

WIOA: Implications for Low-Scoring Adult Learners

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A substantial proportion of participants in public adult education programs struggle with “basic” academic print literacy skills. According to the 2014-2015 National Reporting System (NRS) data, 48.7% of the national adult basic education/adult secondary education (ABE/ASE) population tested as reading at or below the “Low Intermediate Basic” level (Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education National Reporting System (OCTAE NRS), n.d.-a). In some places, the proportion was much higher: for example, in the same year in Texas, 68% of ABE/ASE participants were at or below this level (OCTAE NRS, n.d.-b). A low score on a standardized ABE/ASE intake assessment is not an indication of “low intellect” or “low ability”; it is, however, frequently an indication of substantial difficulty with many aspects of academic reading and writing. In this article, I will explore the potential negative impact of contemporary federal policy on these low-scoring adult readers and the programs that serve them.

The 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which regulates ABE/ASE program operation, emphasizes workforce preparation and postsecondary education as the “core purpose” of federally-funded ABE/ASE programs (United States

Department of Education (U.S. DoE), 2014). This policy has a number of ramifications for low-scoring adult readers. First, a classroom focus on workforce preparation and postsecondary education potentially constrains opportunities for reading and writing development. Second, WIOA performance measures may discourage programs from enrolling low-scoring adult readers by setting outcomes that are largely unattainable by those who have significant reading difficulty. Third, these shortcomings of service fall disproportionately on African American adult learners, who are overrepresented among participants who test at or below the Low Intermediate Basic level.

Constraints in the Classroom

A policy focus on workforce preparation and postsecondary education potentially constrains educational opportunities in the classroom, and thus limits the potential progress of adults who may need dedicated support to develop their literacy skills. First, program attention to workforce preparation may limit the amount of class time spent on reading and writing in favor of skills like resume writing, interviewing, and exhibiting professional demeanor (Hayes, 1999). Less class time dedicated to reading and writing likely means that participants, who

may need many hours of instruction to meet their educational goals (Comings, 2007), would find their reading progress decelerated. Second, WIOA calls for a return to workplace-based ABE/ASE programs and greater curricular alignment with the needs of employers (Bird, Foster, & Ganzglass, 2014). However, the needs of employers might contrast with, or even be in opposition to, the goals of students. Numerous studies of workforce development in workplace settings or job training programs have found that what was described by managers as literacy education focused more on behavior modification that benefitted employers, rather than literacy or the educational growth of participants (Folinsbee, 2009; Gowen, 1992; Grubb & Kalman, 1994; Hull, 1997). Third, a workforce preparation frame may limit the type of texts to which readers are exposed (Gowen, 1992), yet reading development is most effective when learners engage with a broad range of materials that reflect their interests and purposes for attending class (Purcell-Gates, 1995; Cuban, 2001). The program model most promoted in the contemporary ABE/ASE policy context is the Integrated Education and Training (IET) model, in which participants are taught specific job skills, receive contextualized and integrated literacy support, and earn a postsecondary credential. Although IET programs are generally closed to low-scoring adult learners, these programs are illustrative of the type of workforce-oriented literacy education WIOA supports.

WIOA's emphasis on postsecondary education also potentially constrains the classroom opportunities available to low-scoring adult readers. This emphasis may heighten pressure on programs to focus instructional energy on the gate-keeping tests that learners must pass in order to demonstrate "progress" and become eligible for postsecondary programs. With a greater focus on testing often

comes a concomitant lack of attention to complex or authentic literacy tasks or attention to literacy skills for the multiple purposes that may be relevant to participants' lives (Bingman, Ebert, & Bell, 2000). For adults who may have substantial reading difficulty, a focus on testing to the exclusion of other experiences with reading and writing is likely to have a negative limiting effect on their literacy development.

Fewer Programs for Low-Scoring Adult Readers

WIOA has six core performance measures used to evaluate programs: four related to employment, one related to postsecondary credentials, and one related to measurable skills outcomes. These performance measures may discourage programs from enrolling adults who test as reading at the Low Intermediate Basic level and below because the goals WIOA sets are difficult for low-scoring adult readers to achieve. WIOA's expectation that all adult learners, regardless of entering reading level, life circumstances, or potential learning difficulties, will produce rapid employment outcomes ignores the shortage of stable, well-paying jobs with benefits for people across the spectrum of print literacy skills and abilities (Hull, 1997). The Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) reported that 5,000,000 American jobs regularly go unfilled, and proposed that America's roughly 9 million unemployed adults and 24 million "front-line" workers (read: underpaid, low-skilled) would be able to compete for the "better" ones, if they had the right training (Uvin, 2015). However, even if all 5,000,000 unfilled jobs were "good" jobs and it were possible to successfully prepare 5,000,000 people with the skills needed for those jobs, about 28 million people would be left without a job that provides a living wage. Adults who begin with further to go

and who, due to the policy emphasis on education for employment, may have increasingly less access to reading instruction in their classrooms will invariably come up short in this competition, and the programs that serve them will be penalized accordingly.

The core measures related to obtaining postsecondary credentials and measurable skills outcomes have a similar problem: adults who have significant difficulty with reading have difficulty achieving the goals assessed by these measures. Yet, WIOA evaluates programs on the basis of “percentage of participants who obtain a postsecondary credential or diploma *during participation or within one year after exit*” (U.S. DoE, 2014, p.3, emphasis added), a wildly unrealistic expectation for participants who are reading at a very basic level. The reality is that many of these learners will not go on to gain a GED, and even fewer will complete a postsecondary credential. Dropout rates from adult literacy programs are extremely high (Porter, Cuban, Comings, & Chase, 2005), and the barriers to completion are many and complex (Comings, 2007; Schafft & Prins, 2009). And although the Center for Law and Social Policy suggests that the core performance measure related to measurable skills improvement “is an important step forward in encouraging the workforce system to better serve low-skilled individuals” (Bird, Foster, & Ganzglass, 2014, p.15), demonstrating measureable skills outcomes has long been a federal requirement of the National Reporting System, and thus far, has done little to improve service to low-scoring adult readers. Rather, this requirement penalizes programs when participants do not demonstrate measurable outcomes, a common occurrence for low-scoring readers, who frequently leave programs before they have completed the many hours of literacy instruction needed to demonstrate gains (Porter et al., 2005).

If the outcomes by which the government assesses

an adult education program are only achievable by participants who start with more advanced reading skills, it seems likely that publicly-funded programs will choose/be forced to engage in “creaming” and only enroll those learners most likely to quickly produce measurable outcomes. Given that programs’ funding and very existence often depend on their learners’ ability to demonstrate outcomes, these accountability measures may force programs that presently offer skilled teachers to low-scoring adults to withdraw those resources, leaving those learners to be served exclusively by volunteers with limited training or expertise in literacy instruction, or left without instructional support altogether.

Furthermore, WIOA-promoted Integrated Education and Training programs are generally inaccessible to adult learners who test as reading at or below the Low Intermediate Basic level, which corresponds to a 5th grade equivalent (GE). These programs are targeted to learners who test at an 8th GE or above (Bragg et. al, 2007), and even the so-called “bridge” or “pre-bridge” programs that target adults with lower tested reading levels usually only accept students who test at a 6th GE or above (Strawn, 2011). Even if low-scoring adult readers were accepted into these programs, the chances that they would be able to produce outcomes that meet WIOA performance measures are slim.

Disproportionate Impact on African American Learners

African American adult learners bear the brunt of ABE policies that concentrate on workforce preparation and postsecondary credentials, because African Americans are heavily overrepresented among low-scoring adult readers (OCTAE NRS, n.d.-a). Table I shows that a large majority (62%) of African Americans entering publicly-funded adult

literacy programs in 2014-2015 tested as reading at or below the Low Intermediate Basic level, a higher percentage than any other racial group. Furthermore, African Americans made up the largest proportion of all participants who tested as reading at or below the Low Intermediate Basic level: 38% of these learners were African American.¹

Given the negative policy implications for low-scoring adult readers articulated above, these demographic data mean that African American adult basic education participants are disproportionately disadvantaged by contemporary federal ABE/ASE policy, regardless of whether that is the policy intention. Though little research has been conducted on the differing effects of federal adult education legislation across racial groups, Quadagno (1994) demonstrated that an early federal adult literacy/anti-poverty program, the 1962 Manpower Demonstration and Training Act, ultimately failed to provide equal education or work opportunities for African American participants, and Goldrick-Rab and Shaw (2005) argued that the “work first” policy focus in both WIA and the 1996 welfare reform act had a detrimental effect on African Americans’ and Latinos’ access to federally-funded job training programs and, ultimately, to higher education.

The present policy has the potential to continue this pattern of differential outcomes. WIOA is a “colorblind” or “race-neutral” policy; that is, although its purpose is to provide opportunities to previously marginalized adults, it seeks to apply solutions without consideration for race or the existence of past or present racial discrimination. Many education

scholars argue that colorblind policies, at best, are ineffective in improving equality of opportunity and outcomes and, at worst, serve to perpetuate racial inequality, because policies are enacted in a society shaped by historical and contemporary racial prejudice and discrimination (Gullen, 2001; Urrieta, 2006; Wells, 2014). Most ABE/ASE participants were previously enrolled in the U.S. K-12 education system, which is widely acknowledged as complicit in the production of deeply unequal educational outcomes for low-income students of color (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Oakes, 2005; Skiba et al., 2011). Whether the disproportional representation of African Americans among low-scoring adult readers is an accurate reflection of previous race-based educational inequality or can be attributed to other factors, such as bias in assessment tests, is an important but as yet unanswered question; equally important is the present reality that African American ABE/ASE participants are disproportionately affected by federal policies that limit access to and quality of educational opportunities for low-scoring learners. Therefore, having policies that effectively address the learning needs of adults at all levels of instruction is an important part of efforts to provide adult basic education services that are not only high quality and effective, but also racially just.

Conclusion

Policy that frames all instruction as part of a pathway to postsecondary education or a career may present ethical and pedagogical challenges to adult literacy programs wishing to provide instruction that

¹ African American and Hispanic/Latino students were substantially over-represented in the overall ABE/ASE population when compared with the 2010 U.S. census data for the general population. (OCTAE NRS, n.d.- a; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). African-American participants made up 30% of the overall ABE/ASE population, but 13% of the national population. Hispanic/Latino participants made up 27% of the ABE/ASE population, but 16% of the national population. That African-American and Hispanic/Latino students were so highly over-represented means that White students were substantially under-represented in the ABE/ASE population—a question worthy of further investigation.

is responsive to a variety of student goals (Hayes, 1999; Belzer, 2003) and presents particular issues of concern for programs offering classes to low-scoring adult readers, who make up about half of all ABE/ASE participants across the country. Current federal policy shaping ABE/ASE educational opportunities may actually be detrimental to this group of learners, many of whom enter literacy programs seeking reading and writing help. Although WIOA requires states to “consider how well providers will serve learners at the *lowest* skill levels prior to awarding local grants” (Bird, Foster, & Ganzglass, 2014, p.9), other requirements of WIOA compete with this directive and make it very difficult for programs to provide quality service to learners at all skill levels. The rhetorical idealism of WIOA is belied by the barriers it creates to responding to the literacy

needs of a substantial proportion of the ABE/ASE population that many of these learners may need years of instruction before completing—or may fail to ever complete—a postsecondary credential or career pathway should not undermine their right to publicly-funded, high-quality adult basic education programs that help them meet their educational goals. ❖

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Table 1—ABE/ASE participants, 2014-2015

Racial group	% of racial group scoring ≤ Low Intermediate Basic	Racial group as % of all ≤ Low Intermediate Basic
African American	62%	38%
Native American	52%	2%
Asian	47%	3%
Hispanic/Latino	45%	25%
White	40%	29%

Data source: OCTAE NRS (n.d.- a)