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Promoting Adult Literacy Education for Minorities in the US: Challenges and Suggestions

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Adult literacy is a long-lasting issue in modern US and adult literacy education often falls off the radar of the support system for education. This study examined and synthesized extensive literature relevant to adult literacy education with a focus on minorities in the US. It identified progresses and challenges in three major issues in adult literacy education: leadership, retention and funding. Although gains have been achieved in this field during the past few decades, there are still a lot of barriers that necessitate strengthened efforts in various social sectors to advance adult education for minorities. This study attempted to illuminate solutions for the problems faced by adult literacy education for minorities and generate perspectives for policy makers, adult literacy educators, administrators and researchers in this field.

Keywords: adult literacy education, minorities, literacy, literacy policies

Introduction

The WIA (Workforce Investment Act) of 1998 defines literacy as an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, compute and solve problems at all levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and society (US Department of Labor, 1998, p. 126). Literacy reflects the ability of an individual to understand and communicate through reading and writing (Locker & Coombe, 2000; Tweedwell, 2000), and this ability specifically refers to the level of English proficiency in the countries where English is the official and primary language. In this sense, for many minority adult learners, if English is not their native tongue, they are classified as "linguistic minorities", that is, "those people whose languages are not the dominant or official ones in a society" (Chu, 1999, p. 340).

Adult literacy is a long-lasting issue in modern US. In the 1980s, it was estimated that approximately 40 to 50 million people in the US were lack of even the most rudimentary literacy skills (Beder, 1991). Current estimates provided by the NCES (National Center for Education Statistics) suggest that more than 40 million adults in the US have only minimal basic literacy skills (Miller, McCardle, & Hernandez, 2010). In 2007 and 2008, over 2.3 million adults enrolled in the classes of ABE (Adult Basic Education) and ESL (English as a Second Language) (Condelli, Kirshstein, Silver-Pacuilla, Reder, & Wrigley, 2009).

In addition, adult literacy learners have diverse literacy levels and needs. In the report for a symposium dedicated to adult literacy education hosted by the AIR (American Institute for Research) in 2009, the panelists with expertise in this field identified three potential categories of adults who were most likely in need of adult basic literacy instruction: K-12 school dropouts, immigrant adults and aging adults (Condelli et al., 2009).

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Among these people, most of them are minorities (Warshauer & Liaw, 2010).

During the past few decades, the demographic landscape in the US has undergone tremendous changes. The populations of Hispanic and African Americans have been growing at a whopping rate of 27% and 9% respectively, versus only 2% for the whites (Engle & Lynch, 2009). An influential survey of a nationally representative sample conducted by the NAAL (National Assessment for Adult Literacy) in 2003 indicated that approximately 11 million Americans have zero or low literacy skills in English, among whom, 24% are African Americans and 36% are Hispanics (Kutner et al., 2007).

According to the 2008 ACS (American Community Survey) by the US Census Bureau, there are approximately 38 million foreign-born individuals in the US, an increase of fourfold of the number of immigrants during the past 35 years (Beeler & Murray, 2007). Nowadays, immigrants comprise more than a fifth of low-income workers (Benstein, 2007), and almost three quarters of the immigrant workers possessing an education level below the ninth grade (Condelli et al., 2009; Jones & Kelly, 2007).

Nevertheless, the advancement of adult literacy education lags behind these demographic transformations. Minority adult learners often find it difficult to attain their goals, and at the same time, the current scale and capacity of the adult literacy programs cannot adequately meet the learning needs of the minorities with low literacy levels. As Ahmed (1992, p. 33) stated, those who most need access to knowledge, information and skills, by which they might pull themselves out of a disadvantageous situation, are the ones most deprived of this access. From a social perspective, adult literacy education is a multifaceted issue and constraints are evidenced in three major dimensions: leadership, retention and funding.

Leadership and Promulgation

With a realization of the imperative need to promote adult literacy education, campaigns have been initiated by legislators, policy makers and literacy organizations. In 1990, governors throughout the US reached a historic consensus on a set of national education goals for the year of 2000, one of which was to provide support for literacy instruction with an aim to cut down the number of illiterates in the US (Tweedwell, 2000). The Obama Administration's 2020 goals (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2009) articulated a reinforced leadership of the US in global education. These goals cannot possibly be met without involving adults—those with and without a high school diploma (Condelli et al., 2009, p. 17).

Two widely known literacy programs were first created in the 1960s. To address the need of improving literacy skills for the native-born citizens, the ABE was implemented as a part of the Economic Opportunity Act, and ESL was to extend ABE by targeting immigrants with limited English literacy levels (Denny, 1992; Kruidenier, 2000; Miller et al., 2010; Sticht, 1989; Venezky, Bristow, & Sabatini, 1994). ESL is the largest component of adult basic education in the US (CAAL (Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy), 2009). The ESL adult learners represent a wide range of English literacy levels, cultural backgrounds, native languages and educational experiences.

A more recent act was the WIA of 1998, a milestone in legislation for adult literacy education, with its Title II of the AEFLA (Adult Education and Family Literacy Act) particularly meant to bridge the literacy classroom and vocational training.

As a federal agency authorized by the US Congress under AEFLA and the NCLB (No Child Left behind Act) (Beder, 1991; CAAL, 2009; Tweedwell, 2000), the NIFL (National Institute for Literacy) provides national guidance to achieve the goal of a fully literate America and coordinates nationwide endeavor in

research, application and literacy programs or services. Throughout the years, NIFL has strengthened its efforts by working in conjunction with many government agencies and educational institutions to explore new research focus and identify effective literacy programs (Freedman, 2000; Miller et al., 2010). Following up the recommendations made by the National Commission on Adult Literacy, the CAAL proposed that NIFL be reinforced with a more up-to-date mission and a more centralized governance mechanism (CAAL, 2009).

A research study of five years (2002-2006) with a total of $18.5 million was conducted jointly by NIFL, the NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) and the OVAE (Office of Vocational and Adult Education) of the US Department of Education. Over 3,800 adults in 80 sites across the country were identified for participation in the study to improve their literacy skills. Among them, 60% were minorities, predominantly blacks and Hispanics, and a large number of them had very limited English proficiency (Miller et al., 2010). This longitudinal study represented very rewarding efforts in designing, developing and implementing successful interventions in adult literacy education (Miller et al., 2010). Moreover, subsequent articles analyzing the outcomes of this project have enlightened researchers' perspectives of modeling assessment measures aligned with learners' characteristics for both native and non-native English speakers (Miller et al., 2010).

Generally speaking, despite of the determined leadership in adult literacy education, many more national attentions and resources have been committed to the K-12 school system (Venezky, 1996). Lack of attention and support is one of the big obstacles to improve adult literacy education. In addition, there is no efficient or reliable way for adult literacy educators to obtain up-to-date information regarding changes and innovations in program planning, outcome assessment, successful model programs and services (CAAL, 2009). In fact, a more centralized accountability system is needed to provide opportunities for innovations and information dissemination.

Suggestion 1: Reauthorize the evidence-based WIA and connect its Title I and Title II programs with literacy education (CAAL, 2009; Condelli et al., 2009);

Suggestion 2: Publicize successful anecdotal exemplars of minority adult learners within ethnic communities to motivate participation;

Suggestion 3: Encourage civic engagement and champion a shared public awareness of adult literacy education for minorities through various social media and channels.

Retention and Practices

A high attrition rate is one of the characteristics of adult literacy programs. In the urban areas, adult literacy programs encounter more challenges in terms of persistence (Comings, Cuban, Bos, Porter, & Doolittle, 2004). Adult participants in urban programs tended to be more mobile, due to a volatile job market (Freedman, 2000). Sticht (1989) reported an average retention rate of 50% for adult literacy programs. Comparable findings were found in a nationwide survey conducted by Development Associates (1993), a research consulting firm in Virginia. In a sample with 5,672 adult learners, half of whom discontinued classes within the first 16 weeks and only 40% persisted beyond the 20th week of an adult literacy program.

Many participants dropped out prior to the completion of a certain program or before achieving their literacy goals. The reasons vary and can be attributed to changes in their life, such as relocating for a new job, the birth of a newborn baby in the family, insufficient support services, like childcare or their discontent with the adult literacy program offerings.

The issue of retention is also related to the constraints experienced in recruiting minority adult students

(Denny, 1992). It is hard to reach out and enroll minorities because of their lack of information about literacy programs and some people were reluctant to participate in literacy programs due to low self-esteem, negative attitude or life experience towards school or society (Denny, 1992). Moreover, the timing of literacy advertisements often plays a role in galvanizing enrollment (Gadsden, 1990). Therefore, instead of waiting for these adult minorities to seek literacy training, efforts and incentives of disseminating information regarding available programs should be scaled up.

Embracing minorities' own culture and values not only can enhance enrollment and retention, but also can produce better learning outcomes. For instance, Hispanics tended to give strong emphasis and priority to family (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992). Research has shown a high degree of care and engagement that Latino parents had for their offspring's schoolwork (Lopez, 2001).

With the support of the New York State Education Department, the Literacy Assistance Center interviewed a group of African American adult literacy students in New York, in order to understand their perspectives of their motives of attending literacy programs. Most adults acknowledged that helping their children's homework in grade schools was the major reason for their participation (Denny, 1992).

In an effective family, literacy project carried out by a research center at Texas A & M University in 2002, economically disadvantaged Latino parents who had limited English proficiency were recruited in the project. In tandem with the progress that the parents made in their literacy skills, both the quantitative and qualitative results of the study also demonstrated positive influence of it on their children's learning (Cassidy et al., 2004).

In addition, during the course of delivering literacy instruction, if the instructor could communicate with the students in the primary language of the linguistic minority, it could create affinity with the learners (Cassidy et al., 2004), which would likely facilitate the learning progress. Given that most people receiving literacy services are minorities, it is also suggested that the proportion of minority teachers be increased. Minority adult learners tend to be motivated if their own culture is respected and there is a rapport between the instructor and the students.

A reciprocal effect exists between educational level and employment (Reder, 2010). Minorities with low literacy skills particularly found it more difficult than others to land in a job, eke out a living or cast off poverty. Workers with low literacy levels were more likely to be the victims of cutbacks and layoffs (Murray, Yerichuk, & Murray-Smith, 2009). Some industries which experienced an exceptionally hard hit by the recession, such as construction, have dismissed a large number of workers, most of who have very low literacy levels.

As one of the ramifications of the economic circumstances, there is an increase of demands of adult literacy training, mainly because a lot of jobless minorities gradually realized that their lack of basic education is one major road block to finding or maintaining a job. For instance, being able to fill out a job application form is one of the primary reasons for which some are seeking literacy programs. Simultaneously, however, participation and persistence of minorities in literacy programs have dropped, because some individuals' dire economic situations may prompt these learners to shift their focus from improving their literacy levels to job search, with the latter often considered as a more urgent task by them.

Despite of numerous breakthroughs in today's information age, technologies have not yet been fully harnessed in adult literacy programs and instruction. For minority adult learners, especially those low-income ethnic groups, access to computers and the Internet is very limited, with a level well below the national average. Only 26.8% of families with a household income under $15,000 have the Internet connection, compared with 91.4% with an income of and above $75,000 (Warshauer & Liaw, 2010). Less than 45% of blacks and 43% of

Hispanics have access to the Internet at home, versus 67% for whites (Warshauer & Liaw, 2010). In addition, within each ethnic group, those with low English literacy level have even much more limited access to computers and the Internet (Strawn, 2008; Warshauer & Liaw, 2010). Yet, minority adult literacy learners are more likely to have a pressing need to access to information for job placement, social services, welfare and ethnic community support system.

Suggestion 1: Broadening the scope of literacy programs for minorities to include vocational training and job placement services, as well as other adult competencies, such as information literacy, health literacy and financial literacy (Murray et al., 2009);

Suggestion 2: Incorporating cultural elements for minorities in literacy instruction;

Suggestion 3: Guaranteeing immediate placement in literacy programs for minority attendees (Gadsden, 1990);

Suggestion 4: Sustaining ongoing literacy advertisements or encourage referrals within minority communities to capture a wider range of potential minority learners (Denny, 1992);

Suggestion 5: Utilizing technologies, such as distance courses, virtual classroom or online forum to help deliver the literacy instruction to the minorities who have limited resources and accessibility to adult basic education (Warshauer & Liaw, 2010);

Suggestion 6: Providing support services to assist minority adults in attending literacy programs, such as childcare service, transportation and personal counseling.

Funding and Staffing

Like all the other spheres, adult basic education feels the repercussion of the economic downturn. Funding has become a formidable issue. Diminishing private donations and depletion of government subsidies have brought about tremendous woes for adult literacy education. Most literacy programs depend on short-term, indefinite and project-based funds, and thus, are faced with mounting challenges in fundraising (Murray et al., 2009). ESL programs were often offered in small community-based agencies and volunteer groups with very scarce funding and resources (Ortiz, 1989). The funding issue even deepens this limitation, evidenced by low salaries, insufficient benefits, job insecurity and heavy workload (Murray et al., 2009).

Many literacy educators are concerned that funding issue will worsen many other existing problems in adult literacy education, such as literacy workers turnover, staff morale and commitment and continuity of literacy programs.

Unlike the K-12 education system, most literacy work is based on part-time or volunteer labor for both program supervisors and instructors, which more or less leads to a fairly high turnover rate. In addition, the prevailing training approaches for instructors often concentrate on practical classroom lecture, test administration or one-stop workshops, with little consideration in well-structured pedagogy or real professional development (Beder, 1999; Fordham & Fox, 1989). So far, very few states require certifications for adult literacy instructors (CAAL, 2009). Besides, the infrastructure of the adult education system is not strong enough to support professional development and vocational training for instructors, practitioners, administrators and volunteers.

Therefore, not only must the training take into account the variance in local and demographic context and the different needs of the participants (Beder, 1999), but also should achieve professional development by the means of improving instructors' personal perspectives and teaching practices. By taking part in a variety of

intensive training and workshops, literacy teachers and program administrators can acquire instrumental information, appropriate educational tools and technological aids to better serve their students and tailor their approaches to different demands (Mikulecky & Lloyd, 1997).

Although large funds have been poured into the attempt of identifying high performing adult literacy programs, more investment is entailed for more successful program planning, effective evaluation methodologies, better staff benefits and professional training for adult literacy educators.

Suggestion 1: Reinforcing the coordinating efforts across various federal and state agencies to mobilize all the necessary resources and funding for minority adult education;

Suggestion 2: Initiating more effective fundraising campaigns and solicit assistance and engagement of minority leadership, businesses, philanthropists and organizations at national, state and local levels to facilitate attainment of funding and resources;

Suggestion 3: Placing more emphasis on structured pedagogy and systematic training for literacy instructors;

Suggestion 4: Making professional development for adult literacy education an ongoing undertaking (Fordham & Fox, 1989).

Conclusions

For both individuals and nations, education is one of the indispensable means for the development in a wide variety of prospects. However, adult literacy education often falls off the radar of the support system for education in the society. With the increasing influx of immigrants and the fastest growing population of ethnic groups, minorities have become an integral part of the US workforce, and thus, their literacy and education levels bear far-reaching implications for the economic growth and social development. However, the mounting needs of the adult learners and the insufficient service of current literacy programs call for imperative improvement and reform in adult basic education. This actual demand in contrast with the neglect has already prompted researchers, educators and policy-makers to step up their efforts. The best solution would be to establish a long-term and strategic approach with continuous endeavor.

Adult basic education for minorities is deeply embedded in a larger context, and many social, economic and political factors could interfere with literacy program participation and achievement of learning outcomes. Although many studies indicated positive outcomes achieved by literacy programs, these short-term gains are, nevertheless, the tip of the iceberg. Literacy education does not merely mean teaching adults with low literacy levels how to speak, read and write; at a more significant level, it must be conducive to people's full participation in the society (Ahmed, 1992; Denny, 1992; Goodman, 1989). Minorities are marginalized to some extent by the mainstream and this social standing of minorities takes a toll in their life beyond their economic status. If the socio-economic status for minorities is substantially improved, the ripple effect can be extended to the adult literacy education for minorities. Hopefully, this article served the purpose of raising the awareness of the values of adult literacy education for the minorities, because a comprehensive understanding of this multifaceted issue can be the key to inform strategic planning and enlist greater endeavor for this significant undertaking.

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