weren't good enough, though she described the practice as a reaction to the agency's need to meet state objectives and stay in operation. While she did not care for what the program was doing, she did not frame its actions as unethical; she found a way to make sense of the agency's choices by focusing on "the bigger picture." However, another mid-level manager did assert that federal and state policies were encouraging unethical behavior, and she expressed frustration and resentment at what she felt she was being asked to do in order to successfully meet outcomes. She suggested that other local agencies were "fudging" their

numbers, and she resisted the idea that such an act was a requirement for staying in operation and sought to make other programmatic changes that would improve program outcomes.

For the executive director and the mid-level managers, the need for the program to meet state/federal outcomes measures was upsetting and frustrating but not dire. In their interviews with me, managers and administrators did not express the same degree of stress and unhappiness that the teachers and counselor did. This is perhaps because these higher-tier workers had some input into program operations; studies of organizational dynamics have repeatedly argued that having some input into decision making increases worker satisfaction (Ingersoll, 2003). The teachers and counselor, on the other hand, were expected to comply with agency mandates without having the opportunity to offer their opinions or suggestions. Additionally, managers' sense of the agency's need for compliance was not linked with the same sense of fear for their jobs. For many of the teachers, finding another full-time job teaching ABE would be difficult, as full-time jobs in the field are hard to come by, and the low status of being an ABE instructor meant that finding another job outside of the field may be equally difficult. If TLC shut down, it is possible these teachers faced long-term unemployment. However, the managers, and particularly the executive director, held higher-status positions, had connections with managers at other agencies, and had managerial experience, meaning they may be more likely find work elsewhere if TLC closed.

## **Conclusion**

The field of adult literacy has long been beset with challenges to recruiting and retaining trained educators: low pay, less than full time work, few benefits, and insufficient physical conditions have often characterized the unappealing working conditions these educators endure. Shortly after the ABE federal accountability system was initiated, Smith, Hofer, and Gillespie (2001) argued that "a rigorous accountability system may only demonstrate the limited outcomes and impacts that result from such conditions" (p.8). However, at TLC, the rigorous federal and state accountability demands served not only to demonstrate the effects of these conditions, but substantially changed the conditions for the worse. It seems likely that, rather than improving outcomes for students in ABE programs as they were intended, strict accountability measures may de-energize and undermine teachers' energy and efforts, thereby working against the stated goals of the policies.

Although this analysis was based on a sample of convenience and explored the affective responses of a small number of practitioners at one institution, given the similarity of conditions faced by teachers and administrators in other publicly-funded programs, it seems likely that

other practitioners are experiencing similar stress as a result of their accountability obligations. Understanding how state and institutional power generate affective responses among teachers and administrators is critical to understanding contemporary working conditions in adult literacy programs. That teachers at TLC generally felt disempowered, mistrusted, and mistreated speaks to the need to consider other models of funding, regulation, and program structure. Bridwell (2009) suggested cooperative professional development approaches as a way of amplifying the voices of part-time ABE teachers and minimizing the isolation those who teach in this field experience. Sun (2010) suggested that ESOL teachers in the ABE field need to "mobilize" and to have national organizations advocate on their behalf. Perhaps similar advocacy could be done by national organization on behalf of ABE teachers. Another possibility is the direct unionization of ABE teachers, a move which would also support efforts to professionalize teachers in the field.

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