

### Is WIOA Good for Adult Learners? A Response to Amy Pickard's Forum Essay

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I am grateful to have an opportunity to reflect on the essay that Amy Pickard wrote on the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014. I confess my thoughts are mixed, admittedly contradictory and without decisive conclusions. I recognize that it is complicated to educate adults who struggled to learn in their K-12 education, who immigrated to the United States and need to learn the English language, and who have other circumstances that prompt them to seek assistance to improve their literacy, as well as their life and work opportunities. I feel comfortable that I've done my best to respond to Pickard's wise commentary, but my best still leaves important concerns unanswered. To move forward, this conversation needs to continue to grow to include educators and learners who deserve the very best education the nation has to offer.

Pickard's essay offers a provocative analysis of the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) that is important for any educator to read, especially educators who work with adult learners in postsecondary education. Her article focuses on the implications of new federal policy on adult learners in three important areas: 1) an increased emphasis of adult education policy on workforce preparation and postsecondary education to the possible detriment of classroom literacy

instruction; 2) a heightened focus on performance measures pertaining to employment for adult learners enrolled in ABE/ASE programs, particularly ABE; and 3) persistent inequities in access and outcomes for students of color, especially African Americans, who seek the opportunity to move into and through ABE/ASE programs. I address each of these issues but in a slightly different order than Pickard by beginning with inequities in ABE/ASE programs for students of color, then by analyzing the workforce focus of adult education, and last, by addressing employment-focused performance metrics reflective of workforce development versus literacy instruction. I conclude with a brief discussion of opportunities and threats associated with WIOA's emphasis on career pathways for adult learners.

Before I address Pickard's three points, it is important that I share her concern for the inappropriate labeling of adult learners. Use of the label of "low-skilled adult" by public policy, including WIOA, as well as the literature, needs to stop. This label reflects a deficit mentality that, at best, depersonalizes students and, at worst, demeans them. Having used the term "low-skilled" myself in some of my own early research and writing on career pathways, I am pleased to say I have changed my ways. Rather than using deficit-oriented terms,

I recognize that it is important to use terms that are descriptive of students' experiences and needs rather than their inadequacies. Hopefully others will follow suit. Without recognizing this problem, it is easy to assume that learners are incapable of achieving success. It is easy and permissible to attribute failure to the students rather than the potentially poor policy that produced the results. This is an important point because, later in her article, Pickard notes the federal adult education and literacy policy is "colorblind" or "race- neutral," but this assertion cuts policy makers too much slack. When we combine the deficit language with the disappointing results achieved by students of color (see Table 1 in Pickard's essay), serious equity questions need to be raised about WIOA.

Moving to Pickard's first major point, I share her concern for the inequitable representation of African Americans and other students of color among low-scoring adult readers who enroll in ABE/ASE programs. I too worry about future implementation of WIOA, but I worry not only because the new incarnation of WIOA may further disenfranchise students of color but also because the adult education and literacy instruction that was part of WIOA had already exhibited inequities in student representation and outcomes. I therefore caution against believing past approaches offer better or worse solutions than future possibilities, but rather I urge readers to be contemplative about any and all change to federal policy. I wholeheartedly agree that improved literacy instruction is needed for adult learners that focuses on their literacy gaps, but I also believe that this instruction should be aligned with reforms that make K-12 education more equitable, that increase funding for both adult education and postsecondary education, and yes, that improve opportunities for adult learners to enter and progress through

college to employment. It is important to recognize that, whenever any educational system perpetuates inequities between different racial/ethnic, income, language, and other individually and culturally diverse student groups, that system needs to improve, and it is important to be open to options that may prove effective in producing benefits for all.

Second, Pickard rightly laments the focus on workforce preparation for low-scoring adult readers at the expense of literacy instruction that is needed to live a full and productive life. She suggests that a trade-off will inevitably be made by adult educators who will be forced to choose between using classroom time to enhance students' literacy and to train them for employment. Ultimately, given the performance metrics required of WIOA, this trade-off will favor workforce training. I understand Pickard's argument supporting the importance of literacy instruction, and I agree that meeting students' literacy needs is of paramount importance, but I do not agree that education for employment is an impossible goal to achieve as well. I believe that many adult learners who seek assistance from adult education and literacy instruction recognize the need to improve their literacy, but many also seek better jobs. Adult education and literacy instruction combined with workforce training, as envisioned by the WIOA legislation, seems worth pursuing to optimize the potential benefits for adult learners but these pursuits need to be given careful thought. Like Pickard, I worry about prioritizing workforce training and narrowing the focus of adult education and literacy instruction in ways that do not allow adult learners to acquire the foundational literacy competencies that they need to function productively in society. I accept that this dual approach to adult education demands new models, but I am not convinced that combining adult education and literacy instruction

with education for employment is a futile idea.

With respect to Pickard's worry about WIOA having the effect of narrowing of the curriculum, whether the focus is on adult literacy or employment, I have spent many hours observing adult education classrooms that suggest to me that the curriculum taught in many adult literacy classrooms is already narrow. "Teaching to the test" is already commonplace in adult literacy classrooms and by extension, creaming is also a real concern. Whenever students' test results are a major determinant of program performance and funding, it is inevitable that student enrollment and curriculum decisions will be linked to improve results at the expense of learners who need literacy instruction more. Indeed, I agree with Pickard that creaming is a problem not only because it excludes individual students who could benefit from adult literacy instruction but because it perpetuates a culture of prejudice that can have a detrimental effect on the educational experience for all adult learners. Considering the complexity of this issue, I advise readers to pay close attention to Pickard's essay that warns that a narrowing of curriculum under WIOA may accelerate creaming that is likely to further exacerbate differential outcomes. Metrics that avoid this dilemma are addressed below.

Third, the workforce-oriented performance metrics that dictate successful performance in adult education and literacy instruction deserve scrutiny, as noted by Pickard. Does this mean ABE/ASE instruction can never be integrated with workforce preparation? I think not, but it does mean that measures that dictate the success of adult education and literacy should take into account the needs of many adult learners to meet literacy needs foundational to workforce-oriented preparation for employment. Supplanting workforce training for literacy instruction may limit learners' literacy learning and also diminish their chances of succeeding in preparing for and obtaining

family living-wage employment. However, at a time when all P-20 education is arguably more focused on education for employment—what is sometimes called the "new vocationalism" (Bragg, 2001, p. 1)—it seems unrealistic to expect that adult education and literacy instruction will be exempted from the heightened connections between education and employment that is occurring on all levels of the educational system. I honestly do not believe the latter (education for employment) has to overshadow the former (adult literacy instruction), but I understand that learning for literacy and learning for employment are not an easy match for many adult learners, particularly those who are identified as low-scoring adult readers. Helping adults to prepare for improved literacy while also preparing them for employment requires carefully constructed curriculum and instruction to ensure that students gain the literacy levels that they need to obtain family living-wage jobs.

Finally, because I argue that the integration of adult literacy instruction and workforce preparation is tricky but possible, I feel the need to share some thoughts about the relevance of career pathways to adult education and literacy. Consistent with a whole host of federal policy directives, including the WIOA legislation of 2014, career pathways have emerged as a primary vehicle for youth and adult education. According to a recently signed 13-federal agency letter,

Career pathways can offer an efficient and customer-centered approach to training and education by connecting the necessary adult basic education [ABE], occupational training, postsecondary education, career and academic advising, and supportive services for students to prepare for, obtain, and progress in a career (dated April 28, 2016).

On the surface this goal is admirable, yet as the saying goes, "the devil is in the detail." If, as Pickard

implies, the focus on career pathways undermines ABE/ASE instruction in favor of workforce training, then low-score adult readers will not benefit from adult literacy instruction to the full extent that they should. However, if career pathways help to integrate curriculum and instruction that meets adult learners' literacy needs and prepares them for not just entry-level jobs but employment that progresses through a series of linked education- and employment-related experiences, then career pathways do offer a promising, potentially liberating option for adult learners. I want to be clear here, I completely agree with Pickard that "ABE/ASE focused on helping low-testing adult learners to obtain a postsecondary credential or career pathway should not undermine their right to publicly-funded, high-quality programs that help them meet their educational goals," but I also do not believe that these goals are mutually exclusive. I worry that adult learners are not well served if their adult literacy instruction leaves them without the skills and knowledge that they need to attain family living-wage employment. To me,

preparing adult learners for employment in the short- and long-term is a necessary goal that need not be pitted against adult literacy but combined to ensure that adults benefit. If this means fighting to ensure WIOA performance metrics do not drive ABE programs out of business, so be it. The fight is worth fighting for adult learners who deserve an opportunity to participate and benefit. ❖

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## Reference

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