Moving towards Participatory Adult Education: Involving Family Literacy Students in Meaningful Leadership Experiences

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Key Findings

Although adult educators espouse values such as inclusion and ownership, adult learners seldom play a substantive role in programmatic decision making. This collaborative research project explored family literacy participants' experiences in their program's parent advisory council (PAC). The study shows that involvement in the PAC enhanced program effectiveness, increased learners' investment in the program, and fostered capacities that learners transferred to personal, educational, and social domains. However, learners had little or no influence over some programmatic areas. In sum, giving learners a meaningful say in programmatic and curricular matters can prepare them to exercise more control over decisions in their lives and communities. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the benefits and challenges of student leadership in adult basic and literacy education, insights that can assist teachers and administrators in creating programs of, by, and for adult learners.

Key Implications

This study underscores the importance of providing adult learners with opportunities for leadership and substantive decision making. Since staff members often maintain control over which decisions and changes learners can make, it is important to consider why particular decisions should be open or off-limits to student input and to communicate this clearly to participants. Educators should also consider how best to develop leadership among learners (e.g., election or assignment of leadership roles) and, whenever possible, negotiate this process with participants. Finally, staff need to recognize that participatory learning can be co-opted: If participation is used only to give the *illusion* or *feeling* of control, it merely reinforces inequitable power relationships and increases people's cynicism about so-called participatory processes.

Introduction

Adult educators commonly advocate for learners' participation, inclusion, and ownership, based on the belief that programs should be responsive to their needs and that students should have a say in curriculum, scheduling, class topics, and other programmatic matters. In practice, however, examples of effective, substantive participant leadership are rare, since adult learners are often treated as clients or recipients of services rather than active decision makers. Additionally, society assigns mothers *responsibility* for ensuring children's educational success, yet they often have little *control or say* over their children's learning (Griffith & Smith, 2005) or the adult education and family literacy programs in which they participate. In such cases, adult education programs are *for* rather than *of* and *by* adult learners. Because highly collaborative program structures and practices are rare (Purcell-Gates et al., 1998), we can learn a great deal from cases where students *do* influence programmatic decisions. Accordingly, this study presents findings from a collaborative research project between The Pennsylvania State University and a nearby Even Start family literacy program that explored parents' experiences as leaders in the program's PAC.

Participatory adult education is rooted in the belief that people have a right to influence the decisions that affect their lives and that adult learners come with particular goals and ideas about education. Thus, participatory education programs involve learners in making decisions about their own learning, particularly through activities chosen or created by learners. This, in turn, validates learners' knowledge and needs, enhances academic achievement, and shapes the extent to which participants can exercise control in the classroom, their lives, and communities.

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According to adult education scholars, the purposes of participatory education are to enhance learners' autonomy, critical thinking, leadership, and active citizenship (Campbell, 2001). Learner involvement in decision making yields many benefits, including self-confidence and self-reliance, increased program involvement and sense of control, enhanced citizenship, and increased program effectiveness and attendance (Jurmo, 1989).

However, challenges emerge when decision-making control is given in name only, placed within limitations, or retracted when conflicts or differences arise (Campbell, 2001). Staff members may also have difficulty teaching and sharing leadership and program control (Campbell, 2001). Additional challenges include learners' resistance to playing a more active decision-making role, differing conceptions of power among staff and learners, and disagreements about appropriate roles for learners and staff, among others (Campbell, 2001). In sum, the benefits of participatory education are not always evident, nor is willing involvement easily negotiated.

Background and Methods

This study is based on a collaborative research project between the Mifflin County Even Start program in rural central Pennsylvania and a professor and graduate students from Penn State.[1] The staff created the PAC in 2004, after an annual assessment showed the program had not met the state performance standards for parent involvement in education. The staff believed they could increase parents' investment in the program by giving them a say in developing portions of the adult education and early childhood curricula. Staff members presented the idea to parents in the adult education class and they jointly chose to start the PAC. The PAC meets monthly during a scheduled class; participation is voluntary and open to all program participants. Through the PAC, learners make decisions about programmatic issues and program improvement.

In this participatory research project, staff members and parents played an active role in choosing the research focus, formulating research questions, collecting and analyzing data, and making decisions about research methods and other aspects of the project. Study participants included 3 women and 1 man (all White) with one or more children aged 8 or younger. Three staff members (all White women) worked on the project with us. (All gave permission to use their real names.) The project sought to understand how parents and staff perceived the efficacy of learner participation in decision making, both as it affected the program and learners' self-perceptions. Specifically, we wanted to explore how the PAC enabled participants to have a voice in the program; in what ways their voices were or

were not heard; the PAC's impact on the program, participants, and the community; and how participants extended what they learned in the PAC to their lives outside the program.

Data sources included a videotape parents made of a PAC-designed and -led field trip to a fire station; a parent-designed scrapbook of photos they took during the research project; separate small-group interviews with 3 parents and 3 staff members; a reflective journal written by 1 parent; PAC meeting agendas and minutes; and field notes written by graduate students after observations of PAC meeting sessions. Data sources were coded to identify the most prominent and relevant themes.

Findings

Having a Voice in the Program

Participating in the PAC enabled parents to exercise their voice in several ways. First, they were able to shape the adult education and early childhood curricula by choosing topics that better reflected their needs and interests (e.g., selection of reading materials and child development topics). For example, Jaime remarked, "The parent council just does not do field trips and stuff; we get to decide what types of activities our children do….You get to decide exactly what happens in your children's classes." Parents suggested topics such as kindergarten readiness or literacy activities that centered on their concerns for their children's development, and developed and led children's activities. They expressed pride in their ideas, activities, and materials. They also successfully advocated for and planned healthier snacks for the program's early childhood classroom.

Additionally, parents took initiative in planning Even Start family events (e.g., all-family fun night), incentive activities (e.g., eating out at a restaurant) to reward parents and children who met program goals, and social events (e.g., Thanksgiving feast) including other programs housed in the building. A teacher elaborated on parents' involvement in planning these events (see Box 1):

> Box 1: My job is to plan the literacy activities and one of the things that the council has been so crucial in helping is that they have been actually discussing activities that they think would be appropriate—for example, the [family] evening events. They pretty much plan[ned] several of them. Last year [for] a fall event…they gave us several activities that were really appropriate towards their child's development. — Even Start staff member

The PAC also helped parents gain a say in their own learning. For example, Matt noted, "We use all the input from different parents and we actually do make an impact on…what we learn in the class-room."

Parents also helped revise the Parent and Child Together Time (PACT) Incentive Form (i.e., the "parent contract"), which outlines activities parents must complete for program purposes within a designated time period. The incentive form was designed to help the program meet government-mandated standards for family literacy programs (e.g., one unexcused school absence for school-aged children). Parents and staff believed the revised incentive form criteria were "more appropriate" given students' daily constraints. For example, recognizing transporta-tion limitations, the PAC reduced the number of library visits from three to one and decided that newcomers could be rewarded on the basis of equal accomplishment rather than longevity.

Limitations of Student Voice

There were some topics over which students had little or no influence, such as the allocation of program funds. Typically, students would tell the staff what they wanted and staff members would research the cost and approve (or not) based on available funds. Staff reported that they decided which areas of the program students could influence and had the final say over whether suggestions would be implemented. The students were not aware that boundaries for their participation were drawn at staff meetings. Analysis of the field notes revealed that although a parent facilitator was chosen for each PAC meeting, staff directed meetings (e.g., calling for decisions, moving through the agenda). Despite these constraints on student leadership, the PAC members spoke positively about their relationships with the staff. Moreover, the staff wanted to expand PAC members' responsibilities, such as setting the PAC meeting agendas or including them in other program arenas such as the hiring of new staff members.

Impact of the PAC on the Program, Participants, and Community

Program Changes. Both parents and staff believed the parents had learned a great deal through the PAC leadership experience and that the program had changed as a result of PAC decisions. For instance, the staff credited the student-developed PACT Incentive Form with increasing parents' involvement in the program and their understand-ing of program performance standards. For instance, the program met the standard for parental communication with children's school teach-ers after the staff discussed this issue with the PAC. Through this process, students and staff alike believed they had gained a mutual awareness regarding the importance of achieving—and the difficulty of accomplishing—particular goals.

According to the staff, students who were actively involved in the PAC were more likely to complete the program goals as described in the incentive form. Attendance also increased in class and at program-sponsored activities. Furthermore, the PAC was instrumental in lobby-ing against Even Start funding reduction by writing to legislators.

Participant Changes. The PAC leadership activities enabled parents to become more comfortable engaging in school-based activities, such as confidently leading their children through kindergarten orientation. Parents also took on new leadership roles in the community and felt more comfortable expressing their opinions. They also developed an enhanced sense of self-worth and control over their lives, became appropriate role models for their children, and gained other positive aspects of parenting such as taking time for oneself (see Box 2).

Box 2: When I first came here I was very quiet. I did not think I was a very good mom. [Participation in the PAC] helps me to be able to be more open, say things a little bit more. I mean, it's hard for me to do that, but— Because I have never really had to stay in a lot of things in my life. Coming here, it helped me realize I am actually doing quite well for my kids in that I have the ability to move on in life and get the education that I want. So being able to say something and say it out in the [open]. You know, [it] gives you a little bit of courage. — Teresa, Even Start participant

Students began to see each other as experts and resources for learn-ing and solving problems, moving away from a teacher-as-expert model. Teresa, for example, noted the input she had given throughout the program had "helped others." Participants believed the PAC had created space to offer advice and listen to others. While these results may occur in traditional Even Start programs, they are more likely when parents become "experts" through leadership activities and when they are heard and granted recognition by other parents and staff (Mitra & Watts, 2002).

Staff members commented that program participants also applied decision-making and communicative strategies they had learned in the PAC to interactions with each other, spouses, and children. For in-stance, a staff person observed, "I see a difference in the students and how they treat each other. You know, we see them compromising and communicating really well."

As participants learned from others (parents and experts), made programmatic changes, and adopted new leadership roles, they gained awareness of available resources and ways to access new information or resources—for example, searching out multiple options to continue their education, access health care, or pursue career possibilities. Others were able to make more informed personal choices, such as leaving abusive relationships.

Finally, students reported that the PAC allowed them to experience the family literacy program as a location of shared power rather than a return to their traditional school experience. For instance, Jaime commented that community residents "would probably get that fear of going back to high school when the teacher is a dictator and you are the student and you have no say of what goes on in it. [It's] definitely not like that at all here."

Changes in Community Participation. Participants reported that exercising their voice in the PAC carried over into their community. Notably, participants began to volunteer at community programs, plan and host fund-raising events, and promote the Even Start program at outside events. The PAC members planned and implemented at least two community projects: the Linus Project (collecting blankets for poor families) and Red Cross fund-raising for victims of Hurricane Katrina. Furthermore, staff stated that the parents had begun to engage with their older children's schools by "taking the leadership role" and becoming partners with the school.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In accordance with the participatory education literature, the findings show that involving learners in curriculum planning and leadership can increase their personal and academic investment and achievement. Including learners in program governance enabled the staff and PAC members to discuss and negotiate the need to meet program standards and the best ways to meet them. Offering students substantive input and leadership opportunities equipped them to exercise power and comprehend the task at hand.

Secondly, leadership enhanced learners' perceptions of self-efficacy in and outside the program, which they attributed to their ability to exercise control and to see concrete changes resulting from their actions. In turn, learners felt better equipped to guide their children's lives and futures. Student involvement in the PAC enhanced program effectiveness and parents' learning (as measured by performance indicators), and stimulated important psychosocial benefits.

Learners built broader, more supportive social networks as they befriended other students and became more active participants and leaders in their home, school, and community. Such networks can provide greater access to resources such as information, social services, job opportunities, and social support, while also offsetting depression and anxiety and increasing their sense of control over their lives. In this case, social support networks were enhanced by participants' ability to negotiate power and decision making, attend interactive meetings, discuss personal problems privately and in small groups, and learn from experts and peers.

Leadership opportunities also enabled learners to gain confidence and practice speaking and negotiating with others in formal situations. Our findings suggest that greater autonomy over decision making about learning enhances students' citizenship and leadership.

Finally, this study suggests that giving learners a role in deciding classroom matters and programmatic issues enables them to better understand their own learning and program operation, including constraints and regulations. The PAC participants used their experiences to critically assess and question behaviors and activities beyond the Even Start program. In this way, participatory programs may help learners develop political consciousness and skills.

In conclusion, this study highlights staff members' and students' desires and goals for a successful program and, in the case of participants, their and their children's future. Parent advisory councils and other structures that grant learners decision-making authority support the creation of "local social spaces in which human actors can learn and exercise the skills of dialogue and debate necessary for the development of a democratic citizenry" (Anderson, 1998, p. 575). Furthermore, participatory education continues the social justice tradition of questioning who has the power to decide what is learned and how it is learned, and of equipping adult learners to shape the organizations that are intended to serve their interests. When learners have a meaningful say in programmatic and curricular matters, the implications transcend the family literacy or adult education program itself, for these actions can prepare learners to speak out and exercise more control over decisions in other aspects of their lives and communities.

The study suggests the following implications for practice.

• Intentionally provide adult learners with opportunities for leadership and substantive decision making.

- Consider why particular decisions should be open or off-limits to student input, and communicate this clearly to participants. Ambiguity about such matters can often lead to conflicts, frustration, and confusion regarding decision-making authority and procedures (Prins, 2005).
- Consider how best to develop leadership among learners (e.g., election or assignment of leadership roles) and whenever possible, negotiate this process with participants.
- Recognize that participatory learning can be co-opted: If participation is used only to give the *illusion* or *feeling* of control, it merely reinforces inequitable power relationships and increases people's cynicism about so-called participatory processes (Rogers, 2006).

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[1]The project involved Dr. Esther Prins and graduate students in her fall 2006 Family Literacy course (Mohammad Al Thowaini, Brendaly Drayton, Lance Galloway, Edith Gnanadass, Ramazan Gungor, Rachel Johnson, Hyung Min Park, and Blaire Willson Toso). Graduate students collected and analyzed the data.