

## **Feature Articles**

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# *The Current Status Of Adult Literacy Education In The United States*

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I recall how I was introduced to adult literacy education. It was 1970, and I was a graduate student in Higher Education Administration at Teachers College, Columbia University. Teachers College had been awarded a large federal grant to study Adult Basic Education (ABE) in the inner city, the grant which culminated in *Last Gamble on Education* (Mezirow, Darkenwald & Knox, 1975). I was fortunate to be hired as a research assistant on that project, and my job was to travel across the United States interviewing ABE administrators, teachers, and students. There was an atmosphere of excitement back then. Literacy educators were doing something socially meaningful, and they knew it. To be sure, they were concerned with high dropout rates, meager resources, a part-time teaching force, and lack of an instructional methodology appropriate for poorly educated, adult, part-time learners, but this was just the beginning. We were on the ground floor. There was a great deal of optimism that these conditions would not persist, that adult literacy education would grow and develop to the extent that the literacy problem eventually would be solved. I was gripped by the enthusiasm and optimism and decided to become an adult educator.

It is now 1993. What has happened in those 23 years? Well, we did not solve the literacy problem. Indeed the National Adult Literacy Study (NALS) shows that our nation's adult literacy rate is much worse than most people had envisioned. NALS tells us that 21 to 23 percent of our adult population function at the lowest levels of literacy and that about 90 million adults, about half the adult population, function with difficulty (Kirsch, Jungsblut, Jenkins & Kolstadt, 1993).

We have not rectified the appalling conditions under which adult literacy education is conducted. Instead, we have learned to expect less. We have come to accept the status quo as a given. Adult literacy education has become defined—even in our own minds—as a low capacity program, staffed by part-timers and volunteers, operating on a shoe string, and

servicing less than eight percent of those who are eligible per year. We accept it because “that is just the way things are.”

To demonstrate this situation, let me take you on a fantasy. You, a parent with young children, have received a promotion and must re-locate to a new state. Being concerned with your children’s education, the quality of the school system is a major factor in choosing the town where you will live. After visiting several schools you rate as average, you meet with the principal of a school many of us know well. You ask the standard questions: “Tell me about your teachers. What are they like?” He responds, “Well, they are all dedicated and enthusiastic.” You say, “No, I mean tell me about their qualifications.” Turning a shade of pale pink he tells you, “Eighty-two percent are part-time. All are certified, but not necessarily in the subjects they teach. We hold staff development workshops for them, but many find it difficult to attend.” You ask, “Tell me more, like how much do you spend per student per year and how many hours do students spend in class?” Clearly embarrassed he responds, “Well, we spend about \$235 per student per year, and, on the average, our students receive 4.4 hours of instruction per week.” Having had almost enough, you end the interview with one last question, “What’s your drop-out rate?” “After six weeks, 20 percent. After 16 weeks, 50 percent.” he responds.

The figures used in the fantasy describe adult literacy education in the United States. They clearly demonstrate what I would argue is the most fundamental problem which faces us as adult literacy educators. Quite simply, we lack the capacity to provide what society expects and what our learners deserve to receive. Consider the following evidence:

The target population for adult literacy education is 44.1 million, 26.8 percent of the adult population. (Thorne & Fleenor, 1993)

Approximately 3.8 million adults are served by the federal adult literacy education program per year—only about 8% of the target population. (United States Department of Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 1993)

ESL [English as a Second Language] enrollments have increased from 19 percent of the students served in 1980 to 32 percent in 1990. ABE enrollments increased less than one percent between 1980 to 1990. (USDE/DAEL, 1993)

On the average, adult literacy education students receive 4.9 hours of instruction per week [4.4 for ABE; 4.2 for ASE; and 5.9 for ESL]. (Development Associates, 1993)

The dropout rate is 18 percent before 12 hours of instruction, 20 percent at 16 weeks of instruction, and 50 percent at over 16 weeks. (Development Associates, 1993)

While in 1980 part-time instructors constituted 71 percent of the teaching force, in 1991 part-time teachers made up 88 percent of the teaching force. (USDE/DAEL, 1993)

In 1989, 11 states required certification in adult literacy, the requirements ranging from the equivalence of a masters degree in adult basic education to attendance at an annual workshop. Fourteen states required certification in elementary/secondary, but not adult education. Twenty-five states required no certification. (Pelavin Associates, 1991)

Forty-five percent of federally funded AEA programs do not have a single staff person certified in adult education, a single full-time instructor or administrator, or a directed inservice training effort. (U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1993, p. 115)

While in 1980 federal dollars allocated to adult literacy education surpassed state allocations, in 1992 states allocated 657.2 million dollars and the federal government allocated 235.7 million. (USDE/DAEL, 1993)

The average expenditure per student per year [including federal and state funds] was about \$235 in 1993 (USDE/DAEL, 1993) as compared to \$6,285 for elementary and secondary education (USDE/OERI, 1992)

### **Capacity**

In my view, the low capacity of adult literacy education is related to three factors which, in turn, are related to each other. They are funding, infrastructure, and lack of influence.

*Funding*

Table 1 portrays federal funding for adult literacy education under the Adult Education Act in real and constant dollars.

Table 1

*Federal Allocation for Programs Funded Under The Adult Education Act in Actual and Constant [1980] Dollars (in millions of dollars).*

Year	Allocation	Adjusted	%
1980	100	100	100
1981	100	91	-9
1982	100	85	-15
1983	86	71	-29
1984	95	75	-25
1985	98	75	-25
1986	101	76	-24
1987	113	82	-18
1988	134	93	-7
1989	162	106	+6
1990	193	123	+23
1991	241	146	+46
1992	287	170*	+70*
1993	305	177*	+77*
1994	305		

\*estimated

An inspection of the figures is quite revealing. First, when allocations are adjusted for inflation, we see that federal funding declined from its 1980 level between 1980 and 1986 and did not reach its 1980 level until 1989. How did the system cope in the 1980s? The answer is all too simple. The volunteer teaching force was expanded, and the full-time teaching force was reduced.

Between 1990 and 1993 we start to see increases which are apparently substantial, but just how significant they are depends on how one assesses the distribution of funds. As a case in point, let us examine the current federal allocation (Table 2).

Table 2

*1993 and 1994 Federal Appropriations Under the Adult Education Act (in thousands of dollars).*

Program	1993	1994
Grants to states	254,642	254,642
National programs*	8,837	8,837
Homeless adults	9,584	9,584
Workplace literacy	18,906	18,906
State resource centers	7,857	7,857
Programs for prisoners	4,910	5,100
Total	304,718	304,908

\*Includes five million for the National Institute for Literacy (source: Speights, 1993)

The first thing of note is that there is virtually no change between 1993 and 1994. Under Clinton, adult literacy education has thus far received level funding. The next observation of importance is that the state grant program, the portion of the budget that funds local programs, stands at 255 million dollars. In constant dollars, that amount is about a 48 percent increase over 1980, while the numbers of learners served since 1980 has increased 87 percent (USDE, DAEL, 1993). Moreover, the Adult Education Act stipulates that 10 percent must be set aside for correctional institution programming, that 5 percent may be allocated to administration and that 15 percent must be allocated to experimental demonstration programs and teacher training. Since this 30 percent is "taken off the top," in reality only about 179 million dollars is available to support local adult literacy programs nationwide. No wonder we lack the capacity to do the job as it should be done.

In all fairness it must be noted that state allocations to adult literacy education have increased substantially over the years, from about 74 million dollars in 1980 to about 657 million dollars in 1992 (USDE, DAEL, 1993). However, two states, California and Michigan, account for most of the state funds allocated. In fact, in 1990 the state allocations of these two states accounted for about 55 percent of all the state funds allocated to adult literacy education (National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium, 1990).

### *Infrastructure*

Infrastructure has to do with the extent to which critical components of a delivery system for adult literacy education are in place, integrated, and performing effectively. There are two aspects of infrastructure which I believe are particularly important for educational systems. The first is a system for knowledge production and utilization. This aspect of infrastructure is important because education is a knowledge enterprise. Teachers must know what and how to teach. Policy makers must know what is needed and how to facilitate program success.

The second aspect of infrastructure is the administrative system—the system that makes policy and administers the delivery of service. The two systems are obviously inter-related, as the administrative system requires accurate and relevant knowledge to function well, and knowledge is worth little unless there is a viable system for putting it into use. Let us first examine the knowledge utilization system.

*Knowledge-Utilization.* For the knowledge production and utilization system in adult literacy education to work well, three conditions must be met. First, there must be a subsystem for producing knowledge, synthesizing what is known, and disseminating it. Second, there must be viable communications channels between knowledge producers and users, and, finally, users must have the capacity to use what has been produced and disseminated. In adult literacy education we lack all three.

Generally speaking, our knowledge production system, represented by the quality and quantity of research and development in adult literacy education, is grossly inadequate (Fingeret, 1984; Beder, 1992). Alamprese (1990), for example, notes, “Literacy research has been hampered not only by the limited availability of funding, but also by the nature of the literacy problem and the methodologies used to study it. Publications in the field have tended to be program descriptions and ‘how to’ articles, rather than reports of systematic research with empirically derived conclusions” (p. 101).

In terms of formal knowledge production, there is only one national journal devoted to adult literacy education, *Adult Basic Education*. Within the field of adult education there is but a handful of university-based researchers who specialize in adult literacy, and the numbers in Reading and ESL are equally small. With the exception of the National Center on Adult Literacy at the University of Pennsylvania, in recent years most federal monies for adult literacy research have gone to large, private consulting corporations. Although the findings of these projects have been useful, most of their research has addressed policy issues and has been

essentially descriptive in nature.

Realizing there were problems with knowledge production and dissemination, the authors of the Adult Literacy Act of 1991 included a provision for a National Literacy Institute charged with stimulating knowledge production and utilization. With a pitifully small budget of five million dollars per year and lack of political clout (as of this writing a permanent director of the Institute has yet to be confirmed), it is difficult to see how the Institute will have substantial impact. The Act also provides for the establishment of state literacy centers charged with many of the same functions as the National Institute, but the total national budget to support these centers stands at only 7.857 million dollars (Speights, 1993).

Although formal research and development is important, much of the most useful knowledge is produced by practitioners in the course of their practice. Knowledge produced through the experience of practice is useful because it has generally stood the test of trial and is appropriate for the context in which it is generated (Usher & Bryant, 1989). Indeed, were the practitioner-based knowledge production subsystem effective, my analysis of knowledge production would be much less pessimistic. Unfortunately, in order for practice-based knowledge to be useful to others, it must be communicated to others. This is exceedingly difficult for part-time personnel who seldom have the opportunity to communicate with colleagues within their programs, let alone colleagues outside their programs. Poor communication between knowledge producers and the part-time teaching force is like a one-way telephone system where the party you want to reach is seldom at home. In a similar vein, given their meager resources, most local programs have neither the time nor the money to devote to local experimentation and development.

While knowledge production and communication are important issues, the utilization of knowledge is an even more severe problem. Research conducted on the federal Adult Literacy 309 Research and Development Program (precursor to 353) demonstrated that the weakest links in the knowledge production and utilization infrastructure were local providers who simply did not have the ability to use most of the knowledge and innovations (Beder & Darkenwald, 1974). Local providers lacked sufficient funds to purchase innovative technology and materials. They also lacked the ability to train their staffs, and few innovative practices were available that were appropriate to the great diversity of local program contexts. Moreover, commercial suppliers were reluctant to invest substantially in new products because the adult literacy education market was just too lean.

*The Administrative System.* Just as a poor knowledge production and

utilization infrastructure constrains adoption of new ideas, methods, and technologies, a poor administrative infrastructure constrains program development and service delivery. As a local program provider lamented, “It just seems like each new Federal initiative has a different target population, different eligibility requirements, a unique set of data requirements, and some institutionally created outcomes that do not take into account the individual needs or goals of the adult student” (USDE, DAEL, 1991).

Nationally, the administrative delivery system for adult literacy education is extremely fragmented. For example, a recent study conducted by the COSMOS Corporation (Alamprese & Sivilli, 1992) “identified 85 programs in twelve Federal agencies that authorize or support adult [literacy] education programs” (p. vii). The three major programs that support adult literacy education—JOBS, JTPA and the Federal State Grant (Adult Education Act) Program—are administered through three Federal Departments: Health and Human Services, Labor, and Education. Furthermore, at the state level fragmentation is reproduced. As a case in point, a paper commissioned by the New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning (NJALL, 1990) noted, “On the state level, sixty-three different programs provide funds for adult literacy education and job training. These programs are administered by more than six separate state departments” (p. 3).

What are the consequences of this fragmented administrative infrastructure? Consider the following:

Program providers—often adult education programs, community colleges, and community based organizations—have to answer to as many masters as provide funding to them, often resulting in duplicative paperwork, conflicting messages and the constant pressure to maintain their numbers. (NJALL, p. 3)

Institutional fragmentation translates into political weakness. There is practically no lobby for literacy. (Chisman, 1989, p. 9)

Fragmentation reduces efficiency, limits accountability, confuses learners, produces waste and prevents a holistic approach to serving learners. (Beder, 1991a)

The providers of adult literacy services are diverse and do not form a comprehensive system for addressing the literacy needs of the nation.



Students seeking literacy assistance are confronted with a web of disconnected often overlapping programs. (U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1993, p. 93)

Fragmentation, then, increases waste by promoting duplication of service and magnifying the bureaucratic load on programs, and it constrains us from developing a coherent voice of political advocacy. Most seriously, however, the plethora of eligibility requirements and program differences confuses learners and prevents providers from dealing with clients' needs holistically.

### *Lack of Influence*

In my view, one of the major factors that has reduced our capacity to solve the literacy problem is our lack of power to influence the political and decision making systems. Because of this, it almost seems that for every step we take forward, we take a step backward, and apparent opportunities seldom pay off. For example, in the late 1980s it looked as if adult literacy education would benefit greatly from the large infusion of money into the JOBS and JTPA programs—even to the extent that many of the problems I identify here would be solved. As Chisman (1990) notes, “To oversimplify, starting in 1988, it became faddish to attach adult literacy mandates, or their equivalents, to measures aimed at reforming programs that are far larger and, in the eyes of Congress, far more significant than the Adult Education Act had ever been” (p. 222). As a result, “The federal funding stream for literacy, which consisted primarily of an appropriation on the order of \$100 million for the Adult Education Act in 1987, swelled to almost \$1 billion by the end of 1989, and proposals for even more funding were on the table” (p. 225).

Although the developments of the late 1980s initially appeared to have been a great step forward for adult literacy education, it is questionable whether any great benefit was reaped. In a subsequent research report, Chisman and Woodworth (1992) concluded, “Rather than providing a bonanza of funding for adult education, as some people had expected, the JOBS Program imposed heavy burdens on existing sources of funding and service programs. For example, most of the funding for JOBS basic education comes from adult education budgets, rather than from the JOBS program” (p. 11). Thus, rather than expanding the capacity of adult literacy education, to a great extent, the advent of JOBS, a much larger and more influential program, merely stretched the adult literacy education system further.

Why does adult literacy education lack influence? I think there are at least two reasons. First, the federal adult literacy program is essentially a state grant program. Federal funds are allocated to state educational agencies (SEA) which, for the most part, are state education departments. SEAs in turn make subgrants to local providers. The great majority (70%) of local providers are public schools (Development Associates, 1992). The problem is that for most state and local agencies which control the delivery of adult literacy education, adult literacy is ancillary to their primary function of educating children and youth. As a result, adult literacy education is in a poor position in respect to resource allocation and must often function under inappropriate rules and regulations established to administer public schools.

The second reason why adult literacy education is so vulnerable has to do with our lack of an influential locus of advocacy. It is very difficult to organize part-time teachers for political action, and our students are stigmatized (Beder, 1991b) and lack a powerful voice. The net result is that, despite the substantial rhetoric that surrounds adult illiteracy, the needed resources have simply not been forthcoming.

### What Must We Do?

If the most serious problem facing adult literacy education today is our lack of capacity to function effectively, then the first thing we must do is to face up to the problem and focus on its resolution. We must abandon our self-defeating acceptance of the status quo, and we must resist being diverted by all the nagging daily problems our low capacity breeds. As a field, let us set some concrete and meaningful goals. For example, rather than being duped into inaction by the ridiculous goal of eliminating adult literacy by the year 2000, let us commit ourselves to increasing the proportion of full time teachers to fifty percent and to increasing the federal allocation to 500 million dollars.

We may not be as powerless as our history and lore would suggest. For example, if, as part of the curriculum, each adult literacy education student wrote a letter of support to his or her congressional representative, that would amount to 3.8 million letters a year. If only half of the 206,352 (USDE, DAEL, 1993) personnel who work in adult literacy education joined the Commission of Adult Basic Education (COABE) and paid fifteen dollars in dues, we would have a locus of professional advocacy of over 100,000 members and a war chest of over a million dollars. While such things would not be easy, we do have organizations such as COABE,

NAEPDC, and The National Coalition for Literacy which could serve as structures for organization and concerted action. Thus, although we clearly have been in a prolonged state of privation, neither are we bankrupt.

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