Increasing Learner Motivation and Success in Adult Basic and Secondary 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 qualitative research was designed to explore 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. The data collected were suggestions from learners participating in adult basic and secondary programs. 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, support services, life needs, & learner needs
Introduction

According to the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE), in 2010 over 37,000,000 adults in the Unites States were without a high school diploma. To stay competitive in today’s job market, and for various other reasons, a number of adults often return to school to complete their high-school equivalency degree. However, 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.

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 frequent stop and drop outs. 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 assist students in successfully completing adult basic and secondary courses through increased motivation.

It is already known that a lack of education plays a large role on poverty among adults and families in the United States. In 2012, the National Center for Education
Statistics (NCES) found that only 53% of Americans aged 25-64 who had not completed high school were employed. While it is easy to understand how lack of education hurts society on an individual level, it is important to note the effect it has on the nation’s economy as a whole as well. According to the World Literacy Foundation (2015), illiteracy costs the United States an estimate of $362.49 billion dollars per year, which is about 2% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). To help increase employment and lower the cost to the economy, it is essential to address the issues tied with motivation in adult learners.

While there is a multitude of research focused around the motivational factors and educational barriers that contribute to stop and drop out rates of adult learners, more research is needed on effective methods to help remedy these recurring issues.

Using qualitative methods and the views of adult basic and secondary learners, this study will set out to explore solutions for increasing motivation in adult learners and improving successful completion rates in adult basic and secondary education courses. With this knowledge, policy makers, adult education programs, and adult educators, can better understand what services and methods will be most effective for improving student success in adult basic and secondary programs.

**Review of Literature**

The purpose of research is not to define the factors that contribute to decreases in motivation and participation; however, it is necessary to provide an overview of the research addressing these factors to gain insight toward solutions to these issues. Although there is a plethora of research focused around motivation and adult learning, this review will focus on specific pieces that address initial motivations of adult basic
learners, the factors that cause these learners’ motivation to decrease while participating in adult basic and secondary education programs, and what suggested solutions to demotivation currently exist.

Most Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs, used interchangeably with the term “adult literacy” programs, provide instruction in the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics to adult learners in order to prepare them to transition into the labor market or higher academic or vocational training. General Education Development (GED) courses are also included under the umbrella of adult basic education for adults who left school and did not receive a high school diploma (Davis & Pepperell, 2012). In 2014, the GED Testing Service (GEDTS), partnered with the American Council on Education and Pearson Learning Solutions, released an updated version of the test that contains more academic rigor than the previous exam. Many adult education programs and their educators expressed, and continue to express, concerns over the new standards and students’ ability to successfully pass the exam. As a result, two other companies, Educational Testing Service (ETS) and McGraw-Hill, have created alternative high-school equivalency programs, the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) and the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC; Anderson, 2015). With additional tests being accepted as another way to measure high school equivalency (HSE), this paper will use the term HSE instead of GED when referring to adult learners working towards a diploma or certificate.

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).

**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.

A common factor that emerges from all of these dimensions of motivation 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, Stechen, 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 as, “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 learning. 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.” 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.

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 among ABE/ASE learners. These methods are typically aimed at policy makers, educational institutions with these types of programs, and adult educators.

Mellard et al. (2012) suggest that AE 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 that adult learners enter programs for a variety of reasons, with a variety of goals in mind, 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.

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.

Although research has suggested a number of solutions for increasing motivation and persistence in ABE/ASE learners, many of these suggestions do not come from the
voice of the learners themselves. With the new changes to GED, the decreasing number of ABE/ASE participants, and the growing importance of earning a HSE diploma or certificate to compete in today’s workforce, it has become more imperative to listen to the students who are enrolled in these programs. Davis (2014) suggests that there are many more stories and voices in adult education that are ready to be heard and that the ones who hold these stories know exactly who they want to hear them. This research will attempt to explore solutions for increasing motivation and improving completion rates of adult learners through the voices of the learners themselves.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions attempt to explore solutions to barriers that demotivate students in ABE/ASE programs through the employment effective services and classroom methods. These questions have been left somewhat open-ended as to ensure the study is not swayed in a particular direction:

1. What support services can educational institutions provide to help increase student motivation and success?
2. What can educators do in the classroom to help increase student motivation and success?

**Site, Participants, & Method**

**Research Site**

Emily Griffith Technical College (EGTC), where the participants attended a GED Preparatory program, is a technical college that offers more than 25 certifications, has a vast English Language Acquisition program, and offers adult basic and secondary classes. The school is has been serving the Denver Community for one hundred years and
has seen approximately two million students since opening its doors. The GED prep program is an eight-week course, and it is constructed as a blended classroom where students have instruction as well as access to an online, self-paced study program. The program serves to support inclusion of its learners, and it provides them with skills to pass the test as well as knowledge and confidence to succeed once they complete the program.

**Participant Population**

For this study, participants were sought out through the use of purposeful sampling. The participants varied in terms of race, gender, and age, but were all parents in the GED program. The sampling size remained small, six participants, since the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual or site (Creswell, 2015). Five of the participants were women; the races of the women were two African, two Hispanic, and one mixed race. The male participant was Hispanic. The participants ranged from twenty-one to forty-two years in age, but most were between the ages of twenty-five and thirty. All of the participants had between one and three children, and all but one left school before earning their diploma.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected through the participants’ completion of a questionnaire containing both closed and open-ended questions. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was received prior to data collection, and participants chose a pseudonym to protect their identity. Data sources include demographic information and written responses from the questionnaire. Data analysis was performed through an exploration and evaluation of layered and interconnected themes that emerged in the responses.
Findings

In this section, I have tried to minimize my interpretation of the findings and focus on the participants’ responses from the questionnaire. This is an attempt to reduce my bias as the researcher, whom is also the participants’ classroom instructor, as well as to ensure the participants’ voices are heard.

Returning to School

To gain perspective on feedback about support services, the participants’ reasons for returning to school must be examined. The participants listed a variety of reasons for deciding to re-enter the classroom and get their diploma. The youngest participant, Reese, claimed the reason she returned to school was because, “…the online high school I went for my diploma is not accredited everywhere.” Others listed more general reasons for returning such as “I want a better future,” and “I also didn’t feel like I was living up to my full potential.” However, the main reason given for returning to school was to obtain a better job and start a career. Tega wrote, “I need a good job.” Pedro wrote, “I think if I get my GED it would improve my goal which [sic] is get a better job…” Pearl explained that she needed a diploma because, “I have a desire to pursue [sic] a career where a secondary/higher education is required.”

Institutional Services

The two major themes of life needs and learning needs emerged from the responses when participants were questioned about helpful and needed institutional support services. Life needs refer to the factors in students’ lives outside of the school that affect their motivation and participation in class. Learning needs refer to the assistance wanted in order to gain the skills, knowledge, and confidence required to
successfully complete a class or pass a test. These themes emerge in responses regarding both helpful and needed services.

**Life needs.** The only support service, associated with life needs, mentioned was the $50 scholarship available to students in the program. No other life needs service was listed as something helpful the school provided.

There were several life need services mentioned by participants when asked about what services were missing at the school. Multiple participants listed child care as a service that would be useful. Pearl explained, “Perhaps offering an on-site child care facility would be beneficial.” Pedro also wrote, “…child care for older students,” when asked about this. Reese spoke more in-depth about this issue. She clarified:

> The only thing I believe my school is missing is like some sort of day care for the GED parents because its [sic] difficult to pay someone in the morning to watch your children and also at night when going to work. Also, the extra time in the morning to get them where there [sic] going it would be easier if there was something at the school.

Another life need mentioned by some of the participants was transportation help. Pearl mentioned, “One of the biggest challenges coming to this particular campus is the lack of parking.” Reese also mentioned that a parking lot, “would be lovely.”

**Learning needs.** The responses showed distinct similarities between the provided and needed services that supported the learning needs of the participants. Most participants mentioned the campus’ Student Success Center (SSC), which is a computer lab, and tutoring and resource center for the students. Participants referred to this as a helpful service. Reese wrote, “The study room and the success center are a big help to
students.” The free tutoring offered at the Center was specifically listed as helpful services apart from the Center as a whole. Participants said, “tutoring, “ and, “…being able to be toured [tutored] for free,” and, “…one on one tutoring,” was valuable.

Although participants listed the SSC and tutoring as helpful services, they were also mentioned in the services that were missing. A few participants said that more tutors would be beneficial for students. Fish stated, “We still need more teachers to do tutoring.” She also suggested, “If we can have another big working room because some time success centre [sic] gets full.” Pedro felt, “…it should be more one on one tutoring for older adults.”

Met needs. It should be noted that several students’ responses did not list any specific service provided by or needed at the school. When responding to what services were helpful, Tega said, “…everything is good…” When responding to what services were missing, Maria wrote, “I think you guys offer a lot already.”

Classroom Services

When asked about effective classroom services, the two major themes of procedural needs and resource needs appeared in the data. Procedural needs refer to the teaching strategies and methods employed by the instructor. Resource needs refer to the study materials and technology provided in the classroom. Like the major themes found when discussing support services, these themes appear in responses concerning both helpful and needed classroom services.

Procedural needs. A few participants listed the instructor, with no specifics, as the best support of their class. Tega responded, “Their [sic] teaching method are so beautiful,” about the teachers at EGTC. Several other participants listed specific
methodology employed by the instructor related to teaching style. Pearl wrote, “I’ve found visual demonstration and teacher/student dialogue to be most helpful.” Maria wrote that one effective method used by the teacher was, “…when she makes up work in groups.” Pedro said a, “clear explanation of subject been taught,” was a helpful method employed by the instructor.

When asked about what could be more helpful, students listed several strategies that could be improved. Even though Maria listed group work as an effective method, Reese felt more group work could benefit the class. She explained, “More group work in classes would be helpful because more than one brain is better…” Maria listed giving feedback and due dates. She wrote, “Personally [sic], I feel like I do better when I have a due date to something like when I pay bills…” when asked about classroom strategies that could be helpful. Despite the fact that Pedro said the teacher gave clear explanation, he also said the teacher should, “slow down pace on subjects, make sure everyone understands subjects being taught especially older adults.”

**Resource needs.** The theme of resources can be broken down into two subthemes, material needs and technological needs, when reviewing the data. These subthemes appear in responses when discussing both effective and needed services in the classroom.

**Material needs.** When responding about the materials, one participant wrote that the, “Kaplan book,” was a helpful resource. Another wrote that the, “worksheets she uses,” were another helpful resource provided by the instructor. “The teacher providing us with a list of websites to use while studying was also very helpful,” Pearl said.
Maria mentioned paper homework as something that students could benefit from, “because not everyone has a computer or internet at home…” Other than this, there were no other mentions of needed materials in the classroom.

**Technological needs.** The students mentioned, “Plato web,” and “I find Plato very helpful,” and “…being able to use Plato web,” when responding about effective services in the classroom. This is the online study software that the students access in and out of class. Reese mentioned the use of the interactive Promethean board as something that, “…is helpful to those that are active learners.”

The only aspect of technology that participants felt could be improved was concerning the computers they use in the classroom. Fish explained that, “some computers [sic] are slow…Internet needs to speed up.” Other than this, no participant mentioned anything with regard to technology that needed improvement in the classroom.

**Discussion**

Overall, the participants responses were much more focused on services that assisted with learning needs and classroom help than life needs. The participants also gave more in-depth responses when discussing support services in the classroom versus the institutional support services. The participants reasoning for returning to school supports previous research regarding the topic of motivational factors that cause adults to return to formal learning environments. Careers, self-improvement, and a better future are all in alignment with previous research on this topic. The desired support services listed, particularly the institutional services such as child care, transportation, and financial assistance, also corroborate previous research findings.

**Limitations**
Lack of data. One limitation of the study was the lack of substantial data that is typical with a qualitative study. The participants did not provide much detail in their responses, and on several occasions, questions were completely unanswered. This could be explained by the time given to complete the responses, and the fact that there was no time to complete follow-up interviews. If more data had been provided, there could be more insight gained into what students’ view as effective support services at their institutions and in their classrooms. This suggests a possible need for a follow up study with the participants. It also suggests the need to further this research using a larger sample size with additional time to complete the study.

Measurement tool. The questionnaire itself proved to be a limitation to the study. The participants did not provide responses to all of the questions, and some of the responses were unusable because the participants did not respond in accordance with the question being asked. This could mean that the participants did not understand the question, or they did not think more detail was needed to sufficiently respond to the question. This also may have been a direct product of the wording of the questions. The participants could have thought they were responding to the question appropriately based on the question’s phrasing. This limitation expresses the need further this research using clearer or more appropriately worded questions or a new method of data collection.

Conclusion

The general focus on learning needs over life needs in the participant responses imply that ABE/ASE students believe services that support learning increase motivation more than services that operate to break down external barriers. Several participants did not list a single institutional support service that was beneficial to them. It is possible that
the students were not aware of all the institutional support services that exist at the school, or they didn’t find them to be as important as the services that assisted learning.

This data suggests that stakeholders, such as policy makers, adult education programs, and adult educators, could benefit from further research on this topic. Future studies should explore ABE and ASE students’ knowledge of existing support services and what methods could be implemented to better message information about available services to students. The data also suggests that future research should examine what percentage of ABE and ASE students use life needs services versus learning needs services and what these students view as the most valuable services offered by an institution. This knowledge can help inform adult education institutions and practitioners of what support services to implement into their programs as well as what effective strategies can be utilized to ensure students are aware of all the services available to them at their institution.
References


