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A Radical Idea: Let's Treat Adult Learners As Adults!

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Adults are children who have grown up. When they have grown up they are no longer children. They have the right to vote, they work and pay taxes to provide for the defense of our nation, they build our highways, houses, and hospitals, they maintain our hotels, golf courses, country clubs, they raise our children and pay for our schools...even our Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) schools and programs. And each year over 3 million of these adults enroll in the AELS programs which their tax dollars pay for. Only then, when they commit to do a little learning, we stop treating them like adults and start treating them like children again.

For instance, even though our adult learners may be legally required to sit as jurors in judgment of other adults in support of our justice system, their own judgments are questioned when, in pursuit of "accountability" we ask if they have learned anything valuable and they say "yes". This is generally considered to reflect "response bias", and so we insist that they prove that they have learned something by taking a standardized test.

To add injury to insult we then administer tests that have been developed using methods based on children in the K-12 system. For instance, the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and Adult Basic Learning Exam (ABLE) tests provide "grade level" scores, and they have been normed using adults who for the most part have come through the K-12 system so that years of education is reflected in the development of the test scales. That is, test scores go up as years of education go up. This influence of the K-12 system is seen in standardized tests such as the Tests of Applied Literacy Skills (TALS) which is based on the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) score scales for Prose, Document and Quantitative "literacy."

But even though we use these tests that have been developed in the context of the K-12 system, we know that the AELS is not like the K-12 system. For instance, the K-12 system generally teaches students for 1080 hours a year for 12 years. The standardized tests for measuring progress in learning are based on the idea of "grade levels" because of this extended period of time for learning and, importantly, because there is a prescribed academic curriculum across our nation that is quite consistent from state to state and neighborhood to neighborhood in its general coverage of content and skills development.

But the AELS is entirely different from the K-12 system. It generally provides only 50 to 100 or so hours of instruction in a wide variety of content areas that are not academic subjects in the K-12 system, such as specific health care information, drivers license applications, work-related knowledge, parenting, spousal abuse, marriage and divorce, crime and the criminal justice system, consumerism and finance, and other adult life oriented content. Skills development, such as reading and writing fluency may not develop much because of the limited time in programs that is typical of adult learners.

But with all these (and other) differences in the K-12 and AELS education systems, we still apply the ideas of learning and accountability for children in the K-12 system to the adults in the AELS, even when we use tests that provide scale scores instead of grade levels. It doesn't matter what we call them, they are all influenced by the K-12 system as witnessed by the high correlations between years of education and performance on the tests. If we are serious about measuring learning in the AELS, we might want to spend some time learning about how learning in the AELS is different from learning and development in the K-12 system.

Our treatment of the AELS as a K-12 system is reflected in the fact that the AELS is sometimes referred to as a "second chance" system, as though adults are getting a second shot at learning what they did not learn the first time. This is probably heavily influenced by the fact that so many of our AELS providers came out of the tradition of high school "evening schools" for youth who were working in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They learned at night what the day school kids learned during the day. It is also influenced by our fixation upon the Tests of General Education Development (GED) as alternative high school credentials. Though the External Degree program has been around for years as a model for how we could certify adults as possessing competent literacy, numeracy and thinking skills using adult-oriented content and problems, we still insist upon providing a certificate based not only on the skills that K-12 develops but also the academic subject areas of literature, science, social studies and so forth, and not on the important content that adults learn in the AELS.

It is also not generally acknowledged that the K-12 system deals with the full range of learners among children, while the AELS deals with mostly "special needs" adults, many of whom suffer from negative beliefs about their own learning ability. This suggests that the most frequent accomplishment of the AELS, that is, helping adults believe in their ability to learn and stimulating their self-confidence for further learning, should be recognized as a major outcome of the AELS programs, not as some "soft" throw-away accomplishment. Indeed, one pays dearly for such outcomes in psychotherapy, much more than the \$320 per enrollee that the AELS gets. This type of "psychological self-sufficiency" is critical to getting millions of adults on their way to economic self-sufficiency.

We also know that the biological and cognitive development of children in the K-12 system follows a different course from that of adults from post-adolescence to middle-age to senescence. Yet we approach adult learners the same way as we do children. We give them the same kinds of standardized tests, we expect them to engage in "second chance" learning, to prove that they have learned something instead of taking their word for it, to hold their teachers and administrators accountable for learning instead of the adults themselves, just as though the adults are children and do not share responsibility for their learning.

It seems to me that now that we have a viable, though greatly under-funded, AELS in place, and we have a lot of knowledge about adult learning and development across life, we ought to start thinking about the ways we might go about addressing learning and accountability in a system that provides about 50 to 100 hours of instruction on average, that addresses a wide diversity of content knowledge, that does not increase "fluency" very much in the limited time of instruction, and that is run for adults whose taxes and political actions pay for and keep the AELS in operation and whose opinions about the value of the AELS ought to be respected. In short, I think its about time we start understanding the AELS as an adult education system adapted to adult lives, and start regarding adult learners as adults.