

## **Title: Locus of Control and Course Completion in Adult Basic Education**

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### Abstract

The relationship between locus of control and course completion in an adult basic education program was investigated. Instruction was individualized; each learner was tutored by an adult volunteer. Early in their program 62 adult learners responded to an 11-item modification of the Rotter I-E Scale. Those learners who completed the program were significantly more internally controlled than those who did not complete the program.

### Introduction

Many learners drop out of the adult basic education (ABE) literacy programs prior to gaining necessary reading and writing skills. Drop-out rates of 60% over a 6-month period have been reported (Kent, 1973). Since completion of programs would seem to depend on personal commitment, it is possible that locus of control is related to course completion.

Rotter (1966) states that people vary in the degree to which they recognize a contingent relationship between their own behaviors (actions) and resulting reinforcements (outcomes). Certain people, externals, generally believe that reinforcements are controlled by forces external to themselves such as fate, chance, luck, or powerful others. Others, internals, tend to believe that their own behaviors are the primary factors in receipt of reinforcements. For them, control rests within the power of the individual. Rotter further states that locus of control is a result of the history of reinforcement patterns experienced by an individual.

Because of the type of life experiences of many individuals in ABE programs, it is reasonable to assume that many may see reinforcements as a result of forces external to themselves. It therefore seems possible that completion of ABE programs is directly related to locus of control. There have been few studies of this relationship.

Newsom and Foxworth (1980) hypothesized that a greater percentage of internal as compared to external students would complete a goal. They investigated this relationship among students in ABE classes. Students were enrolled in a federally sponsored retraining program and received training allowances to attend school. In contrast to the hypothesis, the proportions of internals and externals completing the course did not differ significantly. Since receipt of training allowances was conditional on attendance at school one might speculate that this masked any relationship between completion and locus of control.

Tseng (1970) hypothesized that locus of control would correlate with job proficiency, employability, and training satisfaction of clients in a vocational center. He found that in comparison to externals, internals showed significantly higher instructor ratings on job proficiency and personal quality, higher self-ratings on training satisfaction, and higher need for achievement.

In examining the relationship of locus of control and work relevant variables, Valecha (1972) found that white internals were in higher level occupations, made better progress

on the job, had more stable work histories, worked more hours per week, and had higher incomes than white externals. No such relationships were found for Blacks.

The above studies had provided some evidence of the relationship between locus of control and variables associated with job success. Although support was not shown for a relationship between locus of control and course completion, it is possible that in the Newsom and Foxworth (1980) study the completion rate was more a function of an outside influence such as monetary allowances for attendance at school than locus of control. Yet, it seems reasonable to expect a relationship between locus of control and course completion. Those individuals who are inclined to associate the receipt of reinforcements as being dependent on their own actions and behaviors should more readily complete a course. Therefore it was hypothesized that adult learners who complete a literacy program are more internally controlled than those adult learners who do not complete.

## Method

The participants for this study were 29 female and 33 male adults who enrolled in an ABE literacy program at a community college. This was the total group admitted between September and January. All participants were volunteers, were not eligible for federal training allowances, and could not afford the college tuition fee. The participants learned of the program through social service agency referrals, through word-of-mouth, or through radio and television advertisements. They were told that successful completion would enable them to qualify for further skill training or to enter the job market directly. The students ranged in age from 18 to 56.

Because of the low reading level of the participants, a modification of Valecha's abbreviated 11-item Rotter I-E Scale was used to measure locus of control. These items were chosen based on their adult-oriented and work-related content. In contrast to Valecha's use, the original forced choice format of Rotter's I-E Scale was used. The range of scores was from 0 to 10 with the larger scores indicating external orientation. One filler item was included in the scale. A biographical profile was developed for each student which included type of referral, reading level, age, and progress through the course.

Upon enrolling in the program, each student was interviewed and assigned to one of three reading levels: beginner (decoding words), intermediate (reading to learn), and mature (refinement of skills). Volunteer tutors were recruited through boards of education, university placement centers, a local volunteer bureau, and churches. After being interviewed and trained, a tutor was assigned to work with a specific learner.

The locus of control scale was administered orally by the tutor during the first 2 weeks of the literacy program. Data from six students were not obtained. Of these, four had difficulty understanding the questions, and two tutors did not report the results.

The tutorial program was designed for a 6-month period. Tutors were provided with a literacy curriculum to use in their work with the learners. As a minimum, a 1-hour tutorial was scheduled each week. The learners were provided with materials to use between tutorials.

In order to facilitate the training of tutors and to more adequately administer the program, entry sessions began on three separate occasions: October, December, and January. Because of these time constraints for data collection, completion of the program was defined as active participation in the program for a period of 3 months. It was assumed that students who completed 3 months in the program had shown themselves to be personally committed.

## Results

Data were analyzed with two independent variables: completion and reading level (beginner, intermediate, and mature). The means and standard deviations for locus of control scores are presented in Table 1. Those who completed were more internal than those who did not complete. While there was a tendency for beginner readers to be more external than intermediate and mature readers, these differences were not large. Data were analyzed using a two-way analysis of variance (unweighted means) with locus of control scores as the dependent variable. As hypothesized, adult learners who completed the literacy program were significantly more internal than those who did not complete the program ( $F = 17.03$ ,  $df = 1/50$ ,  $p < .001$ ). It had been expected that those learners who were better readers would be more internally controlled. Although in the

hypothesized direction, these differences were not significant. No interaction was found between the two independent variables.

## Discussion

Adult learners who completed the program tended to be more internal in their belief of control of reinforcements. Internally controlled individuals are described as likely to believe in their own potential to change their world. Generally speaking, learners who completed the program were able to overcome problems of transportation, weather, conflicting work schedules, and the frustrations of the academic learning. On the other hand, externally controlled individuals generally believe their destinies and outcomes are controlled by forces extrinsic to themselves such as fate, chance, luck, or powerful others. Therefore it is not surprising that those individuals who did not complete tended to be more external.

The 40 learners who completed the program were referred to the program by various methods: 15 from school service agency, 13 from advertisements, and 12 from family members or friends. Of the 16 learners who did not complete the program, 12 were referred by a social service agency, and 4 learned of the program through advertisements. This greater proportion of unsuccessful agency referrals is certainly consistent with what is known of locus of control. The fact that those who did complete tended to be more internal and to participate because of their own decision is consistent with the theory of locus of control.

One basic difference between this study and that of Newsom and Foxworth is that the adult learners who participated in this study did not receive training allowances while those in the Newsom and Foxworth study were federally funded. This may likely account for the difference in results between the two studies. In addition, the completion rate was 71.4% in this study as compared to 57.7% in the Newsom and Foxworth study. While numbers were not large in this study, it indicates a need to investigate the relationship between completion and paid participation.

The I-E construct has been linked to physical and emotional disorders, behavioral problems, job-related attitudes and behaviors, interpersonal relationships, school achievement, and social disadvantage (MacDonald, 1972). If it can be further demonstrated that dropouts in ABE programs have an external orientation, then counselling techniques specific to the adult learn can be designed to increase their feelings of self-efficacy. Shifting adult learners to more internal orientations in a group setting through locus of control change techniques could be conducted as part of the course content in ABE programs. During the program orientation, adult learners with external orientations could be identified and streamed into small groups to be instructed in skills that would help in changing external behaviors and attitudes towards internality.

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