Forum: The Role of Research in Policy and Practice

(Part 1 of 3)

Research and Policy: A Three-Way Intersection

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Organizations advocating for federal, state, and local level support for adult education have long relied on the power of individual story to influence both public perception and public policy. Recognizing the effectiveness of adult learner and adult educator voices in advocacy, professional organizations such as VALUEUSA (2021), ProLiteracy (2021), Coalition on Adult Basic Education (n.d.), and TESOL International (n.d.) have developed training programs, provided advocacy toolkits, and organized visits with policy makers in order to promote and sustain awareness of the benefits of adult education for the lives of individuals and the fabric of the community as a whole.

At the same time, decision makers across the political spectrum have increasingly come to rely on research to inform the process known as evidence-based policymaking. According to the final report of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking (CEP) within the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services' Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation (CEP, 2017), evidence-based policymaking is "the application of evidence to inform decisions in government" (p. 11). A fuller definition is provided by the Evidence-Based Policymaking Collaborative (2016):

> Evidence-based policymaking has two goals: *to use what we already know* from program evaluation to make policy decisions and *to build more knowledge* to better inform future decisions. This approach prioritizes rigorous research findings, data, analytics, and evaluation

> of new innovations above anecdotes, ideology, marketing, and inertia around the status quo. (p. 2)

How can the adult education field "prioritize rigorous research findings" that inform evidence-based policymaking, while also taking advantage of the persuasive power of the "anecdotes" that those affected by the policies can provide? This paper identifies two strategies that researchers can employ to reconcile the two and proposes three areas of current interest where those strategies might be used to good effect.

Current Strategies for Research

Policymaking is a complex and nuanced process. Evidence from research can inform it in important ways, but both researchers and policymakers must recognize that "a narrowly 'evidence-based' framing of policymaking is inherently unable to explore the complex, context-dependent, and value-laden way in which competing options are negotiated by individuals and interest groups" (Greenhalgh & Russell, 2009, p. 304). Two strategies that have emerged in recent years provide avenues for broadening the evidence-based policymaking process so that it reflects this complexity more fully.

The first is an increased emphasis on direct interaction between researchers and policymakers. "The process of using available

evidence to make decisions relies on knowledge of what evidence exists … [communication between policymakers and researchers] helps to ensure the most relevant information is conveyed in a timely, reliable, and credible manner" (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2018, p. 5). A powerful example of this is provided by the Pew Charitable Trusts' Results First initiative, which works to establish partnerships that bring researchers together with state-level policymakers to identify, study, and address matters of public concern.

> Partnerships structure learning and collaboration between researchers and decision-makers, and can help connect relevant evidence and experts to the right policymakers at the right time. Perhaps most importantly, these interactions cultivate trust and encourage those involved to participate in other efforts that effectively use evidence to address public problems. … Leaders have found that building these collaborations can help sustain evidence initiatives over the long term, maintaining projects through policy cycles and leadership of staff changes. (Bednarek & Dube, 2021, para. 3-4, 6)

While creating such partnerships can be challenging in terms of funding, staff capacity, and expectation management, once established they can guide development of research questions whose answers inform policy and practice. As Matthew Soldner (2022), commissioner of the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance at the Education Department's Institute of Education Sciences, observed in a speech, "Data can be powerful, but it also needs to be actionable. We need a plan for action before starting research." A policymaker-researcher partnership can strengthen both research and policy by identifying actionable, achievable outcomes.

The second emergent strategy entails intentional involvement of the groups and individuals who are most directly affected by policy decisions. This is Strategy One in FHI 360's Eight Strategies for Research to Practice: "Include key stakeholders in research to increase the likelihood of producing useful research findings" (Canoutas et al., 2012, p. 1). Recommendations for implementing this strategy include identifying and prioritizing stakeholders who "will be directly affected (positively or negatively) by the research results" and "identify[ing] opportunities to obtain stakeholder input at each stage of research," starting with the formation of research questions and extending through "dissemination and advocacy of findings" (Canoutas et al., 2012, p. 1).

A deeper collaboration with those who are ultimately affected by policy decisions is community-based participatory research (García, 2022; Urban Institute, n.d.). In this equity-based approach, all partners are involved in all aspects of a research project; in the case of adult education, this would mean participation by adult learners in outlining the purposes and goals of research and identification of the research questions, as well as data collection, data analysis, and development and presentation of conclusions. García notes that such collaborations can be challenging to maintain, given the transient nature of many adult learners' participation in educational programming. In addition, adoption of this approach requires mutual agreement on how authority, responsibility, and credit will be shared, as well as consideration of ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, and ownership of intellectual property (Holkup et al., 2004). However, it is well worth the effort for the depth and nuance of understanding that can be achieved when adult learners are actively engaged in contributing their perspectives and knowledge to research design and data analysis, rather than serving merely as study subjects. As Goetz (2022) has noted, the community-based participatory research approach moves research beyond the "what" to the "why"—or more specifically, the "what works for whom, and why."

Opportunities for Research in Adult Education

Given the possibilities that these research strategies open, and the total transformation of the socioeconomic and sociopolitical landscape that has taken place over the past two-plus years, how can researchers examining adult literacy, numeracy, and digital skills take maximum advantage of the opportunity that evidence-based policymaking presents? Here are three research areas that could illuminate key aspects of shifts in the adult education landscape. Each area provides opportunities for traditional research methods to ask and answer important questions. In each case, though, the adoption of direct researcher-policymaker interaction and a community-based participatory research model could allow for development of both a richer set of research questions and a more nuanced body of evidence. Research plans that start with the three-way intersection of policymaker concerns, researcher interests, and end user (adult learner, adult education provider, employer) priorities create connections that can base policymaking in a clearer understanding of "what works for whom, and why."

Integrated Education and Training

Federal policymakers' interest in adult education is heavily oriented toward career and technical education, as evidenced by the size of the bipartisan Congressional Career and Technical Education Caucus (https://careerandtechnicaleducationcaucus-langevin.house.gov/) and the considerably larger federal investment in WIOA Title I in relation to WIOA Title II, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. In addition, despite some concern and confusion about the meaning and value of different credentials, interest in skilled trades certification as an alternative to a four-year college degree appears to be increasing (Marcus, 2021a, 2021b).

These related factors give researchers the opportunity to draw adult learners in integrated education and training (IET) programs, program providers, employers, and policymakers together in research projects that explore how IET and other bridge educational models meet the needs and goals of various stakeholders and how they are using more recent developments in technology-mediated instruction to strengthen their outcomes and extend their reach. The work of the Advancing Innovation in Adult Education project (https://lincs.ed.gov/state-resources/federal-initiatives/advancing-innovation/explore), which highlighted partnerships between adult education programs and workforce, community, and higher education partners, provides a strong foundation for further research that also engages adult learners in identifying research questions that are relevant to them and discerning how the research results intersect with the specific situations in their communities. Similarly, researchers can use policymakers' interest in career and technical education to increase their awareness of the critical foundational skills and high school equivalency steps that underlie success in skilled trades training programs, inviting policymakers to identify the research questions that that awareness raises.

Digital Equity and Digital Inclusion

Researchers have produced a number of important studies on aspects of the move to online instruction that the pandemic has entailed (see, for example, Belzer et al., 2020; Morgan, 2020; Vanek, 2021; Vanek et al., 2021). This work has provided key insights into issues of access and availability, such as the fact that in some geographic areas virtual learning has resulted

in improved participation and persistence due to its mitigating effect on other concerns such as transportation and child care (Vanek et al., 2021). As Academy of Hope CEO Lecester Johnson has observed, the need to help children with their homework is one of the primary motivators that leads adults to enroll in adult education (Wondrium, 2021). An interesting direction for research could therefore be exploration of the effects that children's school attendance from home during COVID-19 has had on parents' and caregivers' attitudes and actions with regard to their own educational paths. Involving adult learners and educational programs in this research could lead to deeper insights into the factors that influence adult learners' motivation, engagement, and persistence, providing information for policymakers on the ways that preK-12 education policy affects adults and adult education providers.

Additionally, with the impending implementation of the Digital Equity Act, researchers will have multiple opportunities to study the effects of increased access on the groups that make up the majority of the population of adults with foundational skill development needs. An initial point for investigation could be the role(s) that such adults play (or are able to play) in the initial planning phases of implementation at state and local levels, and how such planning takes their needs and perspectives into account. Research in this area will be essential for evaluating how well DEA-funded work is fulfilling the law's mandate.

As high-speed access becomes more widely available in communities, researchers' attention could turn to uptake: whether, how, and how much adults in unserved and underserved communities begin to use newly available digital resources. Here again the involvement of community members in the development of

research questions and interpretation of response data could provide greater depth of understanding. According to Zia and Keane (2021), for example, uptake was substantial among older adults in underserved parts of the District of Columbia when access to telemedicine became available during COVID-19. Their observations point to the need for further study of which populations adopt which technologies for which purposes, as well as studies that expand current understandings of how adults with foundational skill development needs interact with digital tools, such as the work on AutoTutor conducted by the Center for the Study of Adult Literacy (https://sites.gsu.edu/csal/our-study-abstract/), and how they use support mechanisms such as digital navigators who provide training and conduct troubleshooting (National Digital Inclusion Alliance, n.d.).

Adult Education in Community Context

Adult literacy advocates have long stressed the power of education to open the doors to critical housing, nutrition, health care, and other support services that increase individual resilience, strengthening families and building robust communities. Over the past several years, increasing recognition of the entrenched nature and effects of systemic inequity, combined with stark examples of the disproportionate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities adversely affected by inequality, have reinforced the sense that adult education providers and programs must be active partners within the larger social service context in order to achieve their community-strengthening missions. For example, the Open Door Collective (n.d.) provides this description of its strategy: "We want adult foundational skills advocates to make common cause with advocates for other issues (community health, employment, criminal justice reform,

digital equity and inclusion, older adults services, public libraries, immigrant and refugee education and integration, and others) in order to build an integrated approach to reducing poverty." Similarly, a recent resource guide from ProLiteracy provides a rationale for adopting a more holistic perspective that, among other things, "improves the efficiency, sustainability, and transparency of basic skills development systems through coordination and integration with other governmental and non-governmental development supports (e.g., for health, economic and workforce development, democratization, environmental sustainability, and peace)" (Jurmo, 2021, p. 14). And the National Center for Families Learning has initiated the Family Learning Community Collaborative Model, through which "stakeholders working across sectors in service to families, and including families themselves, meet regularly to foster communication and collaboration towards improving learning opportunities for families" (Smith, 2022).

Recent research has provided valuable insights on the influence of the larger context on participation in adult education, with particular focus on factors that impede participation and persistence in adult education programs (Patterson, 2018; Patterson & Song, 2018). A potentially fruitful parallel area for research could be exploration of the effects of social safety net and community support initiatives on adult education outcomes. This research perspective could provide evidence that contextualizes participation in adult education as one element of the return on investment in poverty alleviation and social safety net initiatives.

For example, Mayors for a Guaranteed Income has initiated guaranteed income pilot projects in several cities, including Stockton, CA; Richmond, VA; and Washington, DC. In DC, the THRIVE East of the River pilot project provided direct cash payments and other support to 590 low-income households from July 2020 to January 2022. The Urban Institute's evaluation of project outcomes (Bogle et al., 2022) notes its short-term effects in terms of reduced housing and food insecurity and improved mental health. Longer-term research on direct payment projects of this type could explore whether and how the stabilization provided by the cash payments results in ability and motivation to pursue further education and training. A similar area of inquiry could look at longer-term outcomes of the health care stabilization provided through enrollment in an Affordable Care Act plan. Designing these research inquiries using a community-based participation approach would provide a rich picture that informs the understanding and addresses the concerns of policymakers, researchers, and end users alike.

Conclusion

Partnering with policymakers and adopting a community-based participatory approach to research are strategies that researchers can use to great effect to raise awareness, influence policy, and pose more apt, actionable research questions whose answers matter to end users. By opening the process of defining theories of change and identifying research questions to participation by the two ends of the policy chain—those who make policy and those who live with its effects—they adopt an asset-focused approach that lifts up the knowledge and ideas available in the larger community. At the three-way intersection where makers, recipients, and evaluators of policy converge, researchers engage all participants in making the future possible.

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