



JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE FOR ADULT LITERACY, SECONDARY, AND BASIC EDUCATION

Published Jointly by The Commission on Adult Basic Education and Western Kentucky University

RESEARCH

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PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVE

Developing Promotional Materials for Adult Literacy Programs

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RESEARCH DIGEST

Dispositional Factors Affecting Motivation During Learning in Adult Basic and Secondary Education Programs

By Mellard, D. F., Krieshok, T., Fall, E., and Woods, K. | Reviewed by Dr. Jeff Ritchey and Dr. Gary Dean

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THE COABE JOURNAL, CELEBRATING 36 YEARS AS A MAJOR VOICE IN ADULT EDUCATION

Dear Readers,

We are pleased to release our third issue in the third volume of the Journal of Research and Practice for Adult Literacy, Secondary, and Basic Education. In this issue you will find three research articles focused on the perceptions of young adults as they face the new GED®, attaining a post-GED® credential for adults with special needs, and identifying assets for which support ABE learners. Each of these articles provides a unique insight into the learning and literacy needs of adults as they work to address various basic skills.

In “Anticipated Effects of the GED® Test on Educators and Young Adults,” Brinkley-Etzkorn and Skolits examined how the GED® changes were perceived by participants, how providers should change their services, and how young adult learners thought they would be affected. The researchers conducted a case study of a long-standing community-based program by using focus groups and individual interviews including: several administrators, instructors, volunteers, and current students. The researchers found uncertainty and anxiety about the new test, much of it focusing on the cost and paying for it. Instructors and administrators described a need for more professional development, curriculum modifications, and implementation of technology in order to be successful with teaching for the new version. Finally, young adult learners, particularly those at the lower grade levels, were expected to have a more difficult time with the new version of the test because of the increased demand on higher-order thinking skills.

In “Post-GED® Credential College Prospects for Adults with Special Needs,” Patterson conducted a qualitative study on the “characteristics, challenges, attributes, and supports” needed by students with special needs seeking entry into college. Twenty adult learners reporting special needs were interviewed as part of a larger study, and their responses provided the findings for this paper. Two major challenges were found stemming from issues at home, institutional barriers at college, and financial limitations. Findings regarding attributes that would help overcome these challenges included tenacity, a strong desire to learn, and a strong self-reliance. Some of the supports that encouraged college prospects with special needs included an increased allowance in time to make the decision, support and encouragement from friends and family, and supports as they transitioned into the college setting.

In “Pillars of Support: A Functional Asset-based Framework for ABE Learners,” Reynolds and Johnson interviewed 60 ABE students on the role assets found in individual, family, institution, communities, and how these assets impacted their entrance into ABE programs, persistence in the ABE program, and transition from the ABE program. The researchers found several assets that supported ABE learners each step of the way and, when one asset was weaker, other assets were brought in to fill the gap. Furthermore, importance of assets changed depending on where the ABE learner was in the process. Finally, the authors felt that it was important to engage all four pillars of assets to support ABE students as they made their way through programs.

I encourage you to read through these articles and the practitioner article by Smith, which describes strategies for marketing for adult literacy programs. We also have our third column of the Research Digest and I invite you to enjoy our Web Scan and the Resource Reviews. Finally, as many of you may have heard, I will be stepping down as editor in December 2014 after this issue. I have thoroughly enjoyed working with COABE and the field on this journal. I have appreciated my time as editor and working with such wonderful authors and providers. I want to welcome the new editors, Amy Rose, Alisa Belzer, and Heather Brown and I look forward to the wonderful wisdom they bring to the journal. If there is something you would like to see in the journal, please feel free to contact us at journal@coabe.org.

Enjoy!
Jim Berger
Editor



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The Journal of Research and Practice for Adult Literacy, Secondary, and Basic Education is published jointly three times a year by the Commission on Adult Basic Education and Western Kentucky University. The journal's mission is to provide a forum for sharing research, information, theory, commentary, and practical experiences that will improve the quality of services for adult basic education, literacy, and numeracy learners. These learners are found in publicly funded ABE, ESL, and GED programs; volunteer-based literacy programs; community-based literacy programs; family literacy programs; workplace literacy programs; correctional literacy programs; and many other places.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Editor's Note: Readers, it is with a heavy heart that I announce the passing of Dr. Jeff Ritchey, Research Digest Co-editor. While his time with the journal was short, his impact was felt widely and he will be missed. God speed, my friend.

- Jim Berger, Editor

Karen E. Brinkley-Etzkorn is a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department at the University of Tennessee. Since 2011, she has worked in the Tennessee Teaching and Learning Center as a graduate researcher, as well as a GED instructor for Friends of Literacy, a local non-profit providing free adult basic education and literacy services to the Knoxville, TN community. Karen has also taught and co-taught courses at the University of Tennessee, and has led and assisted on various evaluation and assessment projects on the topics of teaching and learning, technology, and adult basic education.

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Dr. Margaret Becker Patterson is an experienced adult education researcher, has administered and taught in adult education programs in Nebraska, Nevada, and Kansas, and has presented extensively across the USA. A former state Associate Director of adult education, she worked as Research Associate at the University of Kansas and Senior Research Analyst for Kansas Department of Education. She served as Director of Research at GED Testing Service from 2008 to 2011. She is currently Senior Researcher with Research Allies for Lifelong Learning (www.researchallies.org) and serves as Internal Affairs Chair on the board of the National Coalition for Literacy.

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professional development support to ABLE programs state-wide. Dr. Reynolds is the Educational Specialist for the Office of Rural and Underserved Programs at the Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine. She earned her B.S. in Elementary Education/Deaf Education from The State College of New Jersey, her M.S. in Curriculum and Instruction from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and her Ed.D. from Ohio University. As Director of Adult Basic and Literacy Education Stevens Literacy Center, Dr. Reynolds led the work of the Central/Southeast Adult Basic Literacy Education (ABLE) Resource Center, whose staff provides expertise in learning disabilities and professional development support to ABLE programs state-wide.

Dr. Jeff Ritchey is an Associate Professor of Adult and Community Education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and coordinates the department's master's degree program in Adult Education and Communications Technology. His recent research has focused in two areas: first, the application of technology and new media in non-formal (non-school) educational initiatives (including collaborative projects examining training among journalists in Jakarta, Indonesia, and the use of technology in community programs by Indonesian Islamic boarding schools); and second, professional identity development among non-formal educators, specifically examining the experiences of administrators and teachers in rural county correctional facilities. Dr. Ritchey is author of *The Role of Religion in Shaping the Rural Context* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2002) and editor of *Adult Education in the Rural Context: People, Place and Change* (Jossey-Bass, 2008). In addition, Dr. Ritchey serves as co-editor (with Dr. Gary Dean) of the *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning* published through the Pennsylvania Association for Adult Continuing Education.

Dr. David J. Rosen directed the Adult Literacy Resource Institute at the University of Massachusetts in Boston for thirteen years. As an education consultant since 2003, he has provided assistance to, among other organizations: Portland State University's national Learner Web project;

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to develop a state adult basic education technology plan; Massachusetts Central SABES RSC to create professional development workshops and modules on integrating technology in the classroom; McDonald's Corporation's distance education ESOL program for immigrant restaurant workers; and Health Care Learning Network, a distance education workplace basic skills and college preparation program for health care workers.

Dr. Gary J. Skolits is the director of the Institute for Assessment and Evaluation as well as an Associate Professor in the Ph.D. program in Evaluation, Statistics, and Measurement. In total, he has served in higher education for over 30 years in the areas of academic administration, institutional research, student assessment, institutional accountability and program evaluation. Gary has directed over 110 external evaluation projects, ranging from large national evaluation studies to small scope community agency needs assessments. His research has been published in journals targeted to the fields of education, evaluation, higher education and community colleges, psychology, and agricultural.

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Correction: *In Volume 3, Number 2, we erroneously listed Dr. Grace Kong as being affiliated with Harvard University. She is affiliated with Yale University. We deeply regret this error.*

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Anticipated Effects of the GED® Test on Educators and Young Adult Learners

Karen E. Brinkley-Etzkorn
Dr. Gary Skolits
The University of Tennessee

ABSTRACT

Given the changes made to the GED® test in 2014, one concern among state policy makers, adult educators, and GED® service providers has been the impact of these changes on students as well as teachers, staff, volunteers, and other GED® program stakeholders. Using a qualitative, case study research approach focused on one GED® test preparation site serving young adults under 25, the present study addressed three objectives: (1) understanding participant opinions and perceptions of the changes to the GED® test; (2) examining the ways in which these changes may impact the program's provision of services, and (3) determining how the young adult students served by this program may be affected by these changes. Study findings suggest future changes to the ways in which GED® services are currently provided, especially from the perspective of program staffing needs, training practices, and resource requirements. Overall, participants were skeptical of the benefits of the new test, and all stakeholder groups perceived that the new test would have negative implications for students.

Keywords: 2014 GED®, young adults, program assessment, evaluation, adult basic education

INTRODUCTION

The GED® test has been a substantial element of the educational landscape for more than 70 years. In 1942, the American Council on Education (ACE) made the GED® test available as a way of placing returning veterans into jobs. However, the use of the GED® was substantially expanded as it evolved into a test for non-veterans who needed a substitute credential for a high school diploma (Quinn, 2002). The original version of the GED® was normalized so that 80% of graduating high school seniors could pass the test. In 2012, this 80% benchmark figure became 69.1% (“2012 Annual Statistical Report on the GED® Test,” 2013), although some estimates have placed the normalized passing rate for the same version of the test to be as low as 60% (GED® Testing Service, 2009).

Since its creation, the GED® test has been revised three times: in 1982, 1987, and 2002 (“Technical Manual,” 2009). The now fifth generation of the GED® test was launched in January 2014 with considerable changes. For example, the new test is based on the Common Core State Standards (now adopted by approximately forty states). Moreover, the new test is also reported to be more rigorous, and unlike its predecessor, it is available only on computer. The new version of the GED® has also been redesigned

towards orienting students for college and/or career readiness (Hoffman, Wine, & McKinney, 2013).

While some states have only recently finalized their plans as to whether or not to continue offering the GED® exam (or an alternative assessment such as the HiSETⁱ or the TASCⁱⁱ), there has been no escaping the fact that service providers across the country are now being forced to adapt. GED® service providers will need to revamp or restructure their existing programs to promote the success of their students with this examination. In order to revise existing programs, providers will need to consider the characteristics of their student populations. For example, some service providers specifically target their efforts toward students with particular demographics. Therefore, it will be important for these program administrators to have an understanding of how the new test's requirements relate to the needs, technological skills sets, and other relevant characteristics of their particular clientele.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the unique needs and characteristics of young adult learners and their GED® service provider from the perspective of the revised content focus and online delivery of the new test. Specifically, three research questions guided this study: (1) What are the participant's perceptions of the changes made to the GED® test?; (2) How will the new GED® impact the provision of services offered by the program provider?; (3) How might young adult learners be affected by the changes to the test? In order to answer these questions, this paper begins with a review of the relevant literature to lay a foundation for the present study. The review of the literature is followed

by a description of the research site, participants, methods of study, data collection, and analysis. The study's findings are then presented, followed by a discussion of the results and associated implications for both research and practice.

LITERATURE

Given the nature and timing of this study, there are three important considerations in reviewing the relevant literature in light of the study research questions. First, it is helpful to examine the literature regarding previous GED® test changes and the impacts of these changes on programs and students alike. This establishes an important context for understanding the transition that is currently underway. Second, it is important to consider young adult GED® seekers and what is known about this unique population, since young adults make up such a large proportion of all test takers. This will enable consideration of the critical assumption that millennial-age students are more comfortable with information technology, as well as allow for an assessment of any particular challenges that may be inherent or likely within this population. Third, it is useful to review literature on the effects of program and staff changes more broadly in order to understand how to best serve and prepare these individuals as well.

As stated, the first study research question seeks to identify and understand the perceptions that students, teachers, and administrators have about the new test. Little has been published regarding perceptions or opinions about the GED® test in terms of its format and content. However, reviewing effects of earlier GED® test revisions can elucidate potential

¹As of October 2014, 12 states have adopted the HiSET test, which is the High School Equivalency Test, created by Educational Testing Service. See hiset.ets.org for more information.

²The TASC, or Test Assessing Secondary Completion, is now offered in the states of IN, NJ, NY, NV, WV, and WY as an alternative to the GED® test. See <http://www.access.nysed.gov/ged> for more information.

implications or results of the current GED® assessment changes. For example, when the minimum passing score was raised in 1997, testing centers experienced a spike in the number of test takers just before the change (Tyler, 2005). Similarly, Cavanagh (2003) described a dramatic decline in testing (a drop of 44%) during the first year of the transition to the previous version of the test which launched in 2002. This likely resulted from a rush of students seeking to earn their GED® in 2001, just prior to an increase in the minimum passing requirements. Interestingly, testing participant numbers reached a record high in 2004 which, as Cavanagh suggests, could have been attributed to a large and successful advertising campaign. Heckman, Humphries, LaFontaine, and Rodriguez (2012) examined the influence that changes in the GED® testing program have on high school dropout rates. The authors concluded that when the difficulty of obtaining a GED® increases (via the test's passing requirements), high school dropout rates experience a decline.

The second research question addresses the ways in which programs were, and continue to be, forced to adapt to the new test. The fifth generation of the GED® test will have impacts not only on students, but also on instructors and administrators. Therefore, it is important to consider literature addressing the ways in which programs change and grow, as well as how adult basic education (ABE) practitioners adapt to these changes.

Within the changing ABE landscape, many programs will now be tailoring their services to prepare students for a test that has been designed with career and college readiness in mind. Using a random assignment design, Martin and Broadus (2013) evaluated LaGuardia's GED® Bridge program, which served 369 participants over four semesters during 2010-2012. This program not only teaches

students exam content through field-specific contexts (in this case, healthcare or business), but also incorporates skills and habits to help students achieve success in post-GED® training or college programs. The authors concluded that this expanded approach to GED® preparation resulted in students who were more likely to complete their GED® course, pass the exam, enroll in their local community college, and return to college for a second semester. Should findings like these continue to emerge in future studies, ABE programs will need to consider instructional strategies encompassing broader skills and dispositions, which is well beyond the more traditional GED® instructional focus of content-related information.

The providers of GED® instruction will also have to develop new instructional skills and strategies. Belzer, Drennon, and Smith (2001) defined ABE professional development as a "set of processes and learning activities sponsored by a state...or other entity...to provide practitioners with professional development" (p. 151). Previous research has demonstrated that adult basic education instructors oftentimes enter the field with little or no training in working with adults, as most states do not require any special credentials to teach adults (Belzer, 2005; Smith & Gillespie, 2005). Many ABE instructors work only part time, come from diverse backgrounds, teach across multiple subject areas, and they may even lack adequate content knowledge needed to fully assist their students (Belzer, 2005). Finally, with little to no incentive to participate in professional development, keeping these instructors up to date in terms of pedagogy, content knowledge, and other support for their teaching can present additional challenges (Marceau, 2003; Smith & Gillespie, 2007).

The third research question addresses the ways in which young adult students may be affected by

the new version of the test. This is a particularly important consideration, given that such a large proportion of GED® test candidates are young adults. For example, from 2000-2009, young adults aged 16-19 made up approximately 41% of all test takers. In 2012, there were 673,220 GED® test candidates in the US; of these, 58.8% were ages 16-24 (“2012 Annual Statistical Report,” 2013). While there are many young adults engaged in the GED® testing process each year, research focused on these young adults has been lacking (Zhang, Han, & Patterson, 2009).

Perin, Flugman, and Spiegel (2006) focused on the 39% of the GED® candidates who were ages 16-20. Through a case study of four urban adult basic education programs operated by local agencies, the researchers found that in comparison to older students (21 and up)ⁱⁱⁱ, younger students were more likely to have learning difficulties, behavioral challenges, minimal parental support, and many were unaccustomed to following the directions of others. The authors also reviewed adaptations made to programs to better serve young adult GED® programs, and concluded that “computerized, modular instruction was reported effective [by participants], and increased completion of homework was attributed to the use of computers” (p. 180).

Although the normalization of the test is based on the performance of graduating high school seniors, it is worthwhile to note that some research has concluded that a GED® is, in fact, *not* the equivalent of a high school diploma (Heckman, Humphries, & Mader, 2010; Cameron & Heckman, 1993). For example, Zhang, Han, and Patterson (2009) noted that preparing for the GED® requires considerably less

effort than that required for a high school diploma. Further, in terms of earnings and enrollment in postsecondary education, GED® holders do not fare as well in the job market as those holding a traditional high school diploma (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Reichert (2012) indicated that the GED®, under the 2002 version of the test, did not relate to test takers’ career goals, as “student retention in many GED® programs [was] low...because the skills necessary to complete the GED® have little or no connection to the students’ career goals...nor do they correlate to labor market demands” (p. 9). It should be noted, however, that the new GED® test was specifically aligned with the Common Core State Standards—a set of learning goals in the areas of math and English language arts/literacy that students should know by the end of each grade (“About the Standards,” 2014). However, it is unknown at this time if students will perceive this Common Core alignment to be connected to labor market demands.

METHODS

Site and Program Description

The research site for this study was a community-based GED® program located in a southern state. This program provides test preparation services as well as employment/college access assistance for young adults. The program, which is supported by both grant dollars and state funding, serves individuals who have dropped out of high school by providing them with training and skill development that they need to attain a GED®, gain subsequent employment, and/or continue on to post-secondary education.

³At the time the Perin et al (2006) article was published, the National Reporting System (NRS)’s data reporting guidelines required age to be reported as either 16-24 or 25+. The authors separated the youngest category of students into two groups: 16-20 and 21-24. It should be noted, however, that the most recent version of the NRS’s data reporting and implementation guidelines (2013) require age to be reported in the following categories: 16-18, 19-24, 25-44, 45-59, and 60+.

Specifically, the program targets students ages 17-21, although older students (up to age 25) may enroll as well. This particular program is available to students throughout the day Monday-Friday. Class time lasts four hours each day, although the site is open during regular business hours (8:00 AM to 5:00 PM) for the provision of other services such as new student orientation, tutoring, assisting students with their future plans, and general program operations.

The particular research site was selected for this study based on three key characteristics: (1) the program has a long and stable history, having been in operation for more than thirty years; (2) the program serves a diverse urban and suburban population; and (3) this particular program targets and serves young adult learners. The site is run by a director, supported by additional staff members that include a full-time teacher who also serves as the program coordinator, an intern (who was hired just prior to completion of this research), one volunteer who assists with the site approximately twenty hours per week, and another volunteer who assists less than five hours per week. At the time data was collected, fewer than fifty students were enrolled, although there were typically between four and ten students in the class at any given time. While students are not required to meet a strict attendance schedule, they are encouraged to attend daily. The program's relaxed attendance policy may explain some of the variation in the daily student presence over the course of this study.

Participants

Study participants included the program director, the lead teacher/program coordinator, the 20-hour volunteer teacher, and current students. All non-student participants had been with the organization for at least one year. Student participants were in various stages of progress in the course, ranging

from less than one week to having been enrolled for several months. Students participating in this study ranged in age from 18-20, and included five males and three females. Approximately one-third of the students in the program had been ordered by a court, juvenile justice, or social program to attend GED® classes at the research site.

Instruments and Data Collection

Data collection addressing the three research questions focused on an in-depth, qualitative approach. Question one was designed to gain an understanding of participant opinions and perceptions of the changes to the test, and it was addressed using interview and focus group data. Question two, which sought to identify the ways in which the changes to the test may impact the program's provision of services, was addressed using document analysis, as well as interview, focus group, and observation data. Question three asked how the millennial students served by this program might be affected by these changes, and was answered using interview and focus group data.

The director, teacher, and volunteer were interviewed and observed, while students were observed and also participated in a focus group. Semi-structured interviews were used to probe participants for information pertaining to the research questions. Upon consent, initial interviews (lasting approximately forty-five minutes each), were conducted with the director, lead teacher, and volunteer; two of the participants (the director and the volunteer teacher) provided follow-up interviews lasting approximately thirty minutes. Interview questions focused primarily on participant perceptions regarding the new test in general, ways in which the new test may impact service provision, and the ways in which students will be affected. Interview

guides were developed by the researchers based on (1) existing literature and (2) the research questions.

One focus group with current students in the program was conducted, and it lasted approximately thirty-five minutes. While all currently-enrolled students were invited to the focus group, only the eight students who attended class that day participated in this session. Much like the interviews, the student focus group was semi-structured, and students were probed to elaborate on their responses. Focus group questions related not only to student knowledge about the new test and reactions to it, but also addressed student study habits, comfort with technology, and overall satisfaction with the program.

Three hour-long observations were conducted on-site and were guided by two key objectives: first, to note the behaviors and interactions of millennial students and their instructors and, second, to understand the use of tools and resources in the classroom that relate to the format of the new test. The observation protocol focused on the following three areas within the context of the research questions: (1) technology and learning resources utilized in the classroom and in teaching, such as the use of laptops, mobile devices, or educational software; (2) interactions between the staff and students as they pertain to issues of technology, the new test, or particular pedagogies; and (3) discussions and/or presentations of the new test, student reactions to this information, and presenter responses to student questions. The observation protocol was based on the study's research questions and was loosely-structured to allow for a richer narrative of what was taking place with regard to each of the three observation objectives. The first two of three observations took place during a class session. The third observation, which took place during a new student orientation session, focused on the initial

contact students had with the site. No more than one observation was conducted in one day, and time lapse between observations ranged from several weeks to two months.

Additional data for this project were collected via initial meetings with the program's director, a review of the program's website for content and information relating to the research questions, and supporting documents collected from the site, which included handouts for new students as well as the program's promotional materials. These materials were analyzed with a content analysis framework, with the analysis focusing on the relevancy of the content to each of the three research questions. All data were collected on different days with the exception of one observation and one interview, which were conducted back to back; however, these involved different participants. Data collection was spread over approximately four months, and was structured intentionally to collect a holistic representation of the organization's activities over time, and to capture information on different days as well as with different individuals.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, interviews and student focus group responses were fully transcribed. Researcher field and observation notes were typed in detailed, narrative format; information collected from additional data sources (such as web content and promotional materials provided by the program's administrator) was also put into electronic format (.doc files) for subsequent analysis of content. Specifically, this entailed formatting various orientation handouts, program brochures, and other relevant information that was publicly available into a collection of Word documents that could be analyzed alongside interview and focus group transcripts to identify the emergent themes

related to study questions. During analysis, a general inductive approach, as described by Thomas (2006), was employed. In this approach to qualitative data analysis, the primary purpose is “to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data,” as well as to “establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from [it]” (p. 238). Additionally, Thomas notes that analytic strategies applicable to this particular methodology include multiple readings and interpretations, as well as the development of categories via coding to present findings.

Substantial effort was focused on promoting the trustworthiness of the data. All transcripts, observation narratives, documents, and researcher notes were initially read multiple times to begin identifying emergent themes. During the first iteration of analysis, data were grouped under four broad headings: (1) information about the test, (2) information pertaining to teaching or services provided by the program, (3) opinions about the program and/or the new test, and (4) comments about or pertaining to students. The data were color-coded to categorize the information visually. The four overarching categories (themes) associated with the first iteration of data analysis were identified based on the content encountered and repeated across the initial reading of the transcripts, narratives, and documents in light of the research questions. During the second iteration of coding, each of the coding themes referenced above were further refined to draw out the most important sub-themes as they pertained to the research questions. The resulting themes and sub-themes are introduced and addressed in the following section for each study question.

As with all education-focused research studies, there are several issues/limitations that should be

noted in generalizing the findings of the present study. First, data were collected from a small number of participants, totaling less than fifteen individuals across all methods of collection. This small sample, though it provides a thorough overview of the particular program, may not necessarily be indicative of the broader young adult GED® seeking population or of similar programs throughout the state and nation that serve them. Second, it should be noted that this site underwent a major staffing change just prior to completing data collection. Given the changes in staff within the organization, it is possible that perspectives and opinions evolved during the course of this study and continued to evolve after it was completed.

FINDINGS

Uncertainty and Negative Perceptions of the New Test

The first research question posed above asked, “What are participants’ opinions and perceptions of the changes to the GED® test?” With regard to this question, two notable themes emerged from the data: (1) there were high levels of uncertainty about the new test and, (2) perhaps as a result, the administrator, staff, and student participants indicated that their opinions of the new test were mostly negative.

The program’s administrator as well as both teachers repeatedly stressed their uncertainty about the test. As one of the teachers remarked, “There’s not a lot of concrete information that’s been provided;” the administrator added, “what I found out [about the test] has been through my own research.” These participants also expressed their concerns about not knowing how difficult it will be for students or how to best prepare themselves for the new version of the test. As one teacher stated, “I haven’t educated

myself and therefore haven't educated [the students].” Another staff participant wondered, “What [are we] going to do? How [are we] going to get ready for this?”

Few advantages to the changes could be identified in the data collected directly from the participants of the study. When asked about what aspects of the test may be viewed positively, participants had few insights to offer. Even when comments were framed as advantages by respondents, they contained an element of potential disadvantage. For example, one teacher, noted with concern, “The new test has been called a college readiness test, rather than a high school equivalency or diploma...which is good, *if* we want all high school students to go to college.” The other teacher added, “There’s a new diagnostic scoring tool, which [will] measure career and college readiness and it’s also going to report...on the strengths and the developmental needs of the student.”

During the focus group, student participants were asked about whether they thought the changes forthcoming in the new test were a good idea or a bad idea. Focus group participants’ perceptions leaned clearly toward the negative. For example, students cited fears of the short answer responses and typed essay, as well as concern regarding how to pay for the test. One student wondered if individuals would be able pay for the new test with public assistance, adding, “I know in high school you can get stuff [for] free...if you’re on food stamps.”

A discussion of how students would pay for the new test was an important topic of the focus group conversation. The issue of payment was a troubling idea for all of the students. One participant noted, “Everyone doesn’t have a credit card or access [to one].” Other students stated, “I don’t even have credit,” “I don’t want [to owe] anything,” and “If

[the testing agency] does [require a credit card for payment or registration], there’s going to be a lot of people that aren’t going to do it [because] a lot of people can’t get a credit card.” Yet another student suggested “trying cards that you can use over the phone that are prepaid,” as a possible solution.

Five students expressed concern about the increased cost of the test and how to pay for it, and this is highly relevant as seven of the eight students in the group reported that they did not own a credit card or have a checking account. Only one student noted what she believed was clearly a benefit of the 2014 GED®: a more challenging test would encourage greater numbers of students to remain in high school, rather than drop out.

A Need for Greater Support

The second research question asked, “How will the new GED® exam impact the provision of services at the research site?” Emerging from the data were three distinct themes: (1) a need for GED® teacher professional development, (2) curriculum changes that would likely be necessary to adequately prepare the students, and (3) successfully integrating instructional technologies into the GED® classroom may prove to be difficult. Both of the teachers discussed at length the possibility of needing more help and support from within the organization in order to adequately prepare the students. The program’s administrator expressed concern that current staff skill levels were “not where they should be,” suggesting a need for more training and professional development for those currently working with students. One of the teachers stated, “I may have to take some math classes myself to be able to prepare for it.” The program administrator echoed this concern, noting, “My first reaction was that [the program staff] are not going to be able to

teach to that test.”

When probed specifically about what program content may need to be modified, staff participants noted, “A stronger emphasis on writing ability is going to [be needed],” “a science and social studies component will have to be added,” as well as typing which, although not currently offered at the site, is “something [the program] maybe needs.”

While seeking information about how teaching or the provision of services may need to change, all staff participants reported that both content and operational changes would be inevitable. For example, concerns about training (in terms of both time and new content knowledge to be gained by staff) were mentioned by several participants. As the program administrator pointed out, “funding depends on student success, but student success depends on funding.” The administrator also noted that this presents a challenge to keep the program operating at current completion rates once the test seemingly becomes further out of reach for many GED® seekers in the state.

During the focus group, students were asked about the extent to which they use computers in the program, to which all replied (or agreed), “only on the break.” One student elaborated by noting, “It’s all on paper here.” Given that multiple students had been observed using personal mobile devices, they were asked about their interest level in utilizing an app on their device that would help them learn or practice certain types of problems. Students were also asked if they would be interested in watching YouTube instructional videos on their devices. Surprisingly, nearly all of the students who participated in the focus group agreed that they “would rather do it on paper,” although one student did express interest in exploring the computer-based test further. For most students, this was primarily because they believed training on

technology would be too distracting. As one student noted, “I would not even pay attention; I’d be on something else.” Another student agreed, explaining, “I would start looking at Twitter [and] playing my music.” A third student shared that working on paper is preferable to working on an electronic device because the student was “too easily distracted and will rush on the computer,” and concluded that paper-based tests encourage taking one’s time.

Information collected during the observations provided some further insight into the program as well. In the front of the traditional classroom during one day of observation, there was a large marker board with a great deal of text written on it (as was the case during all of the observations). A large projector sat on the front table, but was not in use. No computers or tablets were present in the classroom, although a majority of the students were observed using smart phone and/or mobile devices during several visits to the site. It should be noted that across all visits to the site, only one student was observed using a computer on one day for approximately thirty minutes while working with a volunteer. During class time, on top of each desk, there were name cards with large stacks of worksheets and paper for the students. There were very few materials observed being utilized in the classroom that would prepare students for a computer-based test.

Unequal Impacts Anticipated for Test Takers

The third research question asked, “How might the young adult students served by this program be affected by the changes to the test?” The major theme that emerged regarding this question was that the changes are not expected to impact all student groups equally. Because this particular site only serves students under the age of 25, a primary

concern is the way in which the research site plans to prepare millennial-age students for the new test. During interviews with staff, participants noted the challenges that a majority of these GED® seekers face. For example, many participants have been in state custody, and they have had a difficult home life with minimal parental support. Additionally, the students have little to no employment history, and some have emotional or psychological struggles which they bring with them to the class. As a result, many of the students have a difficult time focusing and staying on task in class. The “typical” student in this program was described by the staff as initially enrolling at about a fifth or sixth grade level, so the thought of a higher-order thinking test was particularly worrisome to the staff. However, as one study participant noted, “it’s very hard to tell who’s going to be successful when [a student] enrolls in the program.”

All participant groups noted differences in abilities and levels of comfort in adapting to change between the older and younger student groups. While staff participants categorized young adult GED® seekers overall as being the most comfortable with technology and well-equipped for that change, *all* participants spoke of a concern for older (non-millennial) students, particularly returning students over the age of fifty. Participants discussed their perceptions that this group not only lacks the necessary technology skills, but that they also struggle because they have been out of school considerably longer and tend to have lower completion rates than younger students. Despite the fact that this program only serves young adult students, every participant group noted the differing impact that they expect the test to have on *both* millennial and non-millennial students.

Regarding student use of computers and/or other technologies, there were clear distinctions made

among these two groups. When describing millennial students with whom they personally have worked, staff noted that these students tend to arrive with technology experience and, therefore, have far less concern about computerized testing. One participant stated that these students “grew up with computers,” and another described millennials as “tech-savvy” and “unafraid of the computer.” However, when discussing non-millennial students, staff participants stated repeatedly that these individuals interact less with technology and are generally uncomfortable with computers. One staff member commented that computer comfort typically tends to decrease with age, and believed that “computerized testing [would] inhibit the performance of older students.” Another concluded that a computerized test would impact the older students much more than younger students.

Interestingly, a disconnect emerged regarding technology use and comfort when comparing the responses of the program staff to those of the students. While staff participants described students as “regularly interacting with and being exposed to technology,” “very familiar with computers,” “unafraid of the computer,” “growing up with computers in the classroom,” and having “little to no fear of technology,” the students themselves provided somewhat contrasting statements. That is, during the focus group, *all* of the students agreed that they did not want to move to a computer-based test, citing difficulty in answering questions, an inability to focus, and believing that the computer test would cause them to feel more rushed. When discussing the adjustment to the new test, however, one student noted, “Younger people probably will [adapt to the new test more easily], but somebody that’s 30 or 40... They probably can’t even think about [the information on the test and its new format] in that way.” Another student clarified by adding,

“It’s going to be harder for [older students] if they change it; they’re probably not going to want to do it.”

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The findings of this study have implications for research as well as practice. The implications for practice will be addressed from the perspective of the key findings, followed by implications for research. Finally, the need for additional research, specifically evaluation focused research, is identified related to the GED® from the perspective of providers as well as students.

Ensuring a Successful Transition

As illustrated by the findings of this research, many of the participants lacked adequate information about the new GED® test; however, this finding was not necessarily surprising. Hoffman, Wine, and McKinney (2013) described this challenge in their discussion of the new test:

Despite the GED® Testing Service’s efforts to make more transparent the link between the public assessment targets and indicators and the items and tasks on the 2014 GED® Test, communicating these expectations to both adult educators and test-takers themselves has been a challenge. Though all of the guidelines for the test content are spelled out in the GED® Assessment Guide for Educators (2012), the nature of these changes had led to questions and pushback. (p. 19)

During the interviews with staff, one question in particular asked how each individual perceived *students* to be reacting to the test. While one participant suggested that the students seemed to be fearful, another stated that the students appeared grateful to be included in the conversations at the

site; interestingly, the third staff participant believed that students gave no consideration to the changes at all. Comments made during one-on-one interviews suggested that the approaches to sharing information with students varied considerably among staff, which have the potential to shape the perceptions that students form about the changes, and what implications such changes may have. This finding presents an opportunity for organizational leadership to guide staff during this process and to shape student opinions in a way that will be both positive and beneficial to their success.

Integration of Technology

The shift to a strictly computer-based test represents one of the most significant changes to date on the GED® Test. Hoffman et al. (2013) suggest that moving to a computer based test “represents a clear acknowledgement that computer literacy skills are critical elements of career and college readiness. In fact, the Common Core State Standards include computer literacy skills in its Writing Master Standard 6...and its Mathematics Practices” (p. 21). Similarly, Lockwood, Nally, Dowdell, McGlone, and Steurer (2013) predicted that both educational administrators and teachers will need guidance and training to integrate this into programs, and students will “undoubtedly...need the opportunity to practice these skills within the context of their instruction” (p. 8). However, as these research findings suggest, the successful integration of technology into the adult education classroom can be a challenge.

One reason for this is the lack of technology resources and necessary infrastructure in many adult education classrooms. When instruction takes place in churches, community centers, or in schools after hours, access to computers may be limited or even prohibited. One solution here may be to seek

partnerships with those who can assist in computer access for students. In cases where enough computers are not available, new pedagogies can group students or have them rotate so that all have an opportunity to access technology resources.

Student resistance is another reason that the integration of technology may prove challenging. Even young adult learners, as illustrated in the findings of this study, may be skeptical or apprehensive about technology-enhanced learning. A majority of the student participants in the focus group emphasized their preference for paper-based testing as well as a strong lack of interest in using computers more in the class, and in using technology-based study tools such as apps or software programs. Being aware of perceptions and preferences such as these may be beneficial in restructuring programs around student needs now that the new testing format has begun. It will be necessary for programs not doing so already to find ways to integrate computer literacy training into classrooms in order to most effectively prepare students for this facet of the new test (Hoffman et al., 2013).

A Need for Evaluation-Focused Research

Perin, Flugman, and Spiegel (2006) described the importance of evaluating services for youth in ABE programs. Further, Bloom (2010) has suggested that smaller program evaluations can be targeted towards applied research questions capable of assessing programs for areas of improvement or enhancement. The present study makes progress toward this need by assessing one community-based program on an in-depth level as it prepared for, and reacted to, a policy change that had the potential to greatly impact its operations. Bloom (2010) also noted the overall lack of formal evaluation in many second-chance programs, simply because conditions supporting

rigorous evaluation methods may not be available. Research towards identifying existing best practices is needed. As Bloom (2010) suggests, “The result is a gap between the strongly held views of practitioners who believe they know what constitutes ‘best practice’ in youth programing [and] the knowledge base researchers have built from rigorous evaluations” (p. 94). Thus, future research may want to investigate the differences in the beliefs of practitioners and students. Practitioners will be able to provide valuable insight into the process of adapting to the new test, and students, through their stories and reported success on the new test, will provide the answers to questions that remain.

Implications for Practice

There are several important considerations that could prove beneficial to administrators and instructors.

First, the importance of understanding a program’s individual clients cannot be understated. While demographic information is relatively easy to collect and report, identifying the unique characteristics and preferences of students in a certain program may be critical to best serving this unique population. Low program completion rates, few test-retest opportunities for empirical data, and heterogeneity among the adult basic education population make it particularly difficult to capture uniform information about these students (Park, Ernst, & Kim, 2007). Attempting to better understand the concerns, fears, past successes and failures, study habits, interests, and goals of individual students in a program could allow for program changes and transitions to go more smoothly.

Second, comments made by the administrator and teachers in this study suggest that ABE professional development could be beneficial.

Earlier, barriers to the successful integration of instructional technology into the classroom were discussed; however, in some cases, it may be the instructors who are the barriers if they lack the professional development, training, and support they need themselves in order to effectively teach their students. This suggests a need for more accessible, efficient, and high-impact professional development for instructors of adult basic education.

Moving forward, studies will be needed on more specific challenges: technology integration, what models of training have been put into place for both students in terms of computer literacy skills, and instructor professional development. Future studies

may also examine the impacts the new test has on various groups of test candidates, such as millennials versus the oldest student groups. Additionally, more research on the impact of the test's changes on student retention, effectiveness of the Common Core, and the ways in which ABE providers work with students in programs with newly-structured content will be necessary to understand the full scope of impact. Lastly, further investigation into current perceptions of the new GED® may be useful, particularly in states offering both the GED® *and* an alternative pathway to earning a high school diploma, as the number of states offering an alternative assessment continues to rise. ❖

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Post-GED-Credential College Prospects for Adults with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

Many adults with special needs, who did not finish high school, complete a GED® credential to go to college. As they prepare to transition, they may encounter barriers and likely require supports to succeed in college. The purpose of this qualitative research paper is to describe the college prospects of transitioning adults with a GED credential and special needs, in terms of characteristics, challenges, attributes, and supports. Findings emerged from qualitative interviews of GED passers in the recent *Perceptions and Pathways* research project. Tenacity motivated many interviewees toward resilience. Enrollees with special needs valued encouragement from a family member or an instructor during their college experience. The article concludes with interviewee and researcher recommendations for adult education programs and colleges to support transitioning adults.

INTRODUCTION

Young adults with special needs who leave high school early face numerous challenges in adulthood. Those interested in college may complete a GED® credential, thus joining approximately 65% of GED test-takers who endorse further education as a reason for testing (GED® Testing Service, 2013). As they transition, they may encounter barriers (Quigley & Uhland, 2000; Quigley, Patterson, & Zhang, 2011; Roffman, 2000), which leads to the following questions: what added supports might they need for a successful transition; and how do they understand their prospects for college?

The purpose of this qualitative research paper is to describe the college prospects of transitioning adults with a GED credential and special needs in terms of characteristics, challenges, attributes, and supports. By employing a rich qualitative dataset from the *Perceptions and Pathways* project of the American Council on Education and GED® Testing Service in 2011, the paper considers a subset of interviewee data on adults with special needs and their educational experiences five years after GED credentialing. The paper considers the seldom-researched relationship of passing the GED test with the college prospects of adults with special needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students not completing high school may have physical, mental, or learning disabilities—or other special needs. These terms are not synonymous. Disability is defined as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity” (USDOE, Office of Civil Rights, 2013). Corley and Taymans (2002) defined one type of disability, learning disabilities (LD), as a “broad array of disorders in information processing” and note that adults with LD may “experience problems that significantly affect their academic achievement” (p. 46). “Special needs” more broadly includes people with health conditions presenting substantial life barriers without meeting the narrower definition of disability (Patterson, 2013).

Many adults with special needs enter adult education (AE) programs to prepare for the GED test. While prevalence data are not collected consistently (National Research Council, 2012), the prevalence of disabilities in AE programs is pervasive (KET, 2008; Mellard, Patterson, & Prewett, 2007; Patterson, 2013; Tamassia, Lennon, Yamamoto, & Kirsch, 2007). AE programs are also charged with preparing learners to transition and to effectively face challenges after AE completion.

Transitional Challenges for Adults with Special Needs

Transitioning adults with special needs face numerous challenges. Multiple studies have found that these adults struggle with confidence, motivation, or persistence (Duquette & Fullarton, 2009; Payne, 2010; Roffman, 2000). Some research further suggests that high school dropouts may resist further formal schooling as adults and may encounter dispositional, situational, or institutional barriers (Quigley, 1997; Quigley et al., 2011).

Adults with disabilities may perceive educational choices as limited (Rocco & Fornes, 2010). Generally, they less frequently enter college (Duquette & Fullarton, 2009; Mellard & Patterson, 2008; Payne, 2010) or tend to pursue short-term programs. More specifically, adults with LD gravitate toward career-technical programs and achieve lower completion rates than adults without disabilities (Corley & Taymans, 2002). Adults with LD in GED preparation seldom access transition planning (Payne, 2010). Despite the challenges they face, receiving a GED® credential can be a pivotal event as adults close “the door on a history of defeat and failure” to move on to college (LDA of Minnesota, 2006, p. 1).

Skills and Characteristics of Adults with Special Needs

The literature on GED test-takers with disabilities indicated they have literacy skill levels comparable to high school graduates with disabilities and go to college at a higher rate than the latter group does (Hsu & George-Ezzelle, 2008; Lohman, Lyons, & Dunham, 2008; Patterson, 2013). Of first-year college enrollees in the NCES *Beginning Postsecondary Students* survey, Guison-Dowdy and Patterson (2011) found that nearly 17% of entering college students with disabilities had a GED credential vs. 10% holding traditional high school diplomas. Also, in a study of transitioning adults with LD, 7 of 10 interviewees participated in GED preparation; three simply took the test. Most interviewees were enrolled in college and one had completed a bachelor degree (Payne, 2010).

Resilience of Transitioning Adults with Special Needs

The theory of educational resilience provides a framework for addressing supports and attributes

of transitioning adults (Patterson, 2013; Quigley et al., 2011). Resilience boosts chances for “life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997, p. 46). Factors such as social and academic competence, autonomy, or self-efficacy strengthen resilience (Patterson, 2013). Educational resilience implies adult action and self-advocacy as well as response to the support of family and mentors (Duquette & Fullarton, 2009).

Research Questions

With this background from the literature on transition, four sets of research questions were developed to further investigate the attributes and challenges facing transitioning adults with special needs and GED[®] credentials.

1. What are the characteristics and educational background of interviewees with special needs?
2. What challenges did interviewees face as they consider their college prospects?
3. What attributes related to resilience were evident among college-bound interviewees?
4. What was the length of time to enrollment and completion and how many completed? What supports did interviewees describe and recommend when deciding about college and during their college experience?

DATA AND METHODS

Following the American Council on Education’s series of reports on transitions using two cohorts of a million GED[®] test-takers (Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010; Patterson, 2010; Zhang, Guison-Dowdy, Patterson, & Song, 2011), a need for qualitative investigation of GED passers’ educational

experiences was apparent. The *Perceptions and Pathways* project was the first major qualitative follow-up study of GED passers on their later educational experiences (Quigley et al., 2011).

Interviewee data for this paper came from a subset of *Perceptions and Pathways* data. Details on state selection, data collection, and coding are offered in this journal (Patterson, 2013). Of the 85 adults interviewed in the full study, 20 adult learners reported having a disability or other special need.

Each interview began with the interviewer showing a sample “life map” (McPherson, Wang, Hsu, & Tsuei, 2007). The interviewer then asked the interviewee to draw a one-page life map of educational events and situations. On the life map, interviewees drew or wrote about leaving school, taking the GED[®] test, and either going to college or not going (see Appendix for a sample life map). The life map started the story of the interviewee’s education and framed the interview conversation.

Interviewers then reviewed the life map and asked open-ended questions about the adult’s educational perceptions and pathways since leaving school. Interviewees typically were eager to share their experiences and addressed most issues of interest in simply relating their story, with interviewers following up as needed. Examples of clarifying questions included, “I see you wrote about Mr. T in school. So what happened there?” or “Could you tell me more about this diploma picture you drew?” Other open-ended follow-up questions included how they valued education, what triggered them to consider college, how their first month of college went, whether they ever thought of dropping out, whether they would pursue further education after completion, and if they had any advice for peers, adult educators, or colleges.

Interviewees were not asked initially about

disabilities or special needs. If the interviewee disclosed voluntarily, the interviewee had the opportunity to continue speaking about the disability or special need if desired. The status was identified later during data coding. Data were analyzed using an inductive content analysis. Initial analysis categories were created following coding, with multiple, iterative categories leading to abstract themes (Patterson, 2013).

RESULTS

Characteristics and Experiences

Demographics and the educational background of interviewees supply information to address the first research question. They reflect diverse backgrounds, geographic locations, and educational experiences. The remainder of this paper reports only on 20 interviewees with special needs (of the original 85). Interviewees were 22 to 56 years old when interviewed. Interviewees came from six states and DC. Eleven were women and nine were men; 19 were native English speakers. Interviewees disclosed physical disabilities, LD, and chronic health conditions; five interviewees identified multiple special needs. Physical disabilities were vision impairments and other disabilities resulting from injuries or accidents. Learning disabilities included dyslexia, attention disorder, and memory impairment. Disclosed chronic health conditions were lupus, cancer, migraines, and asthma (Patterson, 2013).

Fifteen prepared before GED testing. On average interviewees completed ninth grade. Nineteen dropped out of high school, and four were homeschooled¹. Interviewees' total GED test scores¹ ranged from 2,260 to 3,560 (median = 2,660). When

testing, seven interviewees endorsed testing to enter a 2-year college and five to enter a 4-year college¹. When interviewed, two were enrolled in college for the first time, six had never enrolled, and three had stopped out after enrolling. Nine interviewees had graduated from college.

Challenges

Challenges facing interviewees informed the second research question. Challenges fell into two major categories: barriers at home and in attending college. Often facing steep barriers, 14 interviewees, who later enrolled, described college choices positively or neutrally. Not surprisingly, many interviewees dealt with the effects of illness, pain, or disabling conditions. These effects appear to threaten the balance of physical and mental well-being, as one interviewee observed: "I'm not in a place where I can [physically] keep up with school...Because when I'm physically not right, mentally I can't push myself..." If that balance is off, barriers seem insurmountable to the adult learner.

Challenges at home. The first category reflects challenges at home, including chronic pain and intergenerational needs. Seven interviewees related dealing with chronic pain, which challenged one interviewee to sit through class: "...I said I'm not going to be able to [stay in class]. I had to get up and move around, I start hurting real bad... I have to sit down a while, stand up for a while." For this interviewee changing positions regularly made the difference between staying in class and leaving.

An interviewee with chronic head pain struggled with studying and was disappointed with her doctor's advice not to overdo it: "When I study hard... I have a pain in my head, very hard. I stopped, and

¹Three interviewees from West Virginia and one from Washington, DC, participated in a pilot and lacked complete demographic and background data.

then I went to see the doctor, and he said, ‘You can’t do anything very hard to you [sic].’” The pain she experienced interfered with her learning.

In addition to their own special needs, several interviewees coped with inter-generational challenges – caring for parents, siblings, or children. The caregiving role can be potentially debilitating when the caregiver also has a special need (Patterson, 2013). A middle-aged interviewee reporting chronic asthma cared for her father: “My father passed away the last year [of college]. He died of cancer and that semester that he was in the hospital, I still got A’s in my studies. I was doing it for him.” While struggling with family and personal health needs, these adult learners were educationally resilient.

Challenges getting to college. A second major category of challenges interviewees described experiencing revolved around getting to college, including transportation to class, scheduling issues, and finances. For interviewees with physical limitations, chronic illnesses, or other impairments that prohibited driving, transportation was a frequent barrier (Patterson, 2013). Many relied on family, friends, or classmates to get to class. “I just wished I’d had a ride, but I got here because me and the girl [sic] were in the same class,” explained one interviewee with a chronic illness. A few interviewees had never learned to drive or could no longer drive because of physical impairments. One interviewee with two injured knees described what followed her first surgery: “I probably could’ve taken a class ... [but] I couldn’t drive. I had this brace from here to the ankle. I didn’t [take a class].” The transportation barrier was not lack of a vehicle; these interviewees couldn’t drive. For these adults, having a dependable ride allowed them to keep going, literally.

Another challenge in getting to college was scheduling. While scheduling issues occur

commonly for adult learners, they intensified for interviewees. Some could only attend classes part time or at certain times. An interviewee discussed scheduling as she balanced parenting, coping with lupus, and seeking a degree in psychiatry: “I’m going to be responsible for picking [my daughter] up from school ... so I won’t be able to go to school at nighttime. I may have to go in the summertime.” With her physical limitations, scheduling challenges implied delay in continuing college.

Financial barriers were a third type of challenge; some interviewees struggled financially. The cost of college, even part time, was often overwhelming. One interviewee with LD explained, “I can’t come here [to college] because if I come part time, they won’t cover all my class [financially]... Because I can’t go to full time ... I could not physically and mentally keep up and work to support myself.” For this interviewee, who was self-supporting, college costs without financial aid tipped the scales against attending college.

Attributes and Resilience

Interviewee attributes relating to educational resilience are considered in the third research question. As they reflected on college decisions, interviewees identified multiple attributes associated with resilience (Patterson, 2013). Being persistent or simply yearning to learn motivated them to be resilient. They spoke about positive attributes of the self: self-acceptance and self-reliance.

Tenacity. The attribute most frequently mentioned in interviews was tenacity (Patterson, 2013). A college enrollee in her 30’s affirmed: “I’m determined once I set my mind and I do it, if at all possible. I’m not a quitter.” Interviewees discussing tenacity tended to be college enrollees or graduates.

Tenacity did not imply a lack of barriers; in fact,

several interviewees talked about how persistence helped them through challenges. One college graduate with LD, when asked if she had thought of dropping out of college, replied,

Oh, no. I wasn't going to drop out! No. That's one thing I am not, is a quitter. So I may get discouraged and draw back, because I don't think something's going to happen. Or financially, or there are certain things I just can't change. Then I'll back off. But if I'm in it, then I'll go. I'll finish it.

Even when faced with financial difficulties and life stressors beyond her control, she perceived her tenacity as contributing to educational resilience. Another college graduate, with lupus, admitted how a relative's advice inspired tenacity:

I got a whole bunch of other circumstances—medical, things that are not going to be curable—holding me back. One thing my aunt always said is, “Let me tell you something. You say you're a fighter. You're in the hospital for a month. You come home, you go back to work, you go back to school... You do not give up.” It taught me not to [give up], even with [low] self-esteem that I felt. No, no quitting.

In fighting against lupus, tenacity gave her resilience to complete college.

Yearning for learning. A yearning for learning was another attribute of multiple interviewees, who were generally young. A young female interviewee who “wanted to know everything” and completed two degrees believed she has “always loved learning... I am very happy with myself for having accomplished everything that I have.” A young male college graduate remarked about his college experience: “I stuck with it because I like to learn...My life is about studying....” These young adults were eager to learn and confident

about their prospects.

Self-acceptance. Interviewees described positive attributes of the self: self-acceptance and self-reliance (Patterson, 2013). A middle-aged male interviewee, disabled in an accident, learned to accept himself in college psychology classes. “Taking psychology as an elective later on, I found out why I did a lot of the things I did,” he explained, “I turned out to be a free spirit... You know, [free spirits] want to do things how they want to do it... it does make sense when you figure out what kind of person you are.” Understanding himself led to self-acceptance.

Self-reliance. A second theme was self-reliance (Patterson, 2013). Self-reliance and self-efficacy were often coupled in interviewee descriptions of learning. After a truck accident broke her back, a female interviewee, who described her early life as a series of distractions by peers who persuaded her to leave school, relied on herself to keep learning:

[Going for the postsecondary certificate] was a really good experience. It helped me with self-esteem... After I got in the wheelchair, I went away from everybody... I work pretty well on my own... Yes. If I'm left alone from any distractions I can stay on track pretty good.

She persevered alone through a computer certificate and perceived herself as self-reliant and persistent, even though she thought learning was “really tough.”

A middle-aged female interviewee, who earned a master's degree, relayed how she had learned self-reliance as a child of an alcoholic (Patterson, 2013): “I had to pretty much learn for myself and rely on myself to go in the right direction...” Later, after passing the GED® test, she decided to go to college. She added, “I knew that I had the ability to make my own destiny.” She relied on herself and believed she could achieve her goals.

Encouragement and Supports

The fourth set of research questions addresses the time span from GED® testing to enrollment and completion, as well as encouragement and supports interviewees described while deciding about college, and during their college experience.

Length of time to decide. Deciding to enroll in college takes time. Most enrollees made the decision immediately after or within a few months of GED® testing. Two young interviewees waited a year to enroll, and another waited three years. One interviewee reporting dyslexia and memory challenges described his sudden realization a year after testing: “I just said, ‘I’m going to college.’ ...Well, I *had* to go somewhere... I wanted to get a degree.... I was, like, ‘You know what? I’m going to go attend the community college.’”

An interviewee who waited three years to enroll had to sift through a plethora of advice. This homeschooled young woman experienced cancer at 14 and aspired to a doctorate in psychology. She described needing help choosing an undergraduate program and “finding which colleges are best” for her. She sought guidance from peers and professors:

There were plenty of people around to give me advice, but the advice I sought most were (sic) from those who had been in my shoes or professors at college...I got a lot of opinions, but they weren’t all helpful...

Ultimately she got help from a brother. “My brother who was already attending a college was what you might consider a college counselor for me and guided me through the process.” With his assistance she enrolled.

Completing college. Also informative is understanding how many interviewees completed college programs and how long it took. Nine of 14 interviewees who enrolled graduated from their

postsecondary programs. Six of the graduates completed postsecondary certificates, three earned an associate degree, and one each had a bachelor or master degree. A few interviewees earned two postsecondary credentials.

Nearly all completed within a standard amount of time for the degree or program. Five receiving certificates did so within a few months; one took 12 months. Two interviewees with an associate degree completed in two years, and the interviewee continuing on for a bachelor degree completed it after an additional two years.

Family encouragement. Deciding to enroll and completing college may be related to encouragement. Interviewees with encouragement, especially from parents and family, tended to enroll in college, while those lacking encouragement tended *not* to enroll. Enrollees with encouragement, however, tended to stop out of their college programs almost as often as they graduated. Interviewees who stopped out may have just as much, if not more, encouragement than those who graduated, yet seemed overwhelmed. Having encouragers in their lives appears to offer strong motivation to continue education.

Ten interviewees described their mothers and six their fathers as encouraging them to decide about college. Although it did not guarantee graduation, family encouragement was particularly apparent for interviewees who later graduated from college. Seven of nine graduates reported having encouragement from family during decision-making.

After enrolling in college, 13 of 14 interviewees who enrolled discussed family encouragement. A total of seven mothers, five fathers, and one grandmother encouraged them throughout college. Just as parents influenced making the college decision, they also encouraged interviewees during college. The young male interviewee reporting

dyslexia and memory challenges relied heavily on his mother's support as his "personal secretary" and perceived he "attended [college] for my parents at first, because they really wanted me to go."

Another young man, who reported attention challenges, perceived encouragement from his parents. He remarked,

The encouragement has always been there...
 "Hey, I'm glad you're taking classes. Here's an extra 50 bucks for your birthday card... Here's extra gas money." There was always encouragement and ... pats on the back ...
 And, you know, "I'm so proud of you."

Encouragement from friends and others.

Three adults indicated a friend or significant other encouraged them in their decisions about college. One middle-aged woman with a reading disability, who reported being illiterate and starting seven years of basic skills while incarcerated, was eager to start college after GED® testing. She felt a huge letdown when college staff mentioned costs.

I wanted to come to college... I was all excited. They were like, "Well, you can if you get a loan and pay for the courses." Then all my hopes just kind of got smashed, because I don't have money like that. I struggle, of course...

Because of initially not receiving information about financial aid, she almost gave up her goal of studying physical therapy, until a friend encouraged her by supplying information she needed.

Once he told me [about financial aid], I applied and there it went. I said, "Why didn't they tell me about this?" Because I didn't know if it was a secret or if everybody was supposed to know... But he informed me.

Mystified by the process of beginning college, this interviewee would not have known how to pay for college without her friend's encouragement.

Two interviewees reported that an instructor or staff member encouraged them in their college decision-making and three participants mentioned that a co-worker or supervisor did so. One young man with severe chronic migraines received encouragement from a college outreach staff member to learn computer networking. "That [college tour the outreach staff member offered] was part of what opened my eyes... in all honesty, it really opened my eyes. I'm very thankful for this school." The tour offer nudged him to decide.

Once interviewees started college, support tended to continue. Seven interviewees received encouragement from an instructor and one from a counselor during college. The young woman with cancer expressed gratitude for an instructor who talked her out of stopping out from the associate degree program. She said:

I mentioned that I was thinking about taking some time off and she said that if I took time off now, I'd probably never come back and I would never reach my goals, so I needed to think about that seriously... And because of what she said to me, I realized she was probably right... the driving force [in continuing] was definitely my teacher.

Instructors were perceived as encouraging when illness or injury made continuing difficult or impossible. A middle-aged female interviewee, who left a nursing program because of multiple knee surgeries, credited instructors and a counselor with helping her finish the semester:

I was scared to death taking classes. But... the teachers here [at the college], they're wonderful. They make you...want to continue... I was more disappointed to have to go tell my counselor that I was going to have to stop classes. She had that disappointed

look on her face [and said], “You know what?

You’re coming back.” [I replied,] “Yes, ma’am.”

A young female interviewee was grateful for instructors’ support when she was ill: “I told my teachers I couldn’t finish my assignment because I was sick and if it was okay to give it to them the next day. They were really understanding. They are flexible if you have a real situation...” This flexibility and understanding encouraged her toward a degree. A woman with a reported reading disability, who earned a certificate in phlebotomy, received welcome encouragement from an instructor:

[The teacher] always would tell us her stories about how she had trouble in school, with people helping her, so she would say, “Anything you need after school, here’s my phone number.” ...A lot of teachers don’t do that...they’re not willing to go the extra mile...

The instructor’s willingness to reach out supported this interviewee’s college experience. Further encouragement from a fellow classmate helped her pass a required state phlebotomy exam:

I met this girl, Athena, [in class] and she was awesome... we’d do homework on the phone. She would help me...I don’t do good [sic] on test taking and I almost didn’t go [to the state exam]....[The exam] was hard and I had my friend Athena. She was sitting across from me and I’d look up [anxiously] and she’d go, “You can do it.” I’m like, ‘I can’t do it.’ And she’s like, “You *can* do it.”

The interviewee described, with excitement and pride, how she not only passed the exam but scored well. The encouragement from the instructor and classmate who were “all behind her” seemed to inspire her to do her best.

Five interviewees also described encouragement

from friends and three participants from significant others during college. A middle-aged graduate credited a friend from work for mentoring her: “I had a supervisor friend and she really encouraged me through my climbing the ladder at [name of company]... She would remind me, ‘It’s important to [go to college]. Take advantage of this.’” Long-standing support of others who had been through similar experiences is a common thread in interviewee encouragement.

Transitional supports. College enrollees described benefitting from numerous transitional supports and even made specific recommendations to peers and colleges. Some supports were financial. Before starting, many interviewees benefitted from financial aid information and a certainty that they could get a job in their major after graduation. They needed financial support not only for tuition costs but also for textbooks and childcare. Others required a college in a convenient location.

Other supports involved scheduling, counseling, and other information needs. Interviewees advocated for a “manageable schedule” and flexible class times. A middle-aged female interviewee advised peers to be realistic about scheduling:

My advice is just to take as much [coursework] as you can at once. Don’t get discouraged and just keep going. Some people can take one or two [classes]... I would say, “Don’t worry about time because you got all the time in the world. Just get it done.”

She perceived that GED® passers with special needs might need to adjust their course load to progress toward completion.

Counseling was another critical support. One young female interviewee advised colleges: “It would be key to make sure people know” about academic

counseling, resources for planning schedules, and other counseling. “If there aren’t [resources], make them available.”

A middle-aged male interviewee recommended that colleges provide tutoring geared towards adults with LD:

Oh, yes, tutoring makes a big difference...

They need more funding down there in that tutoring [center]; they need a lot, because if you have a learning disorder, you’re not going to make it through some of these courses without a tutor...

He perceived that completing courses required tutoring assistance, and adults needed tutoring information before deciding to enroll.

Interviewees also expressed how navigating the college system mystified them and advised giving information about college as another support. Many needed to see what college was like before committing. A middle-aged female interviewee even wanted to meet instructors beforehand: “I had that anxiety, but just the way the teachers were, it means a lot to the way they respond to you.” She went on, “If you could get [prospective students] in there, get them in the door the first time, it makes a world of difference... It made me see things a lot clearer.” She believed that if peers could see the college and meet the staff, they would be more willing to commit.

Requiring counseling sessions and a first-semester orientation course also helped some students acclimate. A young male interviewee recommended:

...The college provides classes [requiring] background research about [the college]...

And I thought that class was wonderful... because it *forced* you to get out and see what was available, to *see* what the options were... The counselor, I think, is equally

as influential... You have to meet with the counselor at least once or twice or three times throughout your first semester.

By requiring orientation courses and counseling, this interviewee believed, “a student should be closer to somebody with the information to be able to provide a direction for that student.” His recommendations about counseling implied both that a student with special needs would know how to reach the counselor and that the counselor would help the prospective student decide. Not all interviewees could find such services. As one young female interviewee admitted, “The counselor might have helped if I went to them, but I didn’t know who to go to or where to go.”

DISCUSSION

Challenges

Three types of interviewee challenges—reliable transportation to class, manageable class schedules, and adequate college finances—might be viewed as common to most mainstream postsecondary students. However, the intensity of challenges is far from mainstream for adults with special needs. While many adults need to care for family, interviewees in this paper faced truly daunting challenges in caregiving, especially for family with illness or special needs.

Educators in AE programs and in colleges can provide assistance with accommodation and referrals when needs are apparent. This assistance not only reduces the burden on the transitioning adult learner, but enables them to see the AE program or the college as a go-to resource and a place to refer peers. Adult interviewees expressed respect, relief, and gratitude for the programs and colleges that helped them overcome barriers. As they gained information, they were eager to pass along that knowledge to other

potential students.

Interviewees in college suggested several types of assistance. AE and postsecondary staff can assist with identifying “ride sharing” or transportation vouchers. Flexible scheduling and handling of assignments would provide much needed accommodations for learners who are not only in pain themselves, but caring for others with major needs. They may need to make advance arrangements with an instructor to confidentially access accommodations or signal pain. Information on adult caregiving options for the elder generation would also assist adult learners.

Other possible approaches colleges could take to help adult learners transition are:

- Identifying graduates with special needs who could serve as peer mentors
- Connecting incoming students with special needs to programs that benefitted graduates with special needs
- Collecting and studying in-house longitudinal data on systemic supports that prove most helpful to students with special needs
- Ensuring that outreach staff and college counselors offer and discuss solutions to financial barriers, or if they cannot do so, referring the transitioning adult to community or government resources.

Policymakers could seek to remove financial barriers by permitting adults with special needs to use financial aid when special needs students require part-time enrollment.

Attributes and Resilience

Several attributes supported interviewees in decision-making. Tenacity, or simply yearning to learn, motivated them toward resilience. They frequently referred to positive attributes of the self (Patterson, 2013; Quigley et al., 2011): self-acceptance

and self-reliance.

Based on recent literature and the outcomes from this paper, adult educators who work with transitions could encourage adults through peer discussion and sharing. Honest discussions in peer groups about their understanding of themselves as learners may guide them toward future goals, self-acceptance, and sense of purpose (Patterson, 2013; Waxman, Gray, & Pardron, 2003). Sharing excerpts from stories of adults with special needs (such as presented in Florida Literacy Coalition, 2012; Payne, 2010; Roffman, 2000; or in this paper) and asking how each story relates to their circumstances and needs may also be beneficial. Discussing what an adult learned or how an interviewee was resilient may facilitate adult learners’ self-understanding and goal setting.

Making College Decisions

While most interviewees decided about college shortly after GED® testing, they often found the college system mystifying. Further, they frequently believed they needed to see what college was like firsthand before committing. Often encouragement to apply to college came about in the context of close relationships, especially with parents. Frequently interviewees relied on encouragement and information from loved ones to get past uncertainties.

Colleges enrolling adults with special needs could help them easily access accurate, complete information on branch campuses or transportation resources. Staff clearly needs to reach out to adults with current, detailed information about financial aid options. Outreach efforts – such as college tours, open houses, or semester-long orientations – need to be explicit and offer concrete solutions to decision-making challenges. In an era of widespread technology use, getting college access and decision-

making information should not be a mystifying or secretive process for adults. Rather, information about getting to the college, getting financial aid, identifying a counselor, and answers to other common questions should be transparent and on the college's website as well as in print at local AE centers.

Adult educator support. Adult educators can support adults with special needs in the decision-making process in several ways. First, many interviewees in this paper had minimal information about colleges in their area—both in terms of what institutions offered and what they required to enroll. AE educators can provide direct information and encourage the adult to check with his or her support network of family and friends, or establish a peer network among adult learners who are transitioning (Payne, 2010), so the network could assist with gathering information.

AE educators or support networks might help in locating easily accessible colleges, advising how to set up and manage course schedules, or finding tutors and counseling on or off campus. Knowing who can help and where to find them is paramount. Adult educators can also refer transitioning learners to bridge programs, college outreach tours, and intake counseling.

College Persistence

The power of encouragement also extends to college persistence for adults with special needs. Enrollees with special needs valued the primary encouragement they received from a family member or an instructor during their college experience. Instructors were perceived as supportive when illness or injury made it difficult or impossible to continue in college. Their flexibility and understanding were clearly encouraging and even inspirational.

Of 14 interviewees who enrolled in college,

nine graduated from their programs. Despite the challenges, nearly all completed within a standard amount of time for the program. College instructors, particularly those who work with adult learners who are just beginning, or close to finishing, should not underestimate their role in urging the adult to persist. They could also encourage adults to reach out to family or classmates for support (Duquette & Fullarton, 2009; Payne 2010). Whenever adult educators can keep in touch, that could also make a positive difference; interviewees reported valuing the support of AE staff after they moved on.

Enrollees with encouragement, however, were almost as likely to leave college programs as to graduate. Interviewees who stopped out often became overwhelmed. Having encouragers in their lives appears to offer strong motivation, but may not suffice in extreme circumstances. Even so, most stopouts indicated they saw themselves going back should circumstances change.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Many challenges lie ahead for this subpopulation as they consider and experience college. Payne's (2010) participants made multiple recommendations on how adult educators could enhance transition services. She recommended further study comparing transition services and outcomes for adults with and without special needs. Findings from this paper point future research in a similar direction.

Future studies involving interviews with transitioning adult learners could also consider ways to strengthen data collection designs. For example, this paper relied on self-reported disclosure of special needs; interviews with adults with diagnosed health conditions or disabilities could offer additional perceptions specific to adults with those diagnoses.

Also, by design the Perceptions and Pathways study was retrospective. Allowing five years to elapse, to give GED® passers adequate time for college studies, means their perceptions are filtered through a lens of history. Finally, the data in this paper came from a larger study and represent only a fragment of the full experience of interviewees. Future research could interview adult learners with more recent credentials or could review and present the complete educational biographies of transitioning adults with special needs.

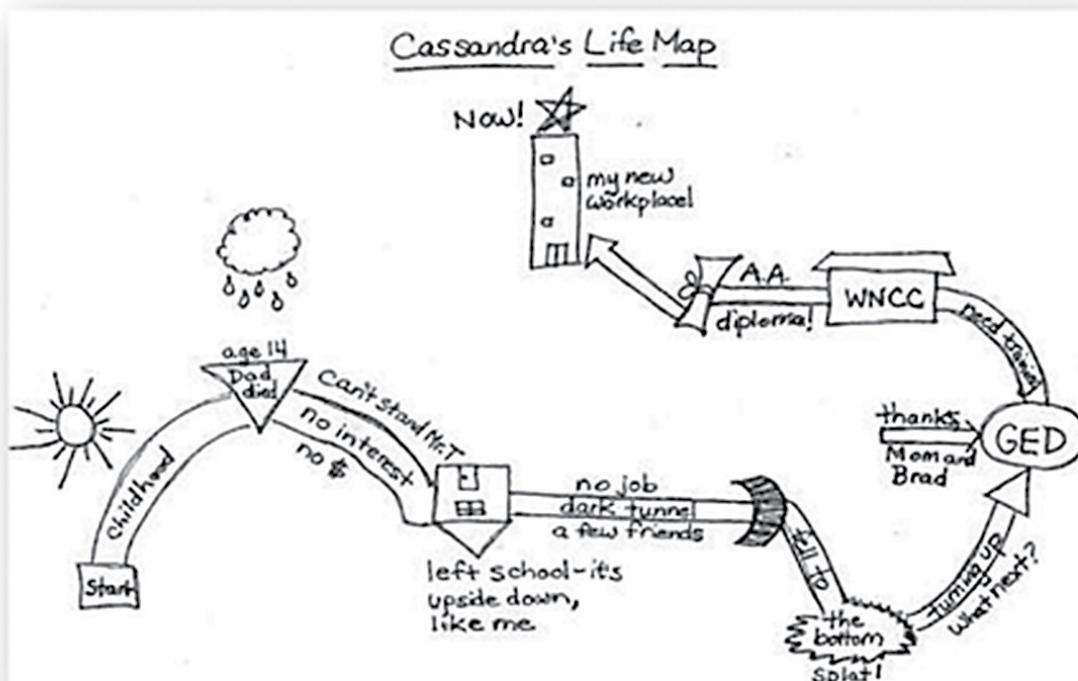
It is clear that more resources are essential for this significantly large group of adults (KET, 2008; Tamassia et al., 2007)—both to continue research on this under-resourced topic and to boost the chances of adults with special needs to complete college. Taking a “glass half empty” view and concluding that prospects for adults with special needs were simply poor and many faced insurmountable barriers is

not a view supported by the literature or this paper. Findings from this paper reflect the impressive energy and resilience of many who persisted in college, a “full glass” tribute to the endurance of the human spirit. If these findings can be applied, college completion becomes more than a prospect; it becomes a reality. ❖

The author thanks GED® Testing Service for access to Perceptions and Pathways data for this paper. Thanks also go to Dr. B. Allan Quigley, Dr. John Hosterman, Ms. Daphne Atkinson, and five anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on earlier drafts. Content responsibility is solely the author's. Correspondence about this paper should go to Margaret Patterson, PhD, Research Allies for Lifelong Learning, margaret@researchallies.org.

APPENDIX

Sample Life Map (Quigley, et al., 2011)



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Pillars of Support: A Functional Asset-based Framework for ABE Learners

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ABSTRACT

This paper reported results from a qualitative analysis of assets and supports disclosed in the narratives of adult basic education students. These students were identified as exemplary by their instructors for academic achievement, hours of program attendance, or community service. Themes were identified using the *Four Pillars* framework to categorize and describe assets and supports that facilitated academic success. We described how different asset types manifest at each stage of the students' progression from entrance to transition. We found notable variation in the relative importance of assets across individuals and within individuals across the phases of their adult education experience. A sense of community within the ABE classroom contributed to the ability of students to persist despite difficulties, and ABE teachers were identified as the most influential pillar in the final stage of the process; transitioning to opportunities beyond the ABE program.

INTRODUCTION

Adults, including adult basic education (ABE) students, often seek to continue educational opportunities because of a change in life circumstances (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Cuban, 2003; Quigley, 1997). Although the initial motivation may stem from external or environmental circumstances such as job loss or other life change—possibly a *disorienting dilemma* (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999; Mezirow, 1997)—returning to an adult basic education or literacy program represents a purposeful decision about the future. Adult learners seek learning experiences that help them meet their goals, are relevant to their lives, and are respectful while engaging the experiences they bring to the classroom (Knowles, 1973, 1990). For some, participating in learning experiences as an adult can be transformative (Freire, 1970, 2001; Gould, 1978; Mezirow; 1997).

Adult learners often must address numerous barriers and challenges in order to participate in the ABE classroom (Isserlis, 2008; Quigley, 1997; Schaftt, Prins, & Movit, 2008). Taking the steps necessary to enter and then persist in an ABE program requires adult students to (a) be aware of the assets present within themselves, their families, and their communities; and (b) be willing and able to engage those assets. Individuals who can identify

and utilize their own strengths (individual assets), as well as the supports present in their environments (family, institutional, community assets), fare better (Saleeby, 1997).

A substantial body of research and numerous models from the broader field of adult education can help frame an understanding of barriers to participation (see Cross, 1981; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Johnstone & Rivera, 1965). Factors that support or detract from student persistence in ABE programs are under-researched (Schafft, Prins, & Movit, 2008). Much of the scant literature on persistence in adult literacy programs has focused on barriers (Schafft, Prins, & Movit, 2008), why learners leave programs, or more recently, program characteristics that contribute to persistence (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 2000; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). In the field of adult basic and literacy education, there is a need for research that (a) explores how to encourage more adults to enter ABE programs, (b) discloses factors that contribute to student persistence in ABE programs, and (c) identifies ways to better support students as they transition out of ABE programs into the next phase of their lives. Applying an asset-based approach to investigating how adults experience and, perhaps, are transformed by their learning experiences can contribute to our understanding of why some adult students choose to enter, persist in, or transition from ABE programs into other forms of education. We used the *Four Pillars* framework (Thompson & Cuseo, 2011) as a lens for examining these processes in ABE students. Ultimately, this knowledge about student participation in ABE programs can and should inform policy and practice decisions related to program administration, design, and resource allocation at local, state, and national levels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The *Four Pillars* model of student success

(Thompson & Cuseo, 2011) provided the primary theoretical frame for this investigation. Additionally, the project was informed by research on adult learning and development (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Knowles, 1973, 1990; Quigley, 1997), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997, 2009), and persistence in adult basic education programs and resilience (Benard, 2004; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Each of these areas of research provides a unique, but complementary, framework for investigating the supports utilized by adult learners in ABE programs. The following section briefly describes these key areas of research that frame the inquiry.

Four Pillars

Thompson and Cuseo (2011) discussed four different sources of support: individual, family, institution, and community. We refer to these supports as assets. These asset categories parallel existing models of adult participation (see Cross, 1981; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Johnstone & Rivera, 1965); such models generally frame these categories as barriers or deterrents to participation, while Thompson and Cuseo (2011) identified the individual, family, institution, and community as assets. These assets are the *pillars* upon which success rests (i.e., the assets upon which individuals rely for support when confronting challenges or barriers). Individual assets are operationalized in this paper as personal strengths such as those described in research on resilience (Benard, 2004; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990), including: (a) social competence (e.g., interpersonal skills and relationship building, caring, empathy, and compassion); (b) autonomy (e.g., positive identity, internal locus of control, self-efficacy, resistance, mindfulness, self-awareness, and humor); (c) problem-solving, (e.g., planning, critical thinking, resourcefulness, and flexibility); and (d) sense of purpose (e.g., goal direction, creativity, optimism/hope, positive feelings about the future, and

faith or a sense of meaning). For many individuals, family members function as a key support in difficult times or during periods of transition. Additionally, institutions—including educational and social service institutions—often provide support both directly (e.g., by providing material resources) and indirectly through mentoring relationships and providing opportunities for meaningful contribution (Albertini, 2009; Cox, 2004; Milstein & Henry, 2000).

The fourth pillar, community, can also function as a critical support for adult learners (Albertini, 2009). Furthermore, community-based organizations can function as assets in a bi-directional manner, both affording opportunities for adult learners to contribute to the health and well-being of the community and providing necessary resources (e.g., financial, housing, social, and health-related resources) to those adult learners (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996). Community is a notably broad concept. We were interested in both the community that develops in the adult education classroom (i.e., the learning community) and in terms of belonging to a particular place (e.g., a neighborhood).

Transformative Learning

Learning involves change and, often, transformation. Transformative learning is “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally open to change” (Mezirow, 2009, p.22). It involves critical reflection, discourse, and action (Mezirow, 1997).

Adult educators, and adult basic education instructors, can create environments that are conducive to transformative experiences. Although transformative learning may begin in the classroom it often extends beyond those boundaries into the personal *lifeworlds* (Habermas, 1987) of adult learners. Adult educators may never fully know

the impact of the transformative experiences on their adult students (Taylor & Jarecke, 2009). A better understanding of how adults experience and, perhaps, are transformed by adult basic education experiences can contribute to understanding why some adult students choose to enter, persist in, or leave ABE programs.

Persistence

Factors that support student persistence in adult basic education are important to understand, but under-researched (Schafft, Prins, & Movit, 2008). Research on persistence in adult literacy programs has primarily focused on barriers to persistence (Schafft, Prins, & Movit, 2008) or program characteristics that contribute to persistence (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 2000; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). Schafft, Prins, & Movit (2008) provided a broad and nuanced view of barriers to persistence, stating that “structural factors and community context profoundly shape adult learners’ ability to attend classes regularly and make progress toward their educational goals—above and beyond learners’ attitudes and program characteristics” (p.4).

Studies have investigated programmatic factors and, to a lesser degree, individual factors that contribute to persistence of adult students in ABE programs. Comings et al. (2000) identified four supports that contributed to persistence: (a) awareness and management of facilitators and constraints, (b) self-efficacy, (c) goal-setting, and (d) progress towards a goal. They identified mastery experiences (Bandura, 1995), vicarious experiences, and social persuasion as ways to support the development of self-efficacy (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 2000). Other studies have shown goal-setting to have a positive influence on self-efficacy and persistence in ABE programs (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999; Meder, 2000) and higher education (Sedlacek, 2004).

The New England Learner Persistence Study

(NELPS) identified six *drivers of persistence* for ABE students: (a) sense of belonging and community, (b) clarity of purpose, (c) agency, (d) competence, (e) relevance and (f) stability (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). Other research cited that a sense of community was an important contributor to persistence in ABE programs (Cuban, 2003; Kerka, 2005). The importance of supportive relationships has also been supported by research in the area of resilience (Higgins, 1994; Masten, 2009; Miller, 2002; Orr & Goodman, 2010; Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Herman, 1999; Schilling, 2008; Werner & Smith, 1992).

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this project was to identify and describe assets utilized by exemplary adult students in ABE programs, to use the *Four Pillars* framework (Thompson & Cuseo, 2011) to organize and describe those assets in ways that produce actionable findings, and suggest practical applications. The questions that guided the investigation were:

1. How did each of the asset areas (individual, family, institution, community) contribute to the individual's decision to enter in the ABE program?
2. How did each of the asset areas contribute to the individual's ability to persist in the ABE program?
3. How did each of the asset areas contribute to the individual's transition to opportunities beyond the ABE program?

Interviews of 60 exemplary¹ adult basic education students in the rural Midwest were conducted by staff members of an ABE professional development resource center based at a regional university. The interviews were conducted between 2004 and 2008 for use in an annual publication (*Success Calendar*).

These extant narratives were entered into ATLAS Ti qualitative data software by the researchers for qualitative analysis. The previously described *Four Pillars* model (Thompson & Cuseo, 2011) was the basis for an a priori coding scheme (individual, family, institution, and community); subcodes (actions, expectations, and relationships) emerged during coding and were interpreted loosely as codes and used primarily as narrative cues. The narratives were jointly coded by the two researchers, contributing to inter-coder reliability. After the initial coding was completed, codes were grouped and categorized, leading to the themes discussed in this paper.

During analysis it became apparent that phases of students' progression through the ABE program (i.e., entering, persistence, and transition) offered a consistent organizing framework, which can be used to consider the importance of the various assets utilized by the students. This organizing framework of entering, persistence, and transition allowed us to refine our preliminary research question into the three research questions that ground this study.

Findings

We present the findings here within the context of the organizing framework (i.e., the stages of entering a program, persistence, and transition) and the four asset areas (individual, family, institution, community). Specifically, we will describe the ways in which the different asset areas manifest at each stage of the students' progression from entering to transition.

Entering

Our focus here is on the *decision to enter an ABE program*. Taking the first step back into formal education requires adult learners to overcome multiple situational (financial, transportation, health)

¹Students were nominated by their ABE program instructors as exemplary for outstanding academic achievement (e.g. high GED score), hours of program attendance, or community service.

and institutional (policies and practices) barriers. The decision to enter can be a difficult one with the potential to be influenced positively or negatively by internal and external factors. We describe how each of the four asset areas contributes to the individual's decision to enter the ABE program.

Individual. While the initial motivation may stem from external or environmental circumstances such as job loss or other life changes (a *disorienting dilemma*), the experiences reported by students suggest that adults, who decide to enter an ABE program, possess intrapersonal assets which contribute to their ability to take that first difficult step. While several students described newspaper or radio advertisements as the particular event that initiated a phone call to the ABE program, returning to education was clearly a long-standing desire for these students. Indeed, one female student reported that getting her General Educational Development (GED®) diploma was a dream she had for 53 years.

While the advertisements functioned as an invitation back to the classroom, acting on the information required initiative, a sense of autonomy, and self-efficacy. These students believed that they could be successful in the adult education classroom and a sense of autonomy may be an internal strength that these students relied on to overcome the anxiety of entering the adult education program. As one female student stated, "...the hardest walk I ever had to take was walking into that classroom to start working on my GED®. I didn't need a job. It was something I wanted. The time was right." Another female student described her motivation to make a change in her life, "A series of bad decisions, wrong turns, and bumps in the road of life, brought me to the point I knew I had to do something positive with my life. I had to gain some substance, some control. I had to get an education."

Family. The encouragement of family members (spouses, siblings, children, even grandchildren and

extended family members) appeared to be a critical factor in the students' decision to return to adult education. Many of the female students reported that spousal support was a particularly important element in their decision to return to adult education. "E. asked me when we got together in 2001, 'Have you ever thought about going back to school? You are a smart woman.'" Family members communicated high expectations and a belief that their loved one could be successful, even if he or she did not yet believe. Often the adult learner resisted the initial encouragement, yet the family members persisted and pushed. One participant said, "...some very important people in my life practically forced me to see about getting my GED®. They took me by the hand to the ABE program."

Institutional. Several students described seeing an advertisement in the paper for the adult literacy program or hearing an advertisement on the radio. One student described looking up the ABE program in the phone book. Advertisements may be the particular event that initiates or sparks a phone call, which speaks to the importance of thoughtfully publicizing and marketing adult literacy programs. One male student stated, "I heard of the ABE classes for the GED® on the radio and a couple of friends. I don't know how I got the courage to pick up the phone and call to sign up, but I am glad I did."

Community. Research suggests that informal mentors from the community can be protective factors in lives of young people and adults (Benard, 2004; Higgins, 1994). The stories told by adults in this project indicate that community members functioned as informal mentors by providing encouragement, guidance and holding high expectations. Two employers encouraged their female employees to return to school, communicating high expectations.

Persisting

As discussed earlier, adult learner persistence

is a complex issue. Learner persistence can be impacted by numerous situational, institutional, and dispositional challenges. In this section, we describe how each of the asset areas contributed to the individual's decision or ability to stay in the ABE program overcoming multiple challenges. Many of the individuals persisted long enough to achieve their goal, often the GED®.

Individual. Common themes regarding persistence that emerged from narratives were the resourcefulness and flexibility of the students. Students who persisted encountered many challenges and difficulties, but found ways around the problems, often utilizing support networks in the program, family, and/or the community. Many students described high levels of motivation and determination. Several students took the GED® test multiple times before passing. Several participants described their motivation for persisting in the ABE program:

- I also have to give myself credit, too. Deep down I was going to do it or die.
- I didn't do well at school—was picked on. But, I determined I would do it no matter what.
- I went back to school and had some physical issues that would leave me unable to function at all. Not as mom or taxi for my kids or even to sit for more than fifteen minutes. But I hung in and even took on a class to be a court appointed special advocate and lo and behold after seven years of coming in and out of class, I took my GED® test. The test was prior to Thanksgiving 2006 and by December I was sworn in to the County Family Court and heard I passed the GED®.

- I want to be as independent as possible. It's scary, but challenging to prove I can do this and take care of myself.

The motivation to attend class every day despite multiple challenges ranged from the need to address immediate and critical needs (i.e. gaining employment and being able to provide for a family²) to the desire for a better job or career options. Several female students indicated that as a result of their participation in ABE classes, multiple career options became available; whereas few options existed previously. Other students were motivated to persist by a desire to prove to themselves and others that they could achieve academically.

Adults strive for independence (autonomy) and the ability to determine the direction of their lives (Imel, 1988; Knowles, 1973/1990); a theme expressed by many students. Students reported experiencing fear at various points (e.g., coming to class, writing an essay, taking the GED®), but persisted. Strong goal-orientation and a desire to achieve seemed to be more powerful than (and helped them overcome) their fear of failure. Many students described what could be conceptualized as a transformation (Mezirow, 2009) (see Table 1).

Students spoke positively about their futures, expressing a growing sense of optimism and hope (Seligman, 1992). Their narratives suggest that choices exist for them now, where none existed previously. They experienced a deep sense of personal satisfaction gained from attending the ABE classes—a sense of doing something for themselves. For some, this was a chance to work towards a goal they may have had for decades. While some students reported a sense of something unfinished, incomplete, or missing when they talked about their lack of a high school diploma,³ others reported a feeling of growing pride as they progressed through the program. They

²We found this factor was described primarily by male students.

³The narratives of the students suggest a sense or feeling of inferiority because of the lack of a high school credential.

Table 1—Learner Statements Related to Self-Worth and Transformation

Individual	Quotation
Female student	I don't need help from others anymore. It's very empowering.
Female student	It was amazing that I went from a person being depressed and this total disaster, to feeling my life couldn't get any better.
Female student	It makes you feel you are worth it because you are learning something everyday. I can be face-to-face with other people and feel the same.
Female student	When I saw my name on my diploma, I started to cry, and for once in my life I was proud of myself.
Female student	I was so excited. I felt worth. A part of my life was completed. Without it [diploma] people look at you as if you are zero. In five months I accomplished more than I have in my life except for raising my child. It changed my life.
Male student	School itself is difficult for me. I never cared for school. Now that I'm older, I feel more like I want to learn, instead of being forced. I have reasons why; I feel like I like to learn now.
Male student	It took 10 years to get there. But, then everything took off. Before, every day was dull, same old job, work, extra hours. Everything's easy now. I don't want to take time off from school. I enjoy learning.

used phrases such as: *equal to*, *as worthy as*, *good enough* to describe a sense of increasing self-worth (see Table 1).

Family. Family members functioned as both supports and motivators. Family members, especially children or grandchildren of the female students, were a motivating factor and a reason for staying in the program. The desire to honor family members (mostly mothers) was also evident in the narratives. Students were motivated by the desire to make their loved ones—even deceased ones—proud. Spousal support was frequently mentioned as an important source of encouragement and support, and was expressed by women more often than men.

- I wouldn't have graduated if it hadn't been for my husband, F. He's such an inspiration. He believes in me so much. I would never have done what I have done without him (female ABE student)

- The first day of school, I cried. There is no way I can do this. I'm not smart enough. My wife talked me through it. I just knew I was supposed to be there (male ABE student).

Female students were motivated by the desire to help their children and grandchildren with their education as well as a desire to inspire them to graduate and pursue further education.

D. [her husband] had a feeling that I could do it...And, Stephen [her seven year old son] would say, 'You help me with my homework and I'll help you with yours.'

Another student stated, "I want to be a role model for my kids."

Institutional. The community that developed within the ABE classroom and the relationships that developed between teacher and student were recognized sources of support for the students. The

classes (and programs) were structured to foster a sense of belonging, which has been shown to contribute to student persistence in ABE programs (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009) and in higher education (Tinto, 1994).

Most students mentioned that one individual was responsible for their success, and always referred to that person by name (most often the ABE instructor, but also college personnel, tutors, or ABE administrators). Some students reported that a friendship had developed and that the individual went above and beyond what would typically be expected to help or support them. That help and support seemed to provide the students with enough self-confidence to take positive academic risks (e.g. taking the GED®, enrolling in college or other certificate program). One female student said, “I needed someone outside of my family to motivate and encourage me.”

Goal-setting is typically an explicit part of ABE service delivery models, beginning at orientation, continuing through the development of individual learning plans, and throughout instruction and portfolio assessment. Consistent with persistence research related to goal-setting (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999; Meder, 2000), students reported the value of seeing progress on a regular basis. Teachers assisted students in setting clear goals and provided opportunities for students to be successful.

Community. The narratives suggest that the connection between community and the ABE student operates in two directions: (a) community functions as a basis of support for the student, and (b) community functions as an *affordance* (i.e., an object or environment that facilitates the performance of a particular action; see Gibson, 1977) for service from the student. Within *the community as a basis of support* sub-theme, both (a) the physical community and (b) learning communities/communities of learners are present and contributing. The sense of community

that developed within the ABE classroom appears in many of the narratives and has been identified as an important factor contributing to persistence in ABE students (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). When they encountered frustration, students relied on the encouragement and support of teachers and other students to pull them through: “It’s like a family here. If you aren’t having a good day, everyone rallies around you” (female student). “It was hell, but we were all in it together” (female student). A sense of understanding, common goals, and shared experience existed between students. One learner expressed that many of the students in the program were from the local neighborhood and they “understood where you were coming from. It’s like a close knit family.”

Research indicated that the sense of community that developed in the ABE or family literacy classroom can be particularly meaningful to female students (Albertini, 2009; Schafft, Prins, & Movit, 2008). We found that female students tended to gain confidence as a result of encouragement from friends (of note, friends’ encouragement exerted a stronger influence than encouragement from their teachers). Additional findings include (a) several students received support and encouragement from their employers; and (b) male students tended to focus more on providing service to the community as opposed to gaining support from the community.

Transitioning

A period of transition occurs as adult learners achieve their goals. Similar to enrolling, this transition period can be difficult for adult learners. This section describes how the four asset areas contributed to the transition to opportunities outside the ABE classroom.

Individual. Self-awareness (mindfulness), a subcomponent of autonomy (Benard, 2004), was evident in descriptions of the personal growth and change students experienced as a result of their

participation in the ABE program. Several narratives described a transition or turning point, indicated by phrases like “before I ...but now I...” (see Table 1). These descriptions suggest that the turning point is related to achieving success in the ABE classroom (e.g. passing the GED®, learning to write their names). The experience of setting and achieving the goal of obtaining their GED® seems to have resulted in positive changes in self-efficacy.

Each student indicated a purpose for attending the ABE program, be it a short-term goal or long term aspirations. For those who described a purpose related to career aspirations, their goals primarily involved education, social service, or the helping professions, including:

- Developing programs for working mothers of special needs children.
- Long held dreams of becoming a nurse.
- Working with clients with mental health problems.
- Working towards RN to be able to take care of others.
- Continuing education in psychology or early childhood.

Students described an increased sense of hope and optimism about their futures. Some indicated a change in their attitude towards education. Success in the classroom led to increased confidence and the willingness to take risks and set higher academic goals (see Table 2).

Family. Students reported that encouragement and support from family members gave them the confidence to set high(er) goals for themselves, but most encouragement seemed directed at passing the GED®. There was no specific mention of family members encouraging students to continue education beyond the GED®.

Institutional. Daloz (1986) and Bloom (1995) contended that mentoring relationships are particularly important for adults in a transitional

period. The importance of supportive mentoring relationships was a theme throughout the narratives. Relationships that developed between ABE teachers and students seemed to give students the confidence to set goals for continuing their education and/or to work towards careers and employment opportunities they had not previously considered.

Community. By providing opportunities for adult students to contribute, communities function as assets by facilitating transition to opportunities beyond ABE. Most students in this study were from rural ABE programs in the Midwest. Educational institutions anchor rural communities in the U.S., providing not only educational opportunities, but also social, economic, and cultural outlets (Lyson, 2002). A strong connection to local communities was apparent in the narratives, as evidenced by volunteerism and interest in giving back to their local community.

DISCUSSION

As discussed previously, there is a need for research that explores (a) how to encourage more adults to enter ABE programs, (b) what factors contribute to persistence in ABE programs, and (c) how to better support students as they transition out of ABE programs into the next phase of their lives, which may include work and postsecondary education. The narratives provided insights into each of these phases of service delivery, with findings that suggest recommendations for practitioners and program administrators.

We found that individuals engaged all four asset areas (pillars) as they navigated the adult education experience. Each individual recognized and articulated the assets that contributed to their success at each stage of the process. There was notable variation in the relative importance of assets across individuals (cf. Cuseo, et al, 2010). Some learners reported more about the importance of family

Table 2—*Transitioning from ABE Programs**Pillar 1: Learner Statements Related to Individual Resources*

Individual	Quotation
Female student	I began to think about my certificate and realized it was only a paper unless I used it. I decided I wanted that college education that I dreamed of when I was in high school.
Female student	When I got that GED, it made me feel that I can do anything! That piece of paper was incredible.
Male student	<p>I never cared for school. Now that I'm older, I feel more like I want to learn, instead of being forced. I have reasons why. I feel like I like to learn now.</p> <p>One major way that participating in class and earning my GED affects me is in my outlook for the future and the direction of my career. Before, I couldn't picture myself in any other occupation than some type of manual labor. In my opinion, working in an office would be completely uninteresting (primarily because I didn't want to have to read and write). Now, as I explore a wider field of career options, I know I want to find the type of job where I deal with people. My view of office work has definitely changed, because of what I have learned, and most importantly, because of my attitude towards learning even more. Once you start learning, you don't want to stop.</p>

support and less about the support of community. Other learners spoke at length about the importance of teacher support and less about family support. When one asset area was weaker, other assets were engaged—a finding commensurate with the Thompson and Cuseo (2011) model. This concept of complimentary asset areas has implications for practitioners and program administrators; implications that will be further discussed in the conclusion section of the paper.

Additionally, there was notable variation in the relative importance of assets within individuals across the phases of their ABE experience. Among students who successfully navigated all three phases, it appears that the varied assets expand and contract in importance to meet the needs of specific phases.

For example, the ABE program itself contributed little to the decision to enter the program. For most, this decision was something that students had been thinking about for a long time and in which they were supported by family members.

Student narratives indicated that the sense of community within the ABE classroom contributed to students' ability to persist despite difficulties. Fellow students provided encouragement and support at critical points throughout the program experience. Teachers created a learning environment that facilitated the development of these relationships.

ABE teachers seem to have been the most influential asset in the final stage of the process, transitioning to opportunities outside the ABE program. Family and peer support were mentioned

less in relation to transitioning. Helping students transition to opportunities beyond ABE is an explicit goal of many ABE programs. In many states, substantial professional development resources are allocated to helping teachers successfully transition their students to work and postsecondary opportunities. Thus teachers may have access to resources that family and peers do not.

An additional theme was the power of ABE programs to facilitate transformative experiences for adult students. Students were changed by their educational experiences, experiencing an increased sense of self-worth and increased self-efficacy. As noted earlier, Hansman & Wright (2009) described how transformative learning experiences can influence *perspective transformation*: “As learners become aware of their abilities to participate in the creation of knowledge, their perspectives of themselves and their worlds change” (p.207). Perhaps it is through awareness and effectively engaging the four pillars (i.e., the combination of individual, family, institutional, and community assets) that transformations are able to occur.

CONCLUSION

In this project, we examined how students engage and utilize four types of assets—the *four pillars* (individual, family, institution, and community assets)—and how engagement and utilization varies across individuals and across the educational experience. This framework provides an asset-based approach to understanding how adults experience and, perhaps, are transformed by adult education classes. Findings can contribute to our understanding of why some adult students choose to enter, persist in, or transition from ABE programs into other forms of education.

Recommendations for practice

The *four pillars* model provides a framework for dialoguing with adult students about the types

of supports that are (and are not) available to them at various times throughout their educational experience. Through structured conversations with peers, students may become aware of additional resources and supports. Indeed, peer feedback can be a powerful source of learning about internal strengths in addition to identifying external supports available in the community.

Our findings suggest that these ABE students were aware of and utilized the assets available to them. Many adult students, however, may be more acutely aware of their weaknesses and less able to understand their strengths in ways or to extents that would allow them to get the most from those strengths. ABE teachers should create opportunities for developing self-awareness in students who may not be aware of their internal assets and discussing with them how to apply these assets when facing challenges. In addition to learning style inventories and goal-setting, ABE programs should consider including explicit opportunities for students to assess their individual strengths (see for example VIA Strengths Assessment and Park, Peterson, & Seligman, M.E.P., 2004; and Force Field Analysis used by Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 2000). Teachers can find ways to integrate the awareness and development of individual strengths through activities such as journal writing and structured group activities. By providing choices, adult students can explore and engage their internal strengths in a supportive environment.

The salience of institutional assets shifted as students progressed through their educational experience. While institutional assets did not seem to significantly influence the initial decision to enter the ABE programs, students frequently mentioned classroom community and peer support as contributing to persistence in the program. Resources (human and financial) should be allocated to facilitate a sense of community within

the ABE classroom. With adequate planning time, instructional resources, and professional expertise, teachers can engage students in classroom activities that provide students with an opportunity to learn with and from each other.

Limitations and Future Research

This study used a small sample of extant narratives collected from exemplary ABE students from primarily rural communities in the Midwest, a recognized limitation of the study. Every learner is unique. The transferability of our findings to other ABE students remains in the hands of the practitioners who find the perspective and the model useful.

The four pillars model (Thompson & Cuseo, 2011) provides an asset-based framework for understanding participation in ABE programs.

Further in-depth study could further reveal a more robust understanding of how these pillars of support function for adult students. This framework can be used as a structure for investigating variation in the use of assets among different groups (e.g., gender, race, age and locale). Some studies, for example, have investigated how women experience the support networks they find within literacy programs (Albertini, 2009; Cuban, 2003).

Finally, additional research is needed to identify specific program characteristics (e.g. size, number of sites/classes, enrollment practices, program partners, service delivery model, and staffing) and that act as assets and/or facilitate the contributions of other assets. This can lead to recommendations for practice, resource allocation, and ultimately, improved services and outcomes for adult learners. ❖

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*Developing
Promotional
Materials for
Adult Literacy
Programs*

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Keywords: Literacy Organization, Low-Literate Adults, Marketing, Promotions

INTRODUCTION

Marketing communication is a key strategy that helps many organizations fulfill their goals. Literacy organizations are similar to profit-making organizations in their need to communicate effectively with clients, donors, employees, grant organizations, government, volunteers, and other literacy organizations for growth and sustainability (Wymer, Knowles, & Gomes, 2006).

For the reason listed above, literacy organizations face strong resource constraints and an ever-increasing competition for students and stakeholders, and they have been advised to adopt strategic marketing approaches (Michael & Hogard, 1996). A survey of 224 administrators from literacy organizations revealed that administrators believe it is crucial to design marketing communications that will appeal to low-

literate clients (Douglas, Valentine, & Cervero, 1999). Although literacy organizations can consult practical “how to” guides (Kentucky Adult Education, 2012; Smith, 1996) and academic articles about Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Education Development (GED) programs (Bond, Merrill, & Smith 1997; Wonacott, 2001), few marketing guidelines have been tailored to fit the needs of low-literate adults. Therefore, adult literacy organizations are confronted by unique communication challenges in tailoring their recruitment and retention efforts to appeal to their target audience.

This article reports on a specific case of the READ Center—a community-based literacy organization (CBLO) in Richmond, Virginia—and its attempt to develop promotional materials that will encourage low-literate adults to enroll in literacy programs. The students and tutors from the READ Center took part in the development of accessible promotional materials, and improved distribution methods for those materials. The students first participated in focus group activities to reveal their opinions on the existing promotional tools (brochures and radio ads) and offered insight on future materials. The findings from the focus group activities were utilized in developing new promotional materials, which were eventually evaluated, approved, and distributed by the participating students and tutors.

READ CENTER

The READ Center, a 501(c)3 CBLO in Richmond, Virginia, is “a program structured to support the work of private, not-for-profit literacy organizations that offer tutoring and other one-on-one or small group instructional approaches delivered primarily by volunteers” (Virginia Department of Education, 2012, p. 1). CBLOs typically offer ABE programs for adults who have below ninth-grade-level reading, writing, and math skills; some also offer high school

and other general achievement diplomas through adult secondary education programs (Virginia Department of Education, 2012). As of 2009, more than 100 community-based and faith-based literacy organizations were serving 10,000 adults in Virginia (Virginia Literacy Foundation, 2009).

The READ Center provides one-on-one tutoring in their mission to help adults with low-literacy skills develop basic reading and communication abilities that will allow them to be better-informed and more-successful citizens, workers, and family members. The READ Center is privately run and relies on donations and grants for its operating expenses. Approximately 300 students are enrolled in its ABE and pre-GED programs offered at multiple sites throughout the Richmond metropolitan area; however, program administrators identified some concerns about the current recruitment materials’ ability to attract potential clients, and efforts were needed to improve both the content and outreach modality of those materials.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were READ Center students who enrolled in beginning-to-intermediate literacy classes for adults reading from 0 to 8th grade levels. The individuals were recruited to take part in focus groups at multiple READ Center sites; individual tutors were given a script to invite students to participate prior to focus group activities. The script was utilized in order to deliver accurate and consistent information regarding the purpose and group-setting format for the one-hour focus group sessions to be held at various READ Center sites at specified times. Additionally, the tutors’ script included information on refreshments and snacks at the focus group sites, but offered no other

financial incentives. At the end of the focus group recruitment, each group had six students, for a total of 24 participants with a mean age of 45. The gender of the participants was 50% male and 50% female.

Procedure

Focus Group Development. The focus groups commenced in Fall 2010 in hopes that the insight gathered at these meetings could be used to finalize and distribute enhanced promotional materials. The focus group exercise was ideal for soliciting the students' opinions on the effectiveness of the current brochures and radio ads as well as the development of future brochures and their distribution. Since students' classmates were present in the focus group, students felt much more relaxed in the focus group setting and expressed their opinions freely. Even after the focus group exercise, during the poster and radio ad development process, students and tutors continued to participate in the revision process to design effective promotion tools. Thus, the focus group activities in this study were unique because they provided a starting point for the development of future materials and encouraged students to remain involved in the design process of new promotion materials.

Group Discussion. Following previous focus group guidelines (Edmunds, 1999), the author supervised the administration of four focus-group exercises held at the Richmond, Henrico, and Chesterfield Centers, respectively. After greeting participants and explaining the purpose and ground rules, the moderators asked questions relevant to the improvement and distribution of the current promotional materials:

- How did you hear about the READ Center?
- What is the best way the READ Center could reach you or others who need our help? Why?
- Where are the best places to put up posters

about the READ Center so that many people who might need help will see them and call for our classes?

- What types of materials should we use? Are posters or brochures better? How should we change the materials we are using to look better?
- Where do you live and where do you usually shop?
- Can you suggest other marketing materials we might use?

During the recruitment process, some participants said that they did not want their voices recorded, so two tutors hand-recorded key points and summaries of the discussions. After about an hour, moderators debriefed and thanked students for participating.

RESULTS

Effectiveness of Promotional Materials

The existing promotional materials developed for the READ Center were not designed to target specific stakeholders of the organization (tutors, donors, students, or other volunteers); instead, the READ Center used one type of brochure to recruit all parties. Though the cost saved by producing one set of promotion materials may be a motivating factor for literacy organizations, these one-size-fits-all print materials may not be effective in recruiting potential students who have low-literacy skills. Therefore, focus groups comprised of READ Center students were asked to evaluate the brochures to reveal their effectiveness.

The focus groups studied the current READ Center print materials and found them ineffective. Many participants said that the brochures were too fancy: individuals noted that they were artistically distracting, in that they appeared to be more like ads for a photography studio than for literacy education. Additionally, the brochures were filled with so much

information that participants were demotivated from trying to read them. The focus groups determined that the brochures were designed as if to attract only potential tutors and donors rather than potential, low-literate students.

Participants suggested using more colorful graphics and simplified reading materials. They explained that they were likely to pick up print materials that feature simple and concise messages on colorful flyers they can easily spot and read. They also suggested assuring that phone numbers are easily retrieved from flyers or posters.

Advertising and Distribution Efficiency

Various information sources prompted adult learners to enroll in the literacy program, but most learned about the organization through friends, family, coworkers, doctors, or personnel from churches, libraries, healing centers, and adult community centers. A few participants reported contacting the organization after they heard a radio ad giving them a phone number to call. Half reported hearing the radio ad, but said it gave too much information and was spoken so rapidly that they could not recall the number. Other participants reported listening to the radio on a daily basis, but never heard the ad about the READ Center. Few participants said that they learned about the organization from the print brochures, but noted that even though the brochures were available at many of the community centers participants attended, READ Center brochures were also distributed in many locations rarely frequented by potential students. Word-of-mouth was found to be the best recruitment source, with the READ Center's other promotional tools being inefficient.

Participants' suggestions for improvement included late-night radio ads since work schedules preclude many from hearing daytime radio ads. They suggested using additional communication

outlets such as TV ads and telephone solicitations; advertising on internet sites, community calendars, and community billboards; placing ads at outlets such as Goodwill stores; and using testimonials, posters, bumper stickers, and leaflets. The focus group also suggested locations where potential students might be found and where it would be most advantageous to distribute print materials. The list of locations identified included: schools, churches, laundromats, barbershops, nail shops, grocery stores, social services, health clinics, DMV offices, court buildings, fast-food restaurants, childcare organizations, alternative schools, Greyhound Bus stations, utility-payment locations, hospital emergency rooms, ABC state-run liquor stores, the Freedom House for those recently released from incarceration, and healing organizations such as the drug rehabilitation center. Despite being overlooked by more literate professional advertisers, these locations are regularly frequented by the focus group participants and other low-literate individuals.

Development of Promotional Materials

Using findings from the focus group discussions study, multiple tutors assisted in writing an appropriately simple, easily understood radio ad for the READ Center; efforts were made to eliminate all unnecessary or uncommon words, and tutors examined it thoroughly to assure that it would trigger the interests of potential adult learners. The focus group members later reviewed and approved the script, as shown in Figure 1.

In addition, the READ Center used focus group responses to design a suitable poster featuring two short messages: "Improve Your Reading" and "Free Classes and Tutors," illustrated with a picture of an adult reading a book and another helping the reader. The two adults pictured were both tutors to

Figure 1—Radio Ad Script

It's always looked like fun... to be able to sit down and get lost in a good book or just read something online... to read a story with your kids at bedtime, or simply read a book to learn something new. The problem is... you never learned how. You've been able to make it this far in life, but, let's be honest... not being able to read has hurt you, especially at work. There's no reason to feel alone or ashamed anymore... the ____ organization can help you. The ____ organization is an adult literacy program right here where you live and work. In twice a week, the ____ organization can help you develop the reading skills you need... you'll learn through one-on-one tutoring and small group classes. The ____ organization offers these programs to you free of charge: all you need to do is call _____. No matter where you are right now, the ____ organization can help make your life better through literacy... just call _____. _____.

avoid exposing actual learners. The poster included multiple easily removable white stickers with the name and phone number of the literacy organization. After focus group members reviewed and approved the poster, they and the tutors distributed it to the locations the group had identified. Figure 2 shows the newly designed poster.

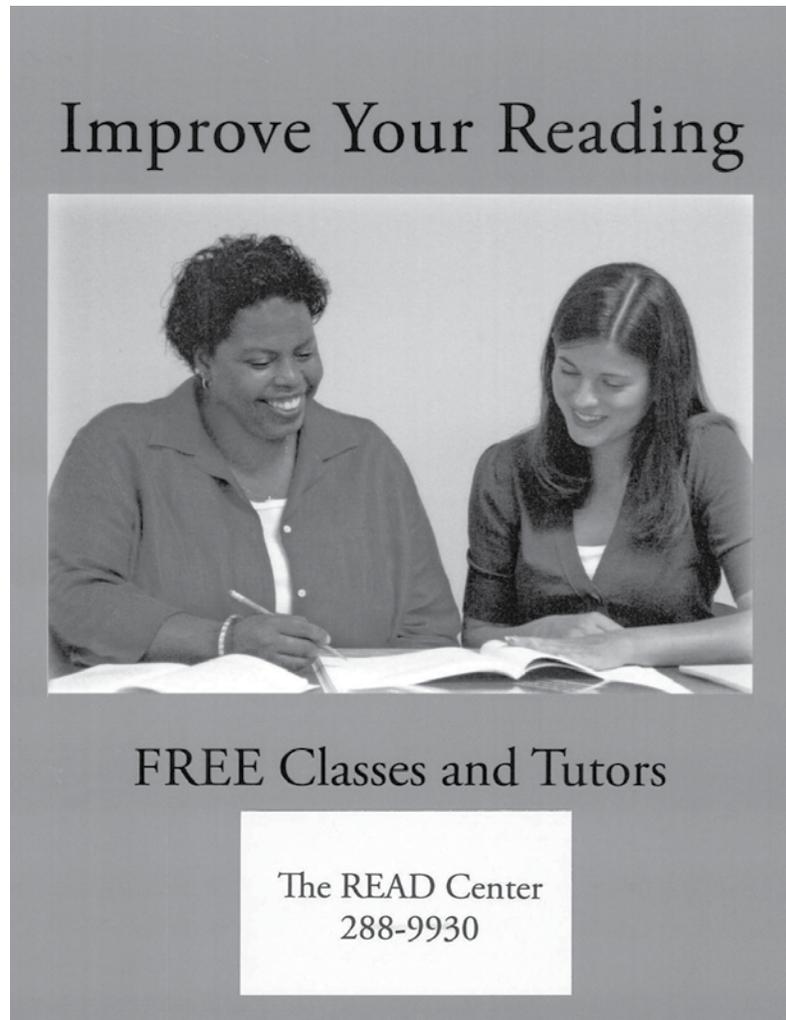
DISCUSSION

The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy estimates that 30 million adults in the United States can only perform simple reading tasks, such as locating the time or place of a meeting on a form or identifying specific information in simple news articles (Kutner et al., 2007). However, only 10% of low-literate adults enroll in widely available literacy classes. The 90% of low-literate adults who need help, but fail to seek actual assistance, may feel stigmatized by their illiteracy, but in some cases they simply may not know about available literacy education (Adkins & Ozanne, 2005). Therefore, literacy organizations must learn how to develop effective communications that can speak to low-literate adults. Additionally, efficient advertising and distribution of promotional materials can play a crucial role in increasing awareness of available literacy classes.

This article addresses both practical experiences and strategies for adult literacy education

administrators and instructors. Based on the findings from this study, administrators can consider developing differentiated marketing and promotional materials that target specific audiences (e.g. separate brochures for potential students versus potential tutors and donors) rather than relying on one-size-fits-all types of marketing. Administrators can utilize students' suggestions on the use of simplified messages for both radio ads and brochures in targeting potential students. In the case of brochures for potential students, more attention-grabbing colorful graphics should be an important factor to consider in the design process. Instructors may incorporate simple and easy to understand messages along with more graphical information.

This article offers some insight on how literacy organizations may utilize the practical experience of the READ Center to provide guidelines for improving their marketing and instructional efforts; the cause, however, is ongoing. Literacy organizations should not neglect constant monitoring and revision of promotion materials in order to maximize their effectiveness, and provide the greatest benefit for the target audience. ❖

Figure 2—Sample Print Poster

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METHODS

The authors developed a retrospective study utilizing goal theory, hope theory, and attribution theory to establish a framework for their data collection. In brief, goal theory posited that motivation is intimately linked to both student interest and student self-efficacy (i.e., a student's belief in their ability to complete a task in a specific context). In turn, interest and self-efficacy provided the foundation for the intrinsic motivation that typically correlates with improved "persistence, engagement and academic achievement" (p. 518). Hope theory provided a means to better understand how an individual responds when facing an obstacle—including the ability to identify the steps necessary to address a barrier or reach a goal (pathways thinking), and the belief that one has the competency to navigate a given pathway (agency). It was important to note that external factors can impact hope, either positively or negatively affecting an individual's pathways or sense of agency. Lastly, attribution theory addressed how individuals explain life events, including their own competency, in a given situation.

As noted earlier, this research utilized a sample of 274 ABE and ASE students. All were drawn from 13 Midwestern ABE/ASE programs funded through the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA). For selection, "participants had to be at least 16 years old; withdrawn from secondary education without earning a secondary credential or attaining basic reading, writing, or math skills; have US citizenship or authorization to work in the US as a foreign national...and volunteer to participate in the study" (p. 522). The sample was selected according to NRS level criteria and consisted of 29 in Level 1 (ABE beginning literacy, roughly equivalent to K-12 grades 1 and 2), 44 in Level 2 (beginning ABE, grade equivalents 3 and 4), 56 in Level 3 (low intermediate ABE, grade equivalents 5 and 6), 60 in Level 4 (high intermediate ABE, grade equivalents 7 and 8), 59 in Level 5 (low ASE, grade equivalents 9 and 10), and 61 in Level 6 (high ASE, grade equivalents 11 and 12).

The resulting sample was 41% male, 59% female; with ages ranging from 16-73. In addition, the sample's racial and ethnic diversity was representative of "the study region's non-ESL, ABE and ASE participants" (p. 522)—38% White/non-Hispanic, 35% African American, 11% Hispanic, 8% Multiracial/multiethnic, and 8% Asian and Native American. Of the 274 participants, 204 achieved an educational gain in the year after the authors' assessment; 70 participants made no gain.

To address the theoretical frames noted earlier, various means of data collection were utilized, including the Hope Scale Pathways and Agency

The authors set out to explore the individual, "person-oriented," dispositional factors that impacted participant motivation.

Goal theory posited that motivation is intimately linked to both student interest and student self-efficacy.

subscales (goal-directed thinking), attendance data (goal-directed action), and a proprietary background questionnaire “to measure goals, attributions, domain states and demographic variables” (p. 522).

Students who made a one-year educational gain differed from those who did not in only a few dispositional or demographic variables.

The study pointed out the simple yet powerful idea that “Hope is a goal-directed construct...”

FINDINGS

Findings from the battery of tests were compared to educational gain, which was determined by an increase in the NRS level. Learners who experienced an increase of at least one level (for those in levels 1 through 5) or passed the GED® (for those in level 6), were considered to have an educational gain. Interestingly, the 204 students who made a one-year educational gain differed from the 70 who did not in only a few dispositional or demographic variables. Nevertheless, across educational levels, significant variations were evident. These variations pointed strongly to the potential importance of developing a more complete understanding of the individual dispositional factors impacting ABE and ASE learner motivation.

To begin, while learners across all levels cited employment and family as motivators for participation, lower level learners were more likely to have selected “another reason” for participating than higher level learners. The implication here was that program goals (specifically those anticipated by the AEFLA and linked to data collection in the ABE/ASE programs they fund) may not align with the motivators of individual learners. Lower level learners appeared to have reasons for participating that, if understood and incorporated into program goals, might result in improved program outcomes and greater learner persistence.

In addition, the study pointed out the simple yet powerful idea that “Hope is a goal-directed construct...” (p. 534). As such, it “enables people to find pathways to reach their desired goals as well as to believe in their capability to reach these goals” (p. 534). Interestingly, learners in level 1 had the highest scores in Pathways Hope, followed by those in level 6. Once again the data pointed to the need for a greater understanding of learner difference and the potential that incorporating these insights into program design might have on participant motivation.

Furthermore, the authors raised the possibility noted by Bernardo (2010) that social networks might provide a catalyst for positively impacting learner hope, as well as the potential of utilizing “outside agents” to impact learner agency, and enhance their ability to address internal obstacles.

CONCLUSION

The authors provided ample detail from the various instruments administered and statistical analyses produced in this study. While the inability to draw causal relationships between the factors identified and outcomes achieved is a limitation, the data clearly pointed to the importance of developing a richer understanding of the complexities inherent in learner motivation. Such insights hold the potential to do the two things noted by the authors as key to “high quality instruction”—meaningful curricula and students sufficiently motivated to attend for significant periods of time. This research raised intriguing questions about the data necessary to create and sustain high quality ABE/ASE programs.

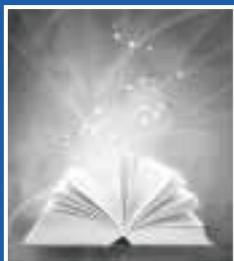
The data clearly pointed to the importance of developing a richer understanding of the complexities inherent in learner motivation.

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BOOK REVIEW



How Children Succeed...Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character

By Paul Tough

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York. 2012.
Paperback Mariner Books, reprint edition. July 2, 2013.
231 pages. 256, reprint edition.
Price: \$18.19 hardcover, \$9.57 paperback

“The story we usually tell about childhood and success is the one about intelligence...the qualities that matter more have to do with character: skills like perseverance, curiosity, optimism, and self-control.”

Educators know from years of experience that learners need cognitive skills: basic skills and academic skills, including reasoning and problem solving. Indeed two of the major gatekeepers for adult success are the high school equivalency exam and the college placement test. However, many educators do not know about a powerful set of, what some researchers call, non-cognitive skills, and what some practitioners call *character skills*. In this context, character is not moral character, but what some have called “performance character”, a set of essential practical skills that can be learned, such as: self-control, persistence, diligence, professionalism, optimism, resourcefulness, resilience, curiosity, and zest. When adults learn these *character skills* they can help themselves, and also help their children, to succeed in learning and in other parts of their lives.

Paul Tough cites research carried out by Nobel prize-winning economist, James Heckman, the researcher who in the late 1990’s found that only 3% of GED® holders have completed a post-secondary degree; compared with 46% of high school graduates. According to Tough, “Heckman discovered that when you consider all kinds of important future outcomes—annual income, unemployment rate, divorce rate, use of illegal

*Reviewed by
Dr. David J. Rosen*

*Newsome
Associates*

drugs—GED® recipients look exactly like high-school dropouts, despite the fact that they have earned this supposedly valuable extra credential, and despite the fact that they are, on average, considerably more intelligent than high school dropouts.” (p. xviii) Tough asserts that I.Q. resists improvement after the age of about eight whereas executive functions, handling stress, and managing strong emotions can be improved into adolescence and adulthood, sometimes dramatically. Executive functions and other character skills can be taught, and in many cases in less time and more easily than basic skills.

This book is being widely read by educators of children, and although it is not focused on adult learners, many of the findings and practices may be applicable to adults, especially those—and there are many—who lack both cognitive and non-cognitive skills. Tough does not argue against the importance of basic academic skills, but presents a compelling case, based on research that he summarizes clearly and engagingly, that for many children—and I would add adults—basic and academic skills are not sufficient. For example, according to an American Council on education study in 2003, over 40% of GED® High School Equivalency exam passers enrolled in college within six years of taking the exam. However, fewer than 12% completed a postsecondary education program within six years. Fewer, less than 4%, complete a four-year degree program.¹ There are many reasons why GED® exam passers do not succeed in postsecondary education: insufficient academic preparation for college, insufficient funds to pay for college, responsibilities of adult life interfering with attending classes, among others. One very important reason that some adult educators may know by the name “soft skills”, is lack of persistence, resilience, resourcefulness, self-control, efficacy or executive function skills, and diligence, as well as optimism, and curiosity and zest for learning. This book includes a compelling argument based on research that these skills are important, and shows that they can—and are—being taught in some schools and programs.

This very readable, informative, sometimes fascinating book summarizes the major research on non-cognitive skills, and presents the work of major education practitioners in the U.S. who are making

In this context, character is not moral character, but what some have called “performance character”, a set of essential practical skills that can be learned.

Executive functions, handling stress, and managing strong emotions can be improved into adolescence and adulthood, sometimes dramatically.

¹Patterson, Margaret; Zhang, Jizhi; Song, Wei; and Guison-Dowdy, Anne. et.al. *Crossing the Bridge, GED® Credentials and Postsecondary Educational Outcomes*. A study published by the American Council on Education. April, 2010. Retrieved 9/15/13 from <http://www.gedtestingservice.com/uploads/files/95f7a61fcdb34260dd41d1914a89ddd0.1MB%29>

This book includes a compelling argument based on research that these skills are important, and shows that they can—and are—being taught in some schools and programs.

a difference by teaching children and teenagers these skills. Teachers, administrators, and others who work with adult learners should find the book stimulating. They may wish to consider non-cognitive skills as they design instruction, curriculum, as well as education programs and schools, especially if they hope their high school equivalency passers will be able to succeed in post-secondary education. Also, Paul Tough makes the important link between children and parents, and points out that “parents who are able to form close, nurturing relationships with their children can foster resilience in them that protects them from many of the worst effects of a harsh early environment.” (p. 28)

David J. Rosen
Newsome Associates

RESOURCE REVIEW



Broadening Our Perspectives on Adult Literacy, Numeracy, and Problem-Solving Skills with PIAAC Data: A Commentary on The Centre for Literacy's 2014 Summer Institute

Editor's Note: The following piece deviates slightly from what typically appears in this portion of the journal, but we felt that it was a timely and important piece and that our readers would greatly benefit from the information presented herein. We hope you benefit from this piece.
– Jim Berger, Editor

I recently attended the annual Summer Institute sponsored by The Centre for Literacy, which convened in Montreal, Canada in June 2014 (for more information, see The Centre for Literacy, 2014). This event provided a unique opportunity to interact with multiple adult education stakeholders (i.e., researchers, practitioners, and policymakers) initiating dialogue to understand and evaluate adult literacy and numeracy trends and issues on a global scale. The event focused on exploring and developing avenues for research, practice, and policy using data from a recently administered, large-scale international assessment, the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). To accomplish this, over 85 adult education experts participated in a three-day interactive PIAAC forum of panel and discussion sessions, quantitative- and qualitative-based research presentations, guest speakers and performances, roundtable-guided conversations with colleagues, and a plethora of networking opportunities. As a researcher, this event broadened my perspective in several important ways: (a) facilitating my awareness of my role in ascertaining and translating research in alignment with practitioner and policymaker needs, (b) understanding culturally-specific issues and considerations plaguing adult education, and (c) deepening my knowledge of PIAAC data and how this data can be utilized in the United States as well as internationally to inform policy. I think it is important to recognize convergences and divergences in the issues and practices facing adult education worldwide. I begin this

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PIAAC assesses the domains of literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments.

The PIAAC results provide a framework for adult educators to understand how the literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving abilities of adults in the United States compare to those of adults internationally.

commentary with a brief description of PIAAC and a summary of how the results from the United States factor into a broader international context. Next, I identify and provide insight into the three key themes that emerged at the event. Finally, I conclude by discussing my reflections on the value of PIAAC data and considerations for future directions in the field of adult education.

WHAT IS PIAAC AND HOW DID THE UNITED STATES FARE?

PIAAC, a comprehensive, international skills survey administered in 24 countries from 2011 to 2012 (Round 1), assessed the domains of literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving in technology-rich environments (i.e., operating a computer). In addition, a detailed background questionnaire was administered, which included a range of items related to personal characteristics, employment history, socioeconomic status, various skills used at home and at work, and health literacy (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014a). Although PIAAC is an internationally administered assessment, there were some differences in data collection by country (i.e., given in multiple languages, computer-based/paper-based formats, domains assessed, and certain country specific items). In the United States, the three PIAAC domains were collected in the English language during 2011 to 2012 on a nationally representative sample of 5,000 adults (ages ranging from 16 to 65). The United States background questionnaire was administered in English and Spanish languages. More information about PIAAC as well as restricted use, publicly available United States, and international PIAAC datasets are available through NCES and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) websites (NCES, 2014a; OECD, 2014).

The PIAAC results provide a framework for adult educators to understand how the literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving abilities of adults in the United States compare to those of adults internationally. Round 1 PIAAC results indicated that adults in the United States scored significantly below the international average across all three domains (literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving in technology-rich environments) (American Institutes for Research [AIR] PIAAC, 2014; NCES, 2014a). In particular, the United States performed well below the international average in the numeracy and problem-solving domains, with 28.7% and 48.9% falling at or below the lowest PIAAC level (Level 1), respectively (OECD, 2013). Moreover, the United States exhibited disparities by racial/ethnic groups; African American and Hispanic

adults were overrepresented in the lowest levels of the PIAAC literacy and numeracy domains. These findings present a dismal picture of adults' performance in the United States relative to other countries; however, the Summer Institute experience was eye-opening in evaluating and extending these findings as well as expanding my awareness of how issues plaguing the United States are also similar to issues impacting international adult educators.

KEY THEMES AND ISSUES TO UNDERSTANDING AND UTILIZING PIAAC DATA

Three key themes and issues pertaining to understanding, interpreting, and utilizing PIAAC data, consistently emerged in discussions and presentations over the three-day Summer Institute: (a) making numeracy a priority, (b) utilizing the additional component reading skill data, and (c) considering the skills and the appropriate interpretations of the data from minority, under-represented groups. These themes appeared across multiple international contexts and were concerns that traversed the multitude of adult education stakeholders represented at the event. Thus, I think these themes are paramount to future pursuits in research and practice in order to bridge the gap and open dialogue between different stakeholders and various global cultures.

The primary concern, echoed in the voices of many adult educators at the Summer Institute, was literacy deficits across countries. However, in addition to literacy, many attendees expressed concern that numeracy skills are often neglected; weak numeracy skills are highly associated with poor employment outcomes. One speculation is that existing instructional math practices in many schools are not sufficient in training adults to be productive and proficient at the real-world math skills needed in the workforce (Tout, 2014). Thus, one of the central themes that emerged for future research was how adult educators could use PIAAC numeracy data to better inform instructional math practices and policy internationally. Given that the United States performed particularly poorly on the PIAAC numeracy domain, I think numeracy skills are clearly an important, understudied area to be considered for future research. As a researcher focused on adults performing at the lowest levels of PIAAC (adults enrolled in Adult Basic and Secondary Education programs in the United States), I know there is a paucity of literacy research; however, there is even less research conducted on these adults' numeracy skills. In particular, research is needed to investigate current math instructional practices to determine how these translate to skills needed in the workforce, and

Many attendees expressed concern that numeracy skills are often neglected; weak numeracy skills are highly associated with poor employment outcomes.

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PIAAC assessed the component reading skills of print vocabulary knowledge, sentence- and passage-level comprehension skills, and fluency skills.

Cultural practices and norms are an important facet for adult educators to consider when tailoring instructional needs.

to adequately design interventions to identify, target, and improve key component numeracy skills.

Another theme that surfaced repeatedly at the Summer Institute was the need to consider the impact of the supplementary PIAAC sections on component reading skills. In contrast to previously administered large-scale international assessments (i.e., the 2003-2008 Adult Literacy and Life Skills [ALL] Survey and the three-phase [1994, 1996, 1998] International Adult Literacy Skills [IALS] Survey; NCES, 2014b; OECD, 2000), PIAAC assessed the component reading skills of print vocabulary knowledge, sentence- and passage-level comprehension skills, and fluency skills. These additional reading component skills provide word-, sentence-, and passage-level information, which is critical to gaining a fuller, more detailed representation of adults' literacy skill profiles. Adult educators surmised that these findings may be essential to better understanding the skill set and developmental trajectory of how adults performing at the lowest PIAAC levels acquire proficient reading skills. In addition, these reading component skills may help to inform instructional practices by identifying at what level(s) – the word, sentence, and/or passage – adults struggle with most, and modifying instructional practices to meet an adult's specific component skill weaknesses (Reder, 2014).

Many countries represented in the PIAAC data included specific minority groups. Adult educators currently have very little information regarding the skills, needs, and cultural practices of these groups. I listened to many personal anecdotes and presentations on research and interventions targeted at some of these minority groups. For example, Canada is making efforts to better understand the implications of PIAAC data and create resources on Aboriginal populations. The Summer Institute afforded me with the opportunity to witness a performance by a spoken poetic word artist, who teaches and promotes adolescent literacy in Canadian indigenous populations through creative writing and song. In addition, an Aboriginal woman presented an inspiring account of how she overcame homelessness and obtained a college degree through *Courage to Soar*, a program designed to empower and further the education and career opportunities of Aboriginal women (for more information, see Minwaashin Lodge, 2010). These firsthand experiences provided a glimpse into the culturally-specific needs of members from minority communities. I think cultural practices and norms are an important facet for adult educators in the United States to consider when tailoring instructional needs to and designing interventions and programs for a heterogeneous group of adult learners.

There were additional presentations on research and interventions being conducted with other minority groups. For example, Literacy Cubed (LIT³) is a family literacy project targeting Roma families in Romania, Slovakia and Montenegro in order to improve reading and health literacy outcomes. The Roma are known to experience high poverty rates, to have limited educational opportunities and resources, and to have limited access to quality healthcare that has been perpetuated through several Roma generations (Mallows, 2014). LIT³ develops and distributes health and literacy materials, conducts workshops, campaigns to raise awareness, and disseminates information about Roma communities in order to improve reading and health outcomes as well as inform national educational policies (for more information, see Literacy Cubed, 2014). As a large-scale assessment, PIAAC is capable of identifying many of these minority sub-groups within countries; however, this dataset is not sufficient because of the limited sample sizes of the various minority sub-groups. Moreover, it is not clear whether the overall literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving PIAAC rates for a country are representative of the abilities of minority sub-groups such as the Roma. Thus, more qualitative- and quantitative-oriented, large-scale research and interventions (i.e., LIT³) are needed to conduct rigorous analyses and to elucidate the cultural and educational practices and needs of these different sub-groups internationally.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND CONSIDERATIONS

PIAAC represents a rich dataset that provides a plethora of information beyond merely ranking countries around the world by levels of literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving abilities. Researchers and educators can capitalize on the comprehensiveness of the background questionnaire to investigate potential variations in PIAAC domains by demographic characteristics (i.e., age, race/ethnicity, second language status, educational background, socioeconomic status, employment status, reading engagement level). Moreover, the supplementary component reading skill data offer a finer-grained analysis to understand the literacy profiles of adults globally. I highly encourage adult educators interested in accessing and utilizing PIAAC data to capitalize on the restricted use and public access files available through the NCES and OECD websites. The NCES, OECD, and AIR PIAAC websites also offer a variety of resources geared toward practitioners, including: a wiki discussion board, monthly newsletters, webinars, presentations, technical reports, and a vibrant, interactive chart building interface to display PIAAC results by domain and country. In addition, these websites offer online,

As a large-scale assessment, PIAAC is capable of identifying many of these minority sub-groups within countries; however, this dataset is not sufficient.

The supplementary component reading skill data offer a finer-grained analysis to understand the literacy profiles of adults globally.

PIAAC represents an excellent opportunity for adult educators to take advantage of readily available data...to advocate for increased funding opportunities.

The Centre for Literacy's Summer Institute was a wonderful, interactive, and informative experience.

individualized education and skills assessments for adult students as well as sample items from all three PIAAC domains; beneficial resources for practitioners designing instructional materials. In my opinion, these resources facilitate communication between and promote collaboration among adult education researchers and practitioners by providing a conduit to effectively and efficiently translate research into practice.

Historically and persisting to the present day, adult education in the United States suffers from a dearth of rigorous research, diminished funding for research and education programs, and poor dissemination efforts to integrate research with practice and policy (Bennett, 2007). Specifically, it was reported at the Summer Institute that of the 36 million adults in the United States who function at the lowest PIAAC literacy levels (Levels 1 and 2), only two million of these adults are being served by federally-funded literacy programs on an annual basis. There are an additional three million on waiting lists (Soroui, 2014). Thus, I think PIAAC represents an excellent opportunity for adult educators to take advantage of readily available data to conduct additional research and advocate for increased funding opportunities for the field of adult education. Of course, it is important to recognize that PIAAC data represent merely a starting point in elucidating and resolving issues in the field. Clearly, outcomes from the Summer Institute indicated that more research is needed on adults' literacy and numeracy skill development and instructional practices. In particular, I think it would be important to consider investigating additional component skills, and predictors of literacy (i.e., decoding, metalinguistic skills, listening comprehension) and numeracy skills (i.e., working memory, rapid automatized naming [RAN], reasoning) to gain a more comprehensive profile of adults' literacy and numeracy skill sets. Additional qualitative and quantitative-based research is also warranted to better understand the population demographics, and culturally specific characteristics and skills of the diverse minority groups within different countries represented in the PIAAC data. Overall, The Centre for Literacy's Summer Institute was a wonderful, interactive, and informative experience that I would recommend to adult educators interested in engaging in critical thinking, debating, and conversing on a global scale with multiple stakeholders about issues and trends regarding adult education research, practice, and policy.

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Blended Learning Apps That Can Make You Flip!

Web Scan Editor's Note: We are delighted to have a guest Web Scan column writer for this issue, Rebecca Metzger. Rebecca holds Master Degrees in Special Education and Counseling, and currently is the West Virginia Adult Basic Education Coordinator for Distance Education and Professional Development at RESA 3 in Dunbar, West Virginia.
– Dr. David J. Rosen, Web Scan Editor

Blended learning has become more popular in adult education because hybrid classes with online and classroom-based instruction can increase student engagement and learning. Many apps are available for teachers to create screencasts (digital recordings of screens with voice-over narration to demonstrate skills and concepts) and to share those screencasts on learning management systems. Here are five free or inexpensive apps to create a flipped classroom; where students can access instruction online at home, and then class time is reserved for teacher help, activities, and projects.

1. Educreations

www.educreations.com

Educreations permits teachers to use an iPad to record lessons and tutorials on a whiteboard at no cost. Text or images can be imported from Dropbox or Google Drive and annotated. Videos can be shared through email, Twitter, or Facebook. In addition to creating lessons for students, users can access lessons created



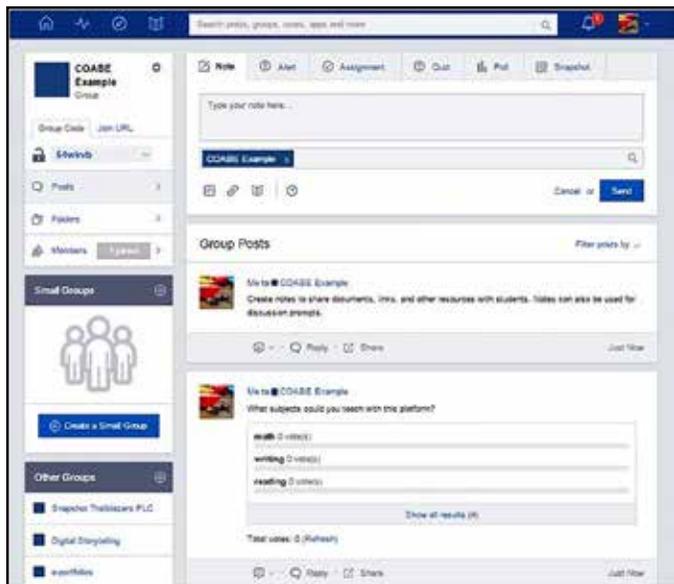
by others in math, science, social studies, English, world languages, and the arts. Educreations can be used on a personal computer or Apple devices.

*Reviewed by
Rebecca Metzger*

RESA 3

2. Edmodo

www.edmodo.com

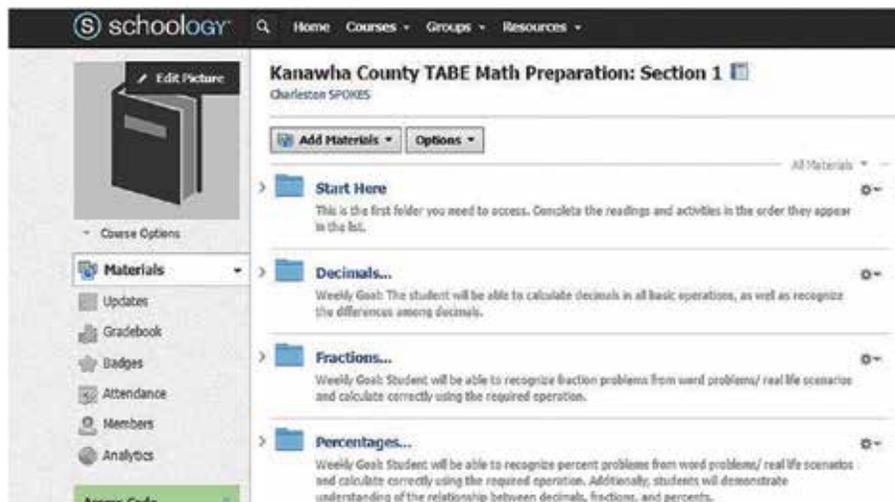


Edmodo is a free social learning platform where teachers can create groups and subgroups to assign content, share schedules, create quizzes, and conduct polls in just a few steps. Teachers can initiate student discussions and collaborations with posts. Edmodo Snapshots allow teachers to create math or English Language Arts quizzes from a test bank of over 1,000 questions aligned to Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The Snapshots provide quick assessment data to determine student progress, and links to free online resources to reteach missed standards. Teachers can acknowledge achievement with custom badges. Edmodo is accessible with a personal computer and Apple, Android, and Windows devices.

3. Schoology

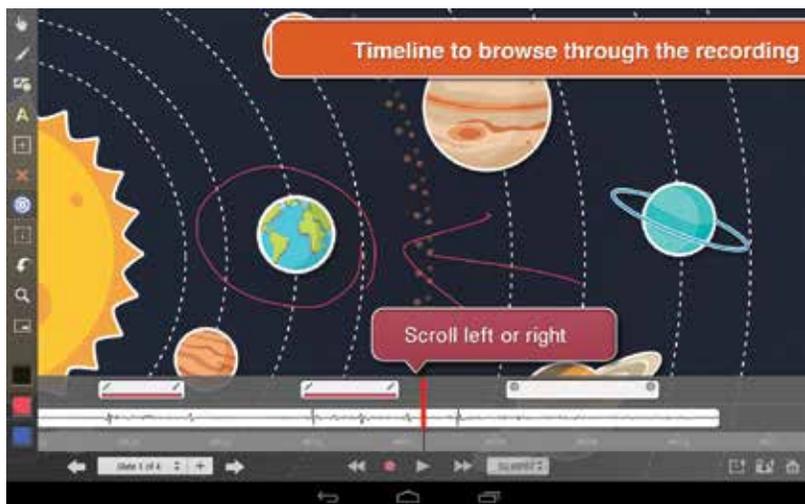
www.schoology.com

Schoology (pronounced skoo-luh-gee) is a free learning management system that permits teachers to easily create online courses and share content between instructors. Materials can be imported from DropBox, Evernote, Khan Academy, and Google Drive. Content, quizzes, and rubrics can be aligned to CCSS. Discussions promote collaboration, and digital online badges reward academic progress and student behavior. Schoology is available on Android, Apple iPad/iPhone, Kindle Fire, and personal computers.



4. Explain Everything

www.morriscooke.com



Explain Everything provides a white screen where lessons can be created. Active web browser windows and multiple file types can be imported into screencasts. Dropbox, Evernote, and Google Drive are a few of the many cloud storage choices for exporting and sharing videos. Project files can be compressed on a Mac with the Explain Everything Compressor, and the Explain Everything Player allows projects to be played on a Mac. The app is \$2.99 for Apple, Android, and Windows devices.

5. Show Me

www.showme.com

ShowMe permits users to create tutorials with a recordable white screen on their iPads, where files can be uploaded from the photo library, Google Drive, or Dropbox. The user annotates the images with voice and pen features. Videos created by others can be accessed via the app or on a personal computer. ShowMe is a free app on Apple devices.

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- Japanese
- ESL



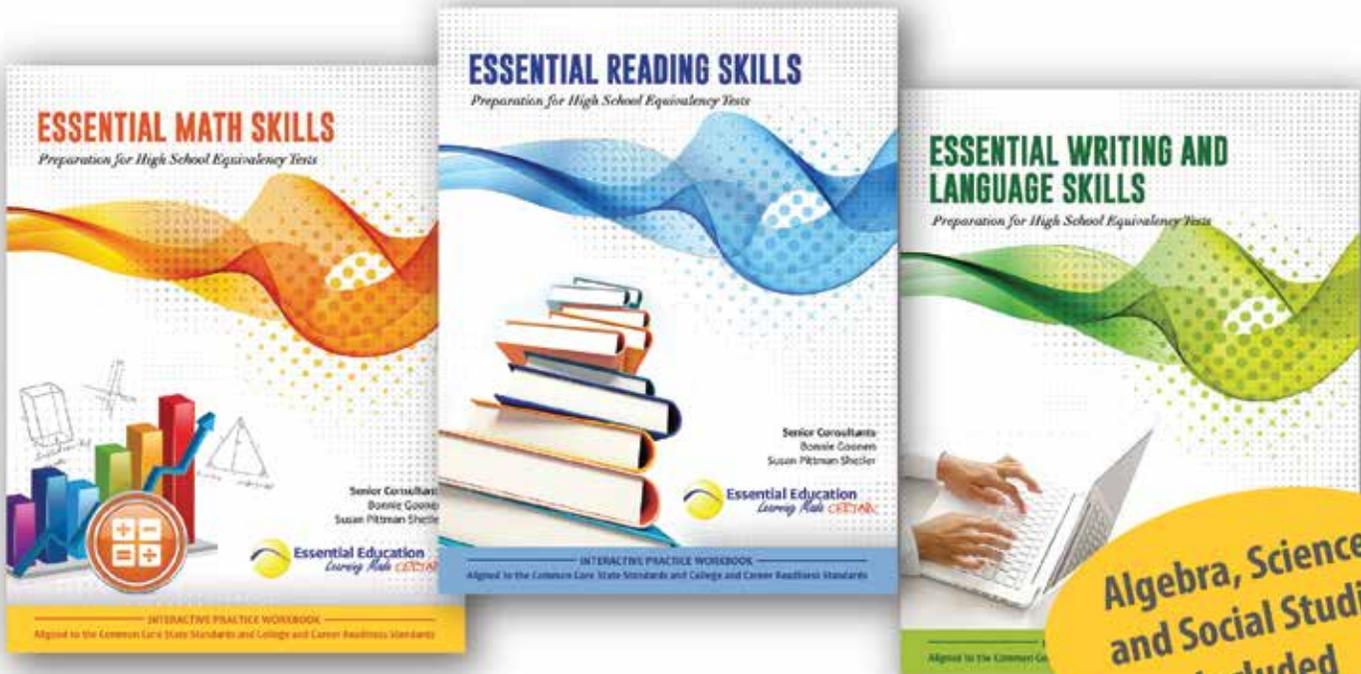
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