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ABSTRACT

Research generally shows that participation rates are low and dropout rates are high in adult literacy programs. This 3 year study in a Canadian context examined participation patterns of adults in literacy programs as well as past school experiences and reasons for entering and leaving literacy programs. Data collected from 94 subjects supported a multifaceted view of participation and persistence for adults in literacy programs. Higher dropout rates for Canadian-born than immigrant participants appeared to be more related to past school and home experiences than to amount of prior schooling or reasons for entering and leaving literacy programs.

Research generally shows low rates of participation in adult literacy programs accompanied by high dropout rates for those who do enroll.¹ In a survey undertaken for Southam News in Canada (Creative Research Group, 1987), a random sample of 2,398 persons from across all provinces were administered both an interview and a functional literacy test based on items from the National Assessment of Education Progress used in the United States (U.S.). Results of this survey revealed that few Canadian adults (only 16 percent) felt reading and writing skills were holding them back and even fewer (10 percent) indicated that they planned to participate in literacy classes. The study reported in this paper was conducted in Alberta, where statistics gathered from a survey of institutions providing literacy programs revealed that less than 1 percent of adults with grades 1 to 9 education were actually enrolled in literacy programs (Further Education Services, 1985). In fact, only 5.6 percent of adults with less than 9 years of schooling were enrolled in any type of adult education program, as compared to 25 percent for all adults. The problem of recruitment and retention is not unique to Canada; in the U.S. it is estimated that participation rates are 5 percent of the estimated 30 million illiterate adults and that attrition rates exceed 70 percent in some states (Quigley, 1992).

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There have been considerable research and some theoretical work on participation in adult education programs. While much of the focus has been on higher education, some attempt has been made to explain and investigate participation decisions of adult basic education (ABE) students (Beder, 1990; Beder & Valentine, 1985; Garrison, 1985). This work has generally focused on motivational factors (Boshier & Collins, 1985) and on barriers to program participation (e.g., Cross, 1981; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985), with little attempt to differentiate nonparticipation from the participation phenomenon (Beder, 1990). The research presented in this paper is concerned with reasons for participation and dropout rather than with barriers to participation.

Considerably less attention from either a theoretical or research perspective has been given to dropout as compared to program participation, but again what is available tends to focus on higher education (Boshier, 1973; Tinto, 1975). Some theorists, such as Boshier (1973), believe that one theoretical formulation is adequate to explain both program participation and dropout. Garrison (1985), however, argues that it is important to treat dropout as a phenomenon distinct from participation. Results of some research such as that by Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) have supported this position. They found that many of the variables which affected participation had little impact on persistence.

At a broad theoretical level, however, it does appear that an understanding of both participation and persistence must include consideration of the interaction between individuals and their environment. It is also clear that any theory which will adequately explain either participation or dropout must be multifaceted. This is supported by studies which have attempted to predict participation and drop out behavior (Anderson & Darkenwald, 1979; Beder, 1990; Garrison, 1990) and from those which have developed typologies of ABE students (Beder & Valentine, 1990; Hayes, 1988). Hence, factors both inside and outside of literacy programs must be considered in any study of participation and dropout. In general, however, factors outside of literacy programs seem to be more influential in decisions not to participate or stay in literacy programs than factors within the programs themselves (Diekhoff & Diekhoff, 1984; Fitzgerald, 1984; Glustrom, 1983; Reston, 1990).

One of the variables which has persistently been found to be related to participation and dropout has been past schooling. In a review of research in this area, Cross (1981), concluded that college graduates are more than twice as likely to participate in further education than are high school graduates, and that high school graduates are twice as likely to become involved in educational programs as nongraduates. Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) found that the most powerful predictor of program participation in adult education was amount of formal schooling. With specific reference to dropout, they found that adults who enrolled in ABE and high school programs were four times more likely to drop out than were adults in other programs, and that adults with the least formal schooling were more likely to drop out than others. However, Cervero and Kirkpatrick (1990) found that the relationship between school attainment and participation was more complex. While prior school attainment was related to participation in credit programs, it was not related to participation in noncredit programs.

A major purpose of the study reported in this paper was to examine participation and dropout patterns of adults in literacy programs in one urban center in Alberta across a 3-year time period. It also examined past school experiences of participants as well as their reasons for entering and leaving literacy programs.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample consisted of 94 adults enrolled in literacy programs in one urban center. This center has a population of over 600,000 and has been a reception center for new immigrants over the past 3 decades. Reflecting the cultural make-up of literacy classes in the area, 40 subjects were Canadian-born while 54 were immigrants. Adults were considered to be immigrants if they were born in any country other than Canada, and while eight were from English speaking countries, most were from the Middle East and Asia and had learned English as their second language. Three of the Canadian-born adults were aboriginal. There were 61 females and 33 males in the sample, and the average age of subjects was 29.5 years. On the *Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE)* (1987), reading grade scores ranged from level 2.1 to 9.2 with a mean of 5.0.

Sixty-nine of the adults in the sample were full-time students at the commencement of the study. The other 25 adults attended on a part-time basis. Full-time students attended classes during the daytime 5 days per week whereas part-time students generally attended evening classes once or twice per week. Most of the adults in the study were from formal programs (N=84), with 51 attending literacy classes in a vocational center and the other 33 attending classes in a continuing education program within a school system. The remaining 10 adults were in nonformal (LaBelle, 1986) literacy programs, five in a volunteer literacy program with a one-to-one format and the other five in community-based literacy programs.

Procedures

Data were collected from the sample of 94 participants in literacy programs through both formal testing and interviews. The *Tests of Adult Basic Education, Forms 5 and 6* (1987), were used to assess reading achievement. These were administered by personnel at one of the institutions the adults attended or by research assistants where the test was not routinely administered.

All participants were interviewed at the beginning of the study using a structured interview schedule to obtain demographic data as well as information about educational background and reasons for entering literacy programs. In relation to educational background, participants were asked the highest level of education achieved by their parents and themselves as well as about any problems they may have encountered in school and why they left school (if they did) before completing their education. They were also asked to indicate why they entered their current literacy program. These initial interviews were audiotaped and responses were recorded on the

interview sheets. Subjects were also interviewed at 6-month intervals to determine their participation status and if they exited literacy programs what were their reasons for leaving. Research assistants conducted these interviews under the supervision of one of the principle investigators, with all follow-up interviews being conducted by two research assistants to ensure continuity for adult participants and consistency in data collection. All follow-up interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis,

Data analysis was carried out by the principle investigators. Data collected from the total sample of 94 on the TABE and initial interview were tabulated to obtain a description of adults focusing on such sociodemographic variables as age, gender, immigrant status, reading level, and educational attainment. Means were calculated for the variables of age and reading level. Data gathered on interviews regarding difficulties encountered in school, reasons for leaving school, and reasons for leaving programs were read and categories for each were established to account for the data obtained. Once these categories were established, data for each individual were analyzed and categorized. During reading of the transcripts, it appeared that gender and immigrant status were factors in the nature of responses provided by subjects. Hence, data were initially combined across individuals by subgroups on the basis of gender and immigrant status, with these subgroups being combined when few differences were evident.

RESULTS

Previous Schooling

Information was collected on the previous education of participants and their parents, perceptions of participants regarding their relative success in school as children, and reasons reported for not completing school. A summary of data on the previous education of participants and their parents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Education of Participants and Their Parents

Extent of Formal Education	Mother	Father	Self
None to 6 years	35	22	8
7 to 9 years	16	11	36
Some high school	4	10	13
High school grad	7	9	19
Vocational	6	4	11
Some university	0	2	4
Bachelor's Degree	1	2	1
Graduate work	2	3	0
Not applicable	0	0	0
Don't know	23	31	2

For those participants who knew the education level of their mothers, 48 percent reported that their mothers had less than 7 years of formal schooling compared to 35 percent of their fathers who had less than 7 years of schooling. While the education levels of both mothers and fathers were fairly low, fathers generally had attained higher levels of education than had the participants' mothers. This may reflect the higher value placed on education for males than females in many parts of the world, including Alberta. It is important to note, however, that approximately one-quarter of participants did not know the education level of their mothers and nearly one-third did not know the education level of their fathers.

For participants, the bulge of people with 7 to 9 years of school reflects the age at which children can legally leave school in Canada. It also reveals the difficulty many immigrants experienced in accessing education at the secondary level in their country of origin, although five did manage to complete some university education.

Participants were asked if they had experienced difficulty in school. There was considerable difference between those who were Canadian-born and immigrants in how they answered this question. Nearly all (90 percent) of the Canadian-born participants reported difficulties in school whereas only 24 percent of the immigrants reported such difficulties. However, regardless of whether or not they had experienced school problems, most participants from both groups did not complete school; the reasons they provided for not doing so are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Reasons Reported for not Completing School

Reasons	Number of Reasons Given*	
	Immigrant n = 54	Canadian-born n = 40
Political	14	0
Cultural	3	1
Family Problems	1	22
Personal-social	2	7
Personal-psych	2	14
Health/Pregnancy	2	8
Financial/Work	7	3
No Opportunity	3	0
Missed/Changed schools	4	5
School/Teacher	2	5
Learning Problems	1	34

*Some participants gave more than one reason

Again there were differences between immigrants and Canadian-born participants in answers to this question. The most common reasons given by immigrants involved political problems in their country which made it difficult for them to continue their education. Reasons in this category were given by 44 percent of immigrants but by no Canadian-born subjects. For Canadian-born participants, the most common reasons involved family problems such as alcoholism and abuse. These reasons were given by 55 percent of Canadian-born participants as compared to only 2 percent of immigrants.

Canadian-born subjects also reported more personal reasons for not completing school, both of social and psychological natures. Social problems ranged from not fitting in, to being teased by other children, and to getting into a lot of trouble. Psychological reasons ranged from being shy and quiet to being not interested or motivated; some of these problems appeared to be quite severe as one woman reported that she had to quit school after she had attempted to commit suicide. Reasons related to missing or changing schools were given by 13 of the respondents but few cited problems with schools or teachers.

Reasons for Participation in Literacy Programs

When asked why they had enrolled in their current program, the respondents gave a variety of reasons. The most frequently cited reasons were job-related with 83 percent of the participants giving reasons in this category. Canadian-born women gave somewhat fewer reasons of a job-related nature, although 73 percent of them still provided responses in this category. In general, people talked about getting a better job, about specific jobs they wanted, about making more money, and about the difficulty of finding a suitable job. Examples of reasons given by respondents include the following:

In [city] you have to get the English 30. You have to get a grade 12. That's what I want. In my country, you don't need it. You have to get it to get the job you want in this country. (female, immigrant)

I need my school as much as possible because I don't want to make \$14, \$10 an hour you know. I want to make something more, but if you don't have enough school, turns out you're not going to get anywhere. (male, immigrant)

All groups also cited personal/psychological reasons for entering literacy programs although these reasons were given more frequently by Canadian-born participants (43 percent) than immigrants (17 percent). Responses in this category included reasons such as feeling better about themselves, improving themselves and developing self-confidence. For example, one woman stated:

I did feel stupid because all the other children and grandchildren in my family have all gone to [a post-secondary institution] and have high education Like me and one other person in my family are the only ones with no education and that makes me feel bad and that's another reason I came back to school is that I don't want to be an outsider in my family. I want to fit right in there. (female, Canadian-born)

Between 21 percent and 29 percent of men and immigrant women gave social reasons for their involvement in literacy programs. However, Canadian-born women were much more concerned with the social effects of literacy than either men or immigrant women. Seventy-three percent of Canadian-born women provided reasons in this category. They talked about becoming more independent, about meeting family obligations, and about meeting people. Some also indicated that a family member or social worker had urged them to participate in a literacy program. They, also, stated that their children had reached a sufficient age that they felt they could attend.

Several of the reasons given involved educational goals, some general (education for its own sake or in preparation for another course) and others more specific such as learning how to read, improving English skills, and learning computer skills. Men gave slightly more general goals than did women (36 percent compared to 21 percent respectively) and immigrants gave more specific educational goals than did Canadian-born participants (43 percent compared to 16 percent respectively).

Dropping Out

Approximately half (48) of the participants in the study dropped out of literacy classes before they had met their goals and, as far as we were able to determine, did not enroll in any other educational program. A higher proportion of Canadian-born subjects (68 percent) than immigrants (39 percent) dropped out of literacy classes, with Canadian-born men having the highest dropout rate of any group (79 percent). Another six people completed literacy programs, entered high school upgrading programs, and then dropped out of these programs before they were finished. Hence, a total of 54 people (57 percent) dropped out of literacy or high school programs over the course of the study.

Only 29 (31 percent) of the participants were still attending literacy or high school upgrading programs at the end of the study.

Twenty-two of these participants were immigrants and the remaining seven were Canadian-born. The remaining 11 people moved from literacy or high school programs to trades programs, and eight had either completed or were enrolled in these trades programs at the conclusion of the study.

Dropout rates were highest for the first few months of literacy programs. Nineteen people dropped out of literacy programs within the first 3 months and 17 more by the end of one year. The dropout rate then slowed to 14 people from literacy and high school upgrading programs in the second year of the program and to four in the third year. Although a relatively high proportion of dropouts in the first three months had a grade 9 education or less (74 percent), beyond that point previous schooling was not a good predictor of persistence in programs. For those who stayed in literacy or high school upgrading programs, 41 percent had grade 9 or less, 34 percent had grades 10 to 12, 17 percent had previous vocational training, and one person had some university education. Only immigrant status seemed to predict drop out; 30 percent of Canadian-born participants dropped out in the first 3 months whereas only 13 percent of immigrants dropped out in that time frame.

A variety of reasons was given by participants for leaving literacy and high school programs. Seventeen people cited as one of their reasons for dropping out of programs problems with the programs themselves. Examples of reasons in this category included the following: the program moved too slow, the participants weren't doing what they wanted to do, there was perceived conflict with the teacher, one experienced frustration with content courses because the content was already known in Spanish, etc. In their own words, participants stated:

I found it too difficult. The teacher-they had a teacher change and I don't know.... I just don't feel like the teachers really care. (female, Canadian-born)

What I was doing is like something I'd already gone through for what I was doing.... Sometimes we wasted time talking... Teach the class. Let the people work on it themselves. (female, immigrant)

But then they start with those computer eh. I ask you know, I ask the girl to help me and she left after half an hour. I mean finally they offer you half an hour. By the time she come I have to go home already. (male, immigrant)

I had a lot of problems when I was in school, with teachers eh? I didn't feel I was getting the help that I needed. I needed more help than that. (male, Canadian-born)

Two people reported learning problems and three indicated that they were terminated from programs, with one woman saying that she didn't know why. Six people left to enter another program, most frequently trades programs.

The second most frequent category of reasons for dropping out of programs (given by 16 program participants) involved social, family, and personal problems. One male and one female were experiencing custody problems, three people reported family problems, three experienced trouble with the law (two of these were aboriginals and the most serious involved a woman who was found guilty of manslaughter), four women reported too much pressure juggling responsibilities at home and school, and so on.

Ten subjects cited pregnancy and/or childcare as reasons for dropping out of programs. This included one male who dropped out of the literacy program to help his wife care for a newborn child, Seven people dropped out because of mental or physical health problems.

Relatively few (three) participants reported that financial pressures forced them to discontinue programs and similarly few (six) left programs because of work. Overall, aside from the obvious link of gender and pregnancy, reasons for dropping out of programs did not appear to be related to immigrant status or time of drop out.

Discussion and Conclusions

Approximately half of the subjects dropped out of literacy programs, consistent with rates reported in the literature (Amoroso, 1984). While dropout rates were high for both immigrants and Canadian-born subjects, they were considerably higher for the Canadian-born group. This discrepancy might be partially explained by prior school experiences of the two groups. Although there was little difference in the amount of prior schooling attained by immigrants and Canadian-born program participants, immigrants reported fewer problems in school, perhaps leading to greater confidence than Canadian-born subjects in their ability to learn. Reasons for leaving school might also be related to subsequent persistence in literacy programs. While political problems in the countries of origin likely lead to traumatic experiences for some immigrant participants and their families, the pattern of family, social, and psychological problems reported by Canadian-born participants was virtually absent for the immigrant group. Well over half of the Canadian-born women in this study reported social reasons for entering literacy programs suggesting the continuation of social problems into their adult lives.

The persistence of immigrants in literacy programs might also reflect the distinction Ogbu (1993) makes between *voluntary* and *involuntary* minorities. Even though immigrants may not have always agreed with what was happening in literacy classes (and there was some evidence that immigrant men in particular frequently did not), their folk theory of getting ahead may have helped them to persist in programs. While Canadian-born participants often expressed the dream of a better life when they entered literacy programs (Horsman, 1990), they appeared to have less belief in the power of education to change their way of life (Hunter & Harman, 1979) than did the immigrant sample.

From a theoretical perspective, the results of this study generally reaffirm the view of program participation and persistence as multifaceted in nature and involving the interaction of individuals and their environment. This was clearly reflected in reasons for entering literacy programs; although improved job opportunities was the most prevalent reason given, many program participants cited psychological, social, and educational reasons as well. Reasons for leaving literacy programs were also multifaceted, with a focus on factors both within and outside of programs.

Although the federal government has influenced the development of literacy programs in Canada through its manpower policies, the responsibility for literacy training rests with provinces, and provincial responses vary considerably across the country (Thomas, 1983). Hence, it would be inappropriate to generalize the specific findings beyond the Alberta context. For example, the difference in dropout rates of Canadian-born and immigrant groups would only be expected in programs in which immigrants are integrated into literacy and academic upgrading classes. However, at a more general level, the wide range of reasons individuals gave for dropping out of programs, particularly those involving personal and family problems, indicates the need for a broad range of services to be available to adults entering literacy programs. This appears to be particularly crucial in the beginning stages of participation in literacy programs since that is when the highest rates of dropout occur. As Graff (1987) has pointed out, literacy is neither the only problem of low-literate adults nor the only solution. While there is a need to continuously improve the quality of the literacy programs offered to adults, changes in programs alone will not be sufficient to deal with external deterrents to persistence.

ENDNOTE

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