

The Supportive Roles that Learners' Families Play in Adult Literacy Programs

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In 2002-03, a qualitative case study explored the experiences of stakeholders connected to two adult literacy programs in Manitoba, Canada. Data were collected through official documents, personal documents, and interviews. Influences by family members contributed significantly to the theme of human relations that arose from these data. The research participants reported that parents and grandparents, siblings, spouses, and children played active roles in learners' decisions first to enroll in the adult literacy programs and then to stay in them through to goal attainment. This original research report recounts these influences as grounds for recommending the consideration of family members in making programming decisions for adult literacy students.

In 2002-03, a qualitative case study explored the experiences of 70 stakeholders connected to two adult literacy programs in Manitoba, Canada. Among these research participants were 37 learners, 2 coordinators/instructors, and 11 other staff - many of whom identified close relatives as having considerable influence on learner participation and success. This original research report recounts these influences as grounds for recommending the consideration of family members in making programming decisions for adult literacy students.

All given names, including program titles, are pseudonyms. The following definitions of terms apply, in accordance with their use by the research participants: learners are adult literacy students, coordinators/instructors are equivalent to teaching school principals, and other staff are paid and volunteer instructors and office workers.

Overview of the Literature

Adult life stages are defined by developmental task completions that are embedded in spousal and parental roles (Powers & Love, 2000; Reeves, 1999; Taylor, 1999). The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (2002) therefore advised adult literacy educators to shift their focus from "remediation" of literacy skills to "preparing learners to take on the complex challenges of adult life (role competence)" (p. 17). Merriam (1999) and Clark and Caffarella (1999) explained maturation in terms of culturally assigned ages for working, marrying, bearing children, retiring, etc. Conzemius and Conzemius (1996), Ellison and Kallenbach (1996), and Lawrence (1998) considered family relationships primarily within the context of accommodating adult social role responsibilities. Thus, the literature depicts adults as having family responsibilities that impact on their participation in educational programming (Galbo, 1998; Kerka, 2002; Knowles, 1990).

The adult education literature portrays relationships with nuclear family members as a primarily positive impetus for learner persistence (Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training, 2002; Thomas, 1990). Adult learners are motivated by family obligations to take their schooling seriously (Grossman, 1993), and to spend their classroom time "on task" (Wartenberg, 1994) in self-directed (Kerka, 2002; Lee & Caffarella, 1994; Pilling-Cormick, 1997) problem-solving (Jones, 1994; Mealey, 1991; Mezirow, 1997) activities that match their real-life family roles (Byrne, 1990; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Merriam, 1999), such as helping children with homework (Quigley, 1997). Sticht (1995) insisted that the "intergenerational transfer of literacy" (p. 24) from parents in adult basic skills programs should convince governments to invest in the education of adults, if only for the sake of enhancing the regular school performance of these adults' children.

Undereducated adults are also vulnerable to negative motivations such as unsupportive spouses or children, which emerge to impede their progress once they have started their

training programs (Curry, 1996). Byrne (1990) noted the problems that social role conflicts pose for adult learners who are parents and spouses as well as students. Thackerson (1990) insisted that for adult literacy students, these other life concerns are inextricable from, and no less important than, their educational concerns. Garrison (1997) divided motivation into entering and task motivation: the factors that induce an adult to enter a learning situation and then to stay in it to program completion. Long and Middleton (2001) cited cognitive-emotive factors that temper individual adults' participation in literacy programs. Fagan (1991), moreover, correlated learners' abilities to overcome skills and knowledge acquisition barriers with their levels of goal-oriented motivation to learn. Thus, once an adult is motivated to participate, barriers such as lack of family support are thought to play a significant role: well-motivated learners will overcome modest barriers, but weakly motivated learners will succumb thereto (Knowles et al., 1998).

Research Setting

The Clay Creek and Silverton programs were chosen from 37 programs that received funding from the Government of Manitoba in 2002-03. They were therefore obliged to follow the provincial government's community-based adult literacy model of learner-centered literacy skills instruction in a group setting. Other criteria for their selection were as follows:

- that they had operated as literacy programs (with or without external funding) for at least ten years,
- that they were different from each other in their current program configurations and/or their sources of additional funding, and
- that they had program coordinators who had been involved with their respective programs for at least three years, and who were receptive to the study being conducted in their settings.

These programs' different histories of program development had resulted in somewhat different sources of

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financial support and foci for program delivery, which provided a basis for making cross-case comparisons of the research results.

The Clay Creek program began in 1989 when a group of concerned citizens became aware of provincial funding for literacy programs. In 1990, the group secured a \$21,600 adult literacy grant from the Province of Manitoba in 1990. This program started out in a church basement as a part-time one-to-one service by a paid coordinator/instructor to a handful of adult students with basic literacy needs, but by 2002-03 it was serving 116 adult learners in a rented storefront classroom in the centre of town. Its budget had also increased to \$263,002, primarily due to increasing its provincial literacy grant to \$44,500, acquiring a \$130,000 provincial grant to provide adult high school services, and charging \$75,375 in fees-for-service to public school system and First Nations reserve students. The Clay Creek program supplemented its full- and part-time group-based adult literacy instruction with adult high school courses accredited by the local school division. It had earned a reputation for helping adult dropouts complete high school, as well as for successfully integrating one-to-one and small-group instruction, for blending adult literacy and high school curricula, and for delivering internationally recognized MicroSoft computer courses.

The Silverton program began in 1989 when a group of parents decided to provide tutoring support for teenage children with academic difficulties that were not being addressed by the regular school system. In 1990, the group received a \$2000 materials grant from the Province of Manitoba, and earned modest operating expenses by offering periodic Laubach training courses (see Laubach Literacy of Canada, 1989). This program started out as a home-based one-to-one volunteer tutoring program for school students, but by 2002-03 it was using paid staff as well as volunteers to deliver full- and part-time one-to-one instruction to 194 learners of all ages in a rented classroom on the outskirts of town. Its budget had also increased to \$93,561, primarily due to increasing its provincial literacy grant to \$56,600, acquiring a \$12,500 provincial grant to provide youth employment preparation services and a \$9,000 federal grant to conduct a research project,

and procuring \$8,687 in charitable grants and donations. The Silverton program, which offered instruction at all academic levels from basic literacy to post-secondary tutorial support, was particularly well known for accepting every learner who asked for help, and for successfully meeting the special needs of students with learning disabilities and other learning challenges.

Research Methodology

This qualitative case study used an ethnographic approach to examine the experiences of various stakeholders in two rural Canadian community-based adult literacy programs. As the naturalistic inquiry of a small number of people and cases (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), in order to understand purposeful behavior (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and explicate how people come to understand situations (Stake, 2000), qualitative inquiry was ideally suited to researching the perspectives of literacy program stakeholders.

The defining feature of case study is its preoccupation with a single unit of human analysis: an individual person, or a group of people that share a definitive pattern of behaviour - such as an organization or a culture (Patton, 1990). The focus for data collection and analysis in this study was first to examine each case program closely as a single entity, with its own "participants' lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for, a situation" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 182), and second to compare and contrast these sets of multiple realities

Ethnographic inquiry is suited to case study because it probes specific situational contexts, in comparison with others, in order to develop insight into the patterns and beliefs that delineate a particular group of people (Tedlock, 2000). Ethnography is a qualitative paradigm that focuses on investigating and describing culture-sharing groups (Patton, 1990). The culture-sharing groups in this case study were the stakeholders associated with each of the research study's community-based adult literacy programs.

The program stakeholders who were invited to volunteer for the study belonged to the following categories: learners, coordinators/instructors, other staff members, learners' parents and other close relatives, program administrators, community referral agents, and provincial funding agents. Open sampling was used for every category except the coordinators/instructors (of whom there was only one per program), in order to encourage as many individuals as wished to participate. Three types of data were collected from these research participants: official documents, personal documents, and one-to-one interviews.

The official documents consisted of year-end program reports (for 2001-02 and 2002-03) based on feedback from every stakeholder group except referral agents and provincial funding agents. These reports included information about such program components as hours of instruction, teaching methods, learning resources, and finances. The personal documents consisted of short compositions by learners, other staff, and a provincial funding agent in response to open-ended questions about their program experiences. The interviews consisted of 45-minute conversations to procure more detailed information from individuals in every stakeholder category. Every interview ended with the following question, "Is there anything else you would like to tell me? - anything else that I didn't ask about, or that you would like to add to something we've already discussed?" It was within the context of answering this question that learners, coordinators/instructors, and other staff members contributed information about the influences that students' families had on learners' literacy program participation.

Research Findings

The Clay Creek and Silverton programs' differences in financial support, learner composition, and instructional foci were not reflected in the research results related to family members' influences on student participation. Both programs' learners, coordinators/instructors, and other staff members reported primarily positive influences by students' family members. Parents

and grandparents, siblings, spouses, and children played active roles in learners' decisions first to enroll in the adult literacy programs and then to stay in them through to goal attainment.

Parents and Grandparents

Fourteen students were unmarried adults living with parents or grandparents. Eight of these parents or grandparents had made the initial inquiries that resulted in program enrollment. In Clay Creek, Darlene's parents had arranged for her to continue upgrading beyond her grade 9 graduation from private school, and Steven's grandmother had asked him to move in with her so that he would live in a town that was closer to the literacy facility. In Silverton, Keenan's father had told him about the program after Keenan dropped out of grade 10, and Marla's parents had brought her to the program after Marla was expelled from high school. Riley's father had asked the Silverton program to help Riley learn to read after he graduated from grade 12 without developing basic literacy skills, and Matt's father had sought out the program as a means to help Matt prepare for military entrance tests after he graduated with limited math problem-solving skills.

Several students attributed their continued program attendance to the encouragement that they received from parents and grandparents, whether or not they lived with these family members. In Clay Creek, Stewart spoke of wishing to follow the example of his mother, of whom he was very proud for having completed a university degree by distance education. In Silverton, Jay, Vance, and Sam groaned lightheartedly about being pushed by parents to finish their schooling. Sam expressed mixed feelings about this pressure: "I just want to get it done. Then everybody will be happy, and maybe shut their mouths - but if they didn't nag me, I'd quit. I act like it doesn't matter, but it does. I really want to finish." Matt was preparing for Armed Forces entry tests in order to carry on the military tradition begun by his grandfather and father.

Siblings

Learners reported being positively influenced by siblings, as well. Three were living with supportive brothers or sisters. In Silverton, Carla's older brother had invited her to live with him after she completed grade 9 by religious home-schooling in another community, and then had inquired about the literacy program when the high school near his home refused her entry as a 19 year-old. Noreen's older brother had invited her into his home after seeking out the literacy program as a means to keep Noreen from abandoning her education when she dropped out of an adult high school program in another community.

Six other students also reported being influenced by siblings. In Clay Creek, Shannon said that she was being encouraged by four older brothers who were high school graduates, and Paul disclosed a desire to follow his older brother into community college. Barry stated that he was being pressured by two sisters and a brother who had completed grade 12 several years after dropping out as teenagers. In Silverton, Kyle and Dean spoke of being motivated by younger brothers who were doing well in high school, and Jay expressed pride in an older brother who was close to finishing a university degree.

For some learners, the supportive roles played by siblings extended into these students' choices of learning materials. Coordinator/instructor Muriel and instructor Gladys reported that Clay Creek students sometimes asked for the same course work that siblings had completed as former learners. Their colleague Sheila also noted the role that successful learning outcomes played in encouraging the siblings of former students to "do it too."

Spouses

Thirteen learners lived with spouses. Several expressed gratitude for these spouses' support in encouraging them to attend the program, noting that their program participation took a toll on the family income and on the time that they spent with other family members. In Clay Creek, Tina said that her fiancé was patiently waiting for her to finish her literacy work and subsequent nurse's aide course before scheduling their wedding. In Silverton, Rhonda said that her husband was actively encouraging her to

finish her education and then "get a decent job." Coordinator/instructor Susan spoke of another student who was very worried about his family finances, but who she thought would be "very successful" in reaching his academic and career goals.

Children

Children were the most influential of many learners' family members. Four male students and ten female students had preschool or school-age children or grandchildren living with them. Several spoke of how they had been motivated to seek upgrading in order to become better role models and providers for these children. In Clay Creek, Jeanette exclaimed,

My daughter is giving me all the motivation to do this! If I didn't have her, I probably would have been doing nothing with my life. I probably wouldn't have cared - but I want her to be able to say, "My mom graduated, and I'm going to graduate." I want to be a good role model for her. I'm trying to make our lives better for her, and I can't do that without an education.

Silverton learner Gordon said that he was using his own program learning experiences as the basis for teaching his teenage son, "Learn from your mistakes. At least, learn not to go back there. Just keep going, focus on what you learned yesterday. Try to contribute to society, and try and do it the best way you know how."

Some learners were parenting special needs children who commanded comparatively higher levels of attention than other family members. In Clay Creek, for example, Leanne was waiting for her grandson to be scheduled for heart surgery, and Nora was raising foster children who needed her attention for residual emotional and learning problems stemming from the abuses they had suffered as very young children. Ralph's desire to become a teacher's aide - and hence to acquire his General Equivalence Diploma (GED) in the Clay Creek program - had been motivated by his own children's learning difficulties: one with a form of

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cerebral palsy and the other two with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).

Coordinator/instructor Muriel said that she gladly accommodated learners' family obligations in Clay Creek, for example by advising parents to tend to their children's needs first and to their own academics second:

When there is a sick child we will say, "Yes, as mothers we tend to our families first. Once you deal with the situation, then you'll come back to the program and you'll do a catch-up."

Muriel added that she sympathized with parents in the program who wanted to "come back to learn, and see what they've missed," in order to help their own children with homework "so they don't go the same dropout route." In Silverton, coordinator/instructor Susan also sympathized with parents who had goals of developing their own skills in order to help children with homework. Nevertheless, she said that she usually advised them, "Get over the idea that you're always going to be able to help your kids with their schoolwork. Things change, and they're going to go past you." Instead, Susan focused on helping low-literate parents learn to read to their younger children, and on helping all learners develop their own learning goals independently of their children's schooling needs.

Discussion and Recommendations for Further Research

This case study was a qualitative exploration of the individual and collective experiences of stakeholders associated with two community-based adult literacy programs. Although the literature review revealed information that has already been documented for adult learners in various schooling contexts, it was expected that the study data would not only compare and contrast with this existing knowledge, but would reveal additional information specific to community-based literacy education. The following discussion therefore examines the research findings in relation to the literature on adult education.

Parents and Grandparents

Students' parental homes feature prominently in the literature on youth who are at risk of dropping out of school (for example, see Johnson, 2000; Nakhaie, Silverman, & Lagrange, 2000; Williams, 1999). However, this author could find no references to learners' parents or grandparents in the adult education literature. The study upon which this article is based therefore opens a new avenue for academic exploration. Subsequent studies should therefore be designed to answer the following questions: do parents and grandparents play influential roles in learners' participation in other adult literacy programs? do parents and grandparents play influential roles in learners' participation in other types of adult education programs?

Siblings

This author could find no literary evidence of sibling-based effects on adult learners. In the literature on dropout-prone youth, on the other hand, having several siblings or older dropout siblings factors into the school leaving formula (Lovitt, 1991; Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991; Wells, 1990). The findings in this article's study therefore open another avenue for exploration in the adult education literature. Further studies should be undertaken to determine if the influential role played by learners' siblings is unique to this study's adult literacy programs or common to other adult literacy programs and other types of adult education programs.

Spouses

The study's findings confirm the literature's concern for the positive and negative effects that spousal relationships have on adult learning experiences (for example, see Powers & Love, 2000; Reeves, 1999; Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training, 2002). All of the adult literacy students' remarks about their wives and husbands reflected a need to be accountable to family members (Ellison & Kallenbach, 1996; Galbo, 1998; Knowles et al., 1998) within the context of celebrating these

spouses' support of their learning efforts. Nevertheless, several students and one coordinator/instructor admitted that program participation took a toll on learners' family finances and relationships, in keeping with the literature's concern for school-family role conflicts (Byrne, 1990; Knowles et al., 1998; Thackerson, 1990). Future studies should include quantitative data analyzed through step-wise regression to determine the relative effects of various factors, including supportive and unsupportive spouses, on learner motivation and perseverance in literacy and other adult education programs.

Children

Children are featured in the adult education literature primarily for the role that they play in motivating parents to go back to school (Knowles, 1990; Merriam, 1999; Taylor, 1999) and for the residual effects that they manifest in intergenerational transfer to end the dropout cycle (Sticht, 1995). In this study, several learners reported being motivated by aspirations to become better financial providers and academic role models for their children. In addition to reporting the desire to help children with homework as a common learning goal (as noted by Quigley, 1997), the coordinators/instructors also observed the effects that children's needs had on students' attendance patterns (in accordance with the social responsibilities recounted by Clark & Caffarella, 1999; Conzemius & Conzemius, 1996; Kerka, 2002). Further studies should focus on the various influences that children of different ages have on parents' participation in literacy and other adult education programs, particularly in relation to the availability of child support services in the community.

Recommendations for Practice

Parents and grandparents, siblings, spouses, and children significantly influenced learners' participation in this study's adult literacy programs. The following recommendations therefore facilitate the consideration of students' family members in adult literacy programming decisions:

- Design opportunities to include students' families in classroom learning and social activities. For example, invite adult family members (parents, grandparents, and spouses) to special classroom sessions, such as guest presentations on topics that are of general interest. Invite children of all ages to events such as potluck picnics and low-organized sports days that celebrate changes between seasons.
- Recognize learners' needs to attend to home problems before they can focus on school work. For example, become familiar with learners' family situations in order to support these students' needs to take time off to attend to problems at home or in their children's schools. Ask incoming learners if they have any situations at home that may require absences from class every now and then or for extended periods of time.
- Put appropriate interventions into place when consultations with individual learners about their difficulties in attending class, or in concentrating when they do attend, reveal home-rooted problems. For example, at some point every day take time to quietly ask each student, "How are you doing today?" - and attend to the body language and words that comprise the response. Post a list of community support services on the wall by the front door or beside the coffee pot, and get to know these support workers so that you will feel comfortable in making referrals to them.

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