Solutions to Motivation and Persistence Problems in Adult Basic and Secondary Education Programs

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Abstract

Adult basic and secondary learners come to class facing a variety of barriers that can produce a shift in their motivation; this shift can cause lowered persistence among these learners. This paper discusses how adult basic and secondary education programs can better serve the needs of their learner population to improve learner persistence as well as increase attendance and program completion. It defines the initial motivations that cause adults to return to the classroom, and it examines the barriers that influence demotivation. It then reviews current research and analyzes findings to offer solutions to low attendance and low program completion rates. The provided solutions are intended to assist policy makers, administrators, program supervisors, and adult educators in developing, and improving current, programs to better accommodate their learners.

Keywords: Adult basic education, adult secondary education, motivation, persistence, demotivation, & barriers
Introduction

Wavering motivation is a prevalent and recurring issue among adult basic and secondary learners. For example, in 2011, of the 691,000 adults who took one or more GED tests, only 434,000 actually obtained their diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). These statistics show that only 62.8% of those who work to obtain their high school equivalency degree succeed in attaining it. The GEDTS (2014) reported that in 2013, out of the 39 million adults without a high school diploma, only 540,535 of them completed and passed the GED exam. A statistical report has not been done since the update of the test in 2014.

Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; 2014) shows that from 2000 to 2012, there has been a significant decrease, almost 1 million, in the number of adults participating in ABE, ASE, and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in the United States. The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is a large-scale study that measures adult skills on four competencies: literacy, reading components, numeracy, and problem-solving skills in technology rich environments (Goodman, Finnegan, Mohadjer, Krenzke, & Hogan, 2013). Results of the most recent study show that, in 2012, the United States scored significantly lower than the majority of participating countries in terms of literacy and numeracy skills. Although there are great differences among countries in terms of adult characteristics, types of education offered, and the meaning of the term adult education, countries seem to share the common problem of a low rate of adult participation in education (Porras-Hernandez & Salinas-Amescua, 2012).
Although motivation is a somewhat esoteric topic, Brockett (2015) explains that motivation has to do with how much a person desires to make the effort to pursue a certain goal. Both internal and external factors can cause these learners to shift the focus of their motivation away from their education and on to other areas of their lives, which results in low attendance and program completion rates. According to Kasworm, Rose, and Ross-Gordon (2010), adults who participate in adult basic education and higher education exhibit the phenomenon of stopping out (i.e., dropping out with the intention of returning), which suggests the need for different institutional perspectives and actions. To help alleviate this continual issue, adult education programs and educators need to gain more insight into how to increase learner persistence and assist students in successfully completing adult basic and secondary courses.

While there is a multitude of material focused around the motivational factors and educational barriers that contribute to loss of persistence and program completion rates of adult learners, more information is needed on effective methods to help remedy these recurring issues.

**What Motivates Adults to Participate in Adult Basic and Secondary Programs?**

There are a myriad of reasons that researchers have pinpointed over the years as motivational factors affecting adults in ABE and ASE programs. Ahl (2006) describes the concepts of motivation as dispositions, energy and direction, something instigated by goals, based in needs, or as a process governing choices.

ABE/ASE learners typically display both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate them to return to formal learning environments. Davis and Pepperell (2012) explain that motivation itself has been explored as a reason for participation in adult basic
education programs, and it includes dimensions of the value of literacy education to perform adult roles, the social nature of literacy education, external persuasion, and learner affect or the desire for self-improvement.

Malcolm Knowles (1980) explained that adult learners want to be able to apply whatever knowledge and skill learned today to living more effectively tomorrow. When thinking about this aspect of adult learning, it is easy to see how a common factor of motivation among adult learners is the desire for improved employment. Industry has changed markedly over the past decade, putting more low-skilled adults out of work who now require education, training and the credentials to build or evidence their abilities in order to earn family-sustaining wages (O’Neill & Thomson, 2013). Zacharakis, Steichen, Diaz de Sabates, and Glass (2011) found that ABE learners typically were working to complete their learning objectives such as passing the GED Tests with the intent of getting a better job. For many ABE/ASE learners, returning to school is there only option for a chance at a more sustainable future.

Davis and Pepperrell (2012) performed qualitative research that involved in-depth interviews of two women who were both school leavers. One interviewee described her reasoning for returning to school by saying, “When I went back to school, I believed it was the right time and that is what I needed to do. I needed to give my kids more than what I had and having a GED has allowed me to do that” (p. 16).

Although obtaining an HSE diploma or certificate is one of the most commonplace factors affecting ABE/ASE learners’ motivation, other studies show that these learners may be motivated for reasons beyond this. Tighe, Barnes, Connor, and Steadman (2013) attempted to define success in ABE programs based on multiple
stakeholders’ views of it. Through a mixed method of both quantitative and qualitative analyses, they discovered that adults in these programs may be motivated by other factors such as improved literacy, increased access to social and community resources, and support for their children’s success. Prins, Toso, and Schafft (2009) used qualitative methods to interview female participants in adult literacy programs in Pennsylvania. They found that family literacy programs provided low-income women with a way to spend time with other women and provide a safe space to interact with empathetic and supportive peers.

Despite these initial motivations, ABE/ASE programs continue to see issues with attendance, persistence, and successful completion amongst their learners. For several decades, ABE/ASE program data show patterns of poor persistence as many adult literacy learners do not persist or participate in enough instruction to measurably improve their literacy skills (Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2012).

**What Demotivates Adults While Participating in Adult Basic and Secondary Programs?**

Academic persistence for the adult learner is a complex phenomenon (O’Neill & Thomson, 2013). Just as quickly as an adult can decide to seek out an ABE/ASE program, they can lose motivation to continue. Adults face a number of educational barriers that prevent them from continuing their program. Ahl (2006) describes three types of barriers that contribute to a decrease in motivation among learners: dispositional, situational, and structural.

A commonly noted dispositional barrier to education includes a lack of self-efficacy or confidence in one’s ability to succeed (National Research Council, 2012; Ahl,
2006). Many adults may never return to the classroom due to low self-efficacy, and many that do return, find this lack of efficacy so overwhelming that they quit programs before they give themselves the chance to improve. Closely linked to self-efficacy are adults’ prior experiences with learning and what those prior experiences have done to shape their current view of traditional learning environments. Belzer (2004) examined the past learning experiences of five African-American women enrolled in a community-based GED program. In her research she discovered that the past experiences of adults might keep ABE/ASE programs from being able to maximize potential for adult learners.

Situational barriers are vast due to the fact that adults have a number of life responsibilities other than learning. Davis (2012) used poetic re-presentation to explore the perceptions of two ABE learners towards their GED classes and instructors and one ABE instructor toward his pedagogy and student interaction. One student recalls, “When I started my GED, I had hope, but it wasn’t enough hope to keep me going...I was incarcerated for 9 months” (p. 232). Other situational barriers include, lack of time, lack of interest, lack of concrete, expected results (Ahl, 2006). Zacharakis et al. (2011) found numerous and specific situational barriers affecting lack of persistence in ABE/ASE learners. Learners gave explicit reasons including: job layoffs, immigration issues, better economic opportunities, pregnancy, murder of a spouse, hanging out and doing nothing, incarceration, drugs, and critical health problems for why they had to discontinue participation in their programs. Ebert and Ziegler (2005) found that adult educators viewed that their students’ new employment was also a source of lack of progress. They also found that teachers felt that certain physical problems played a factor in persistence.
Structural barriers include lack of availability or knowledge of educational opportunity, absence of child-care arrangements, lack of finances, scheduling problems, and pedagogy not suited for adults (Ahl, 2006). These barriers are normally considered to be at the institutional level, and it is programs lacking solutions to these barriers that keep these learners from successfully completing their courses.

**What Solutions Have Been Suggested?**

A number of studies suggest methods and practices that can help reduce these barriers and increase motivation and persistence among ABE/ASE learners. These methods are typically aimed at policy makers, educational institutions that offer these types of programs, and adult educators.

Mellard et al. (2012) suggest that Adult Education programs could better understand and track learners’ real goals for enrolling and progress toward these goals in order to increase persistence. As we have already seen, adult learners enter programs for a variety of reasons, with a variety of goals in mind, so tracking student progress may lead to increased motivation in these learners. They also describe attendance as being a goal-oriented action and an integral part to persistence.

Also on a programmatic level, Comings (2007), found that learners need to be introduced to services through recruitment, intake, and orientation. He also suggested the creation of goals that represent student motivations as a solution to persistence problems. Not only did he suggest that students be introduced to services, his findings showed that students needed to participate in both instructional and support services to increase persistence.
Student-instructor relationships also seem to be a common solution to increasing learner motivation. Students who feel their instructor is passionate and shows genuine interest in their students’ academic success and life goals are more likely to persist in their program (O’Neill & Thomson, 2013; Zacharakis et al., 2011).

Belzer (2004) suggests that educators need to make clear for their learners the relationship between exploring their educational histories and the potential to improve reading, wiring, and other communication skills; pass the GED test; and prepare to move on to postsecondary education and jobs. Helping learners understand their educational past and how it can positively contribute to their current studies may prove to increase motivation among ABE/ASE learners who typically have negative feelings towards traditional learning environments.

Holyoke and Larson (2009) examined ways to engage adult learners with regard to generational differences. They found that, regardless of age, students reported being the most engaged with new materials when they could make a connection, and that each generation shared a need for immediate application of the concepts being taught.

**Conclusion**

The reasons that ABE/ASE learners return to the classroom have been made clear by years of research. Research has also clearly identified barriers that lead to demotivation in ABE/ASE learners; however, despite these identifications, motivation and persistence remain a large issue in adult education today. While research has provided many solutions to this issue, more effort is clearly needed to gain a better understanding of the way policy makers, educational institutions, and adult educators can assist these learners in successful completion of their programs.
References


