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Barriers to Education for the Marginalized Adult Learner

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This qualitative study examines barriers to adult education by the marginalized adult learner. We adopted an inclusive approach by interviewing potential adult learners who had not participated in adult education programs due to illiteracy. Five overlapping themes related to barriers emerged and were categorized as: family values and responsibilities (i.e., cultural); the emotional effect of family poverty on participants' lives (i.e., anger at the welfare system); disrupted school and learning experiences (i.e., multiple school changes); social exclusion and personal challenges (i.e., marginalization due to race, class); and turning points in participants' education and hopes for the future (i.e., positive role models).

Cette étude qualitative examine les obstacles à l'éducation pour adultes auxquels font face les adultes marginalisés. Nous avons adopté une approche inclusive en interviewant des adultes ayant pu participer à des programmes d'éducation pour adulte, mais qui ne l'avaient pas fait parce qu'ils étaient analphabètes. Il en a découlé cinq thèmes qui se chevauchent et qui sont liés aux obstacles. On les a catégorisés ainsi: les valeurs et responsabilités familiales (c.-à-d. culturelles); l'effet affectif de la pauvreté de la famille sur la vie des participants (par ex. la colère contre le système d'aide sociale); les expériences scolaires perturbées (c.-à-d. le changement d'école à de multiples reprises); l'exclusion sociale et des défis personnels; et les tournants décisifs dans l'éducation des participants et leurs espoirs pour l'avenir (c.-à-d. les modèles de rôle positifs).

For most North Americans, being able to read a newspaper or write a grocery list is not a luxury; in fact, most people living in the Western world would take such activities for granted. However, for people who have no basic literacy skills, performing daily tasks that involve reading or writing may pose an insurmountable challenge. To function in a society that revolves around written text, those with inadequate literacy skills make creative adaptations (i.e., through oral exchanges) in their everyday interactions. Nonetheless, those who have poor literacy skills are isolated, because in Western societies, a person's value is determined by his or her education level, vocational attainment, and earning power.

Literacy is defined as the ability to understand and use printed information in daily activities at home, at work, and in the community to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential (ABC Canada, 2008). It is estimated that only 5-10% of all Canadian adults who need literacy instruction to attain the threshold or minimum standard for functioning in the expanding knowledge economy actually enroll in literacy programs, and about one third of these individuals drop out (ABC Canada).

Although the current Conservative federal government has made significant cuts to literacy support, the previous Liberal federal government proposed a long-term national campaign to identify and reduce non-financial barriers to adult learning. Such initiatives included the provincial governments providing programs such as GED classes, postsecondary education (college or university diploma and certificate programs), professional, job-related, and employment preparation training (Rubenson, 2007). However, despite the availability of such programs, many situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers as well as individual factors prevent some adult learners from attending and completing such programs.

This study examines the barriers that prevent marginalized adults from participating in learning. It is believed that the learner's experience and likelihood of educational success is defined and understood in the context of many influences, including culture, poverty, community, social class, and policy. In reviewing the current studies on the barriers to adult education, we focused on non-financial barriers, conceptualizing them in terms of participants' experiences. Income, gender, race, culture, community influences, government policy, and support were considered determinants of individuals' educational experiences and opportunities. Barriers were grouped into three categories: situational, institutional, and dispositional. The influence of individual characteristics (i.e., age, gender, privilege) was also examined.

Situational Barriers

Situational barriers relate to a person's life situation and include poverty, violence, living situation, and familial support. Individuals with low incomes are less likely to buy books, subscribe to newspapers, or to have jobs that require high levels of literacy practices. Compared with higher-income adults, these individuals are, therefore, limited in the extent of their learning and reading experiences (Holt & Smith, 2005). Poverty and living situations may also limit or prevent access to supportive technology such as a computer or Internet access, or may leave an individual with limited places to study (Bamber & Tett, 2000).

Family responsibilities, particularly child care, are the greatest barriers to women's participation in adult education (Hoffman, 2000). Consequently, women living in poverty and female immigrants are attracted to literacy programs that provide on-site child care. Single mothers often find it more difficult to attend and complete adult education classes than those who have the support of a partner. In Canada, 1.2 million women are single parents compared with 281,000 men. Furthermore, single mothers are often less educated and consequently have lower earning power than single fathers (Zhan & Pandey, 2004).

For women, the constraints of family responsibilities may be compounded by the effects of violence. Adult learning environments may be dangerous for women who are at risk of violence from an intimate partner. In attending class, their level of risk may be elevated, as they might be trying to keep their whereabouts secret in order to prevent further harm (Horsman, 2004). Similarly, women might be prevented from attending classes because of physical or emotional abuse (Horsman, 2004).

The level of emotional support a person receives can also affect the likelihood that she or he will engage in literacy programs. Negative attitudes about education held by family, friends, or one's partner are associated with lower participation and completion rates (Bamber & Tett, 2000; Terry, 2007). Similarly, Sullivan (1988) reported that for about 20% of all those leaving

school, feeling that they had a teacher, guidance counselor, or family member who cared about them and their education would have helped them to stay.

Institutional Barriers

The situational barriers described are often compounded by barriers to participation that are linked to the programs and the institutions that promote literacy. Institutional barriers include educational programs and teachers, support for ESL learners, government policy, and criminality. There is evidence that poor curriculum (i.e., that is irrelevant to adults' everyday lives or is uninteresting) discourages some adult learners from completing programs (Bamber & Tett, 2000). Furthermore, some adult learners contend that adult education programs use overly didactic teaching styles and inappropriate learning materials (Bamber & Tett, 2000).

The particular challenges for ESL learners cited in the literature include lack of curriculum resources, teacher training, and privacy for teaching sensitive subjects to mixed-gender classes (Rudd, Zahner, & Banh, 1999). People who do not speak the dominant language may also experience marginalization in the learning setting and may be made to feel excluded, invisible, or of inferior status to other students (Sparks, 1998). Sparks also notes a lack of intercultural understanding in the learning setting (i.e., cultural identity is ignored, native language is not spoken) for those participating in ESL programs.

Those involved in the correctional system have on average lower levels of educational attainment than individuals in the general population. For example, Hetland, Eikeland, Manger, Diseth, and Asbjørnsen (2007) report that 60% of inmates in United States prisons did not have a high school diploma, or GED. A more striking finding is that Aboriginal men and women had significantly greater representation in sentenced custody (30% and 23% respectively) than would be expected based on their representation in the Canadian adult population (3%, Statistics Canada, 2005).

Finally, government policies reflected in our laws and the allocation of federal funds directly influence participation in adult education programs. Participation patterns in adult education appear to reflect the social-political structures of a country (Rubenson, 2006). In Canada, it is ultimately the provincial governments that are responsible for education; the opportunities and access to programs depends on current welfare policies. Countries providing publicly supported child care (i.e., in the Nordic countries) boast higher levels of participation in adult education than countries lacking such policies. Such progressive countries also offer a range of other advanced policies to support a good balance between family and work life. Such policies include child allowances, support for single parents, parental leave schemes, and flexible working hours, which comprise favorable structural conditions for participation (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009).

Dispositional/Motivational Barriers

Dispositional or motivational factors are the third category of barriers to education identified in the literature. This category includes the influence of past experiences; community perceptions; and personal, academic, and job-related motives. Trajectories for participation in adult education vary according to the influences of past experiences, namely, the influence of family and education experiences as children and youth. Having a troubled education history and poor performance in high school is negatively associated with participation in adult education

(Bamber & Tett, 2000; Belzer, 2004), as is lack of engagement in learning activities at earlier ages, including learning during childhood (Martini & Page, 1996).

In terms of community perceptions, negative attitudes about education held by family, friends, or partners can adversely influence participation, as can feelings of conflict resulting from upward mobility (Bamber & Tett, 2000). Learners often struggle to realize their potential and fit in with other learners, all the while trying to maintain a sense of the authentic self.

The motivation to participate in adult education and complete a course of study comes from three major sources, namely, personal, job- and achievement-related, and family. Adult education is often considered a pathway to better jobs, improved parenting skills, or a more enjoyable life (Sheehan-Holt & Smith, 2000). Personal motives refer to the drive to satisfy personal needs or to meet others' (i.e., employers, welfare agencies, etc.) expectations (Sheehan-Holt & Smith, 2000), and to feel better about oneself or build self-esteem (Sticht, 2001; Yaffe & Williams, 1998). In terms of personal motivations for learning, Tremblay (1998) identified internal motivation as taking four forms: mastery, recognition, stimulation, and acquisition (Sheehan-Holt & Smith, 2000; Sticht, 2001; Yaffe & Williams, 1998).

Job- and achievement-related motives also influence participation in adult education programs, and the unemployment rate is inversely related to education in all Canadian provinces (Anonymous, 2008). Zhang and Palameta (2006) reported that the annual income of Canadian men who participated in adult education increased more than the earnings of men who did not participate (24% and 15% respectively). Among couples consisting of two university graduates, the annual earnings of women rose between \$8,400 and \$23,000 between 1980 and 2000; among couples in which both spouses had no high school diploma, the corresponding increase was at most \$5,400. Similarly, about 60% of employed Canadians had postsecondary education in 2006 compared with 40% in 1990 (Chung, 2006).

Adults may engage in education to gain support for the demands of family life, a family-oriented motive. Motivation may also come from the enjoyment they experience from the social support provided by program, to set an example for their children, or to break the "illiteracy cycle" (Yaffe & Williams, 1998).

Individual Characteristics

The influence of individual characteristics such as gender, education level, and socioeconomic status can also affect participation rates in literacy programs. Gender can be conceptualized as influencing both situational and individual barriers. Women may be at a disadvantage compared with men when it comes to attaining a basic education, as fewer programs are available for workplaces with large numbers of women than for male-dominated workplaces (Milton, 1996). Nonetheless, men may reject adult education programs as a feminine activity and may be reluctant to participate in programs perceived as female-oriented; men also exhibit higher drop-out rates from programs than women (Prins, 2006).

The effect of privilege, that is, enjoying advantages of birth such as relative wealth, freedom from violence, and being a member of the dominant culture is also important. Social class and a sense of belonging in a culture where educational pursuits are not encouraged is a common barrier to formal literacy, postsecondary education, and job-related training. When potential learners are considering returning to school and come from familial, neighborhood, and cultural communities where literacy rates and adult education participation rates are low, they risk isolating themselves from their support systems. Such stigma is compounded by individual and

institutional racism (Alford & James, 2007). This phenomenon is compounded for those who have recently immigrated to a country as they are negotiating language and identity and embracing new styles of teaching and learning (Alfred, 2003).

Current Study: Research Question and Rationale

The barriers that prevent potential learners from enrolling in and completing adult education classes are pervasive and often inexorable. It is important that the voices of those who do not enroll in adult basic education programs, or who leave programs before their goals are achieved, are invited to provide their perspectives on education. Thus the current study aimed to address the following questions: (a) Who are the potential adult students? (b) What are their learning requirements? and (c) What are the risks and benefits to education retention for these individuals?

With this study, we aimed to interview individuals who had not participated in adult literacy programs. Rather than focusing on the *exit interview* strategy and speaking only with those who leave programs, we spoke with potential adult learners in their communities. By speaking with these potential learners who have not found their way into an adult education program, we not only allowed their voices to be heard, but gained a perspective on adult education that has not been well represented in the research literature.

Method

Design

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Sub-Research Ethics Board through the Faculty of Education at the institution where the study was conducted. The participants in this study were 10 adult learners from London, Ontario. Semistructured interviews exploring the educational experiences of these adult learners were conducted by the second author.

Participants

The participants in this inquiry were a group considered to have been underserved by mainstream adult education services due to issues of gender, socioeconomics, and culture. Their expertise was crucial in developing a more complete understanding of the challenges faced by those individuals who have been unable to access formal adult learning opportunities. Participants were attending programs at a local skill-development and placement center. The center provided adult learners with assistance in job-searching, as well as a variety of training programs designed to improve employability. Participants were known to the second author through community associations and were a convenient sample. The group consisted of eight men and two women who ranged in age from 20 to 59. All participants were Caucasian, one was Latino, and all but one spoke English as their first language; their marital status is unknown.

All participants had experienced involuntary moves between residences. Some had been forced to vacate their homes due to rent increases, disputes with landlords, or overcrowding. Others had been pulled away to assist ill family members, or had moved in search of safety from violence. At the time of interview, one individual resided in a homeless shelter, and the other nine were renting rooms or suites in apartments or houses. Of the nine renters, seven lived with others including children, other family members, and friends.

All participants had previous school and work experience, but at the time of interview were in receipt of social assistance. Participants were in the first two weeks of trade training programs (i.e., custodial, construction, etc.) and had been out of school for less than one to 43 years. All had been involved in illicit behaviour, and some had previous justice involvement such as charges and periods of incarceration. The justice involvement of half of them was drug-related, and two had been involved for violence-related offenses. Three participants were survivors of violence as adults. All but two were parents with one to five children, aged 2 to adulthood.

Data Collection and Analysis

The participants were not included in the Adult Education and Training Survey (AETS) sample due to issues of poverty, language, incarceration, and residential mobility. Participants were asked about their educational history; the questions focused on important events and influences (i.e., parents, teachers) that shaped these histories. We conducted 10 interviews of approximately 1-1.5 hours in length. All but two were audiotaped. For the interviews not taped, the interviewer took extensive notes. The data were analyzed using thematic-content analysis procedures, defined as “any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1969, p. 14). This approach is appropriate for analyzing the content of a message (Jackson, 2003), and it has been used for analyzing interview data in many disciplines (Priest, Roberts, & Woods, 2002).

We followed Creswell’s (2003) recommended steps for conducting a thematic content analysis. In our analysis, we used a constant comparative method that was collaborative in nature. The primary author transcribed each interview verbatim, and all four of us read through all transcripts to gain a general sense of the meaning of the interview content. We then went through the responses to each question individually and worked as a team to identify key words and commonalities in language. Using a coding process, which involved organizing information into chunks, we then placed these words or phrases into categories. These were then linked under a set of overarching themes that we discussed extensively among ourselves until we agreed on theme names. In this process, we were able to describe detailed information about participants’ experiences. Following each interview, the second author consulted with each participant to determine if his or her experience was accurately represented so as to increase the validity of the findings.

Results

We constructed five overlapping themes from the data. These were categorized as: (a) family values and responsibilities; (b) the emotional effect of family poverty on participants’ lives; (c) disrupted school and learning experiences; (d) social exclusion and personal challenges; and (e) educational turning points and hopes for the future.

Family Values and Responsibilities

Generational, cultural, and language differences in families led to confusion and mixed messages about the importance of education. School was seen by some as unnecessary preparation for future employment and a low priority when there was work to be done at home. Family violence and the basic need for safety took legitimate priority over schooling at various points in participants’ lives. Some parents did not enforce school attendance and behavior codes

because they were preoccupied or fearful of upsetting teachers or their children. Children were called on or felt the need to assist financially at home and to leave school so that they could work more. Many parents experienced employment and child-rearing responsibilities that conflicted with school participation.

The need to attend school was not reinforced by parents or partners who could not or did not wish to help. Participants felt that if they continued in school, they would be doing it without any family support.

After I had my daughter I planned on going back to school but my ex wanted me to go to work, so I went to work.

I don't have support from my mom or my dad, no, it was me, it was me ... I was in school, working, and on welfare ... pregnant, working, school, and welfare.

Frequent moves and the need to assist at home reinforced the relatively low importance of formal schooling in the present and the future.

We moved from place to place ... we were never at one place ... I always stuck with my momma too ... like my dad was very abusive.

All I needed to know was how to read a tape measure, because I was going to work on the farm. I was smart, but didn't need to learn about algebra and other stuff like that. I needed to learn practical stuff and my grandfather could teach me that.

When work was to be done at home, school became a low priority, and when the family needed financial help, participants contributed income. Thus participants worked extensively and attended school infrequently or not at all.

When it was farming season, that's what we were doing ... and so when we had to put the crops in, we put the crops in ... and take the crops ... in between, you just do what you gotta do.

I finished my (grade) 11 and that was it ... my dad got sick so I had to go to work ... he had a company ... so I ran it.

Participants' parents also struggled with their own fears and difficulties. Their struggles left the children to make their own decisions about the importance of education and the benefits of going to school.

Yeah some of my mom's boyfriends and things like that growing up that were rather abusive ... always ... like seeing my little sister get abused and me being too small to do anything about it.

It was a bad relationship, abuse, verbal, mental, physical; I've been in and out of the hospital ... (my dad was from) that era, the depression era where you didn't need schooling.

For participants, having parental responsibilities influenced the allocation of time and energy for school, children, and work.

Making money, supporting my kid ... I tried to get other jobs but I don't have much experience working and I don't have that education ... so I'm having big trouble.

My brother is sick and he's in a wheelchair ... I'm there at nights and help out too.

Emotional Toll of Poverty

Living in poverty often caused emotional and psychological duress. One outcome of poverty was anger at the welfare system that provided modest benefits. Another outcome was fear about personal safety. For example, living in subsidized housing or shelters in neighborhoods where many others struggled with low income contributed to a deep sense of personal shame and feeling of low personal worth. These feelings were so strong that they persisted despite improvements in personal circumstances.

Although the depth of poverty ranged, it consistently meant living in subsidized housing or private market rentals where conditions were poor and unsafe.

Since I got back on social assistance I told him (landlord) I can't pay the whole month's rent because I gotta pay other stuff ... I said well I can't give up my Internet because my phone runs off my Internet so I can't give that up.

Living on social assistance was a hardship in and of itself. To withdraw from assistance, participants would need to find good jobs or paid education that was equivalent to what they were receiving, and these opportunities were few and far between. Participants also noted the hypocrisy of people who advised them to budget better when they ran out of money before the end of the month.

I've been homeless lots of times ... I'm living in a shelter right now ... the system is fucked up. They pay a shelter \$50 per night for my bed there. If they gave that money to me instead, I could find my own place to live for less.

Usually by the second week, you're totally out of money, no matter how much you try to save, cut back on your habits whatever, whatever, it just doesn't do it.

I wish that welfare workers knew what it is like to live on \$575 a month. They should all do that for two months as part of their training. It's not easy.

Despite best attempts to change their circumstances, their own childhood experiences of being poor contributed to a deep sense of being *different* and feeling *less than*.

My family we hardly ever had money, like ... we grew up in like the low income housing and everything ... like it was, it was hard ... you know getting hand-me-downs and everything.

I felt like a poor kid my whole life.

Disrupted Learning

Multiple school changes contributed to a sense of instability and inconsistency in learning. Some of these changes were due to family moves, and others were due to changes in family

composition such as separations. Negative experiences with teachers contributed to the belief that one's destiny was predetermined. Unrealistically high expectations held by teachers and perceived inability to do the work led to searching for alternatives to being in school. Some took their frustration out on the school, and others left school. Frequent moves placed them in unfamiliar schools. Each new start compounded their difficulties in adjusting and picking up where they had left off with their learning.

I've probably been in 14, 15 different schools ... if not more.

This is a new class, all new students, and I was just like, I felt so secluded ... I used to go hide in the washroom ... the place where I felt the most secure.

Being in the class and not understanding the teacher, and just trying to explain myself and then they put me in a special class. I felt like you know, I don't need to be in a special class, what I need in ESL, I can learn.

The problems with teachers and other authority figures resulted in some participants receiving counselling or a formal assessment. Such assessments sometimes led to differential, but unhelpful treatment. In some cases, negative beliefs held by teachers about participants became self-fulfilling prophecies, and problems at school had consequences at home.

I used to get into a lot of trouble in school when I was younger, and they tested me to find out that I had a high IQ. They gave me more work as a "reward" and when I did it they didn't care so I gave up trying.

I went to this (high school) counselor and then ... like she said ... you probably won't get a job in that area if you take this course ... so then she didn't think I should take it.

The teacher I had ... referred to me as "people like you" constantly ... and myself I find that a very discriminating statement ... because "people like you" refers that ... I'm somehow different than everybody else.

Those who were living on their own tried hard to make ends meet, but found that their commitments conflicted with school policies and hours.

I went to go register for grade 12, they told me that I couldn't go in because I was already seven months pregnant, and it's too much of a hazard with the stairs.

Their frustration led to serious behavior problems that would make a later return to school difficult.

I walked to the phone booth and I called a bomb threat ... it didn't take them long to figure it out, it was me ... I mean I was 13 ... I wasn't at my apex of covering my own butt. So they took me out of school and they put me in jail.

Social Exclusion and Personal Problems

Participants experienced isolation due to race, class, ability, and age differences during their early years as well as in adulthood; gender was not identified as a source of isolation. Commonalities that they found with others centered on substances (i.e., alcohol and drugs) and crime. Some experienced destructive addictions to money and lifestyles to finance drug habits. For others, substance use was part of family life. All used it to cope with stress, but found that it interfered with their health and work responsibilities. Using was also associated with involvement in the justice system, which meant charges and incarceration that later caused problems in looking for work.

Perceived differences between themselves and others led to hostile treatment, feelings of inferiority, and poor interpersonal relationships.

Sometimes I'd get picked on ... I couldn't do my times tables at the time where everybody else was doing it and I ... started feeling lower than everybody.

If you're not fitting in then you're excluded and then people don't want to socialize, people don't want to be with you if you're not fitting in.

Participants felt excluded due to race. For others it was because they had problems with the language. Some were from poor families, and others were new to the school.

I lived in a predominantly Black neighborhood and I remember parents coming out and telling their children not to play with me because I was White.

I felt like couldn't talk properly ... I was always scared of people pointing me out or belittle me or put me down and stuff so I never joined the groups and stuff. I always felt like an outsider.

We also needed ways to be able to get clothes that would not lead to us being the outcast kid due to stereotyping, just the basic discrimination that goes towards poor people in the schools.

The relationships that they formed with peers were based on common problems. Substance use and crime became focal points. In some cases, cultural affiliations influenced the perpetration of crime.

I had a Black friend, Iraqi friend, Filipino friend ... my group was very multicultural ... we all get along great because we all didn't speak English well, but our background, we came from a broken third world country so we understood each other.

We were all different backgrounds but we all socialize because of the crime life ... we all sold weed, we broke into cars.

I started getting into a different kind of group environment, like I was hanging out with street kids and that's when I started drugs.

The cycle of addiction became a powerful motivator to commit crime and to use. To do one, you would need to do the other.

Having an addiction costs a lot of money.

When I had money I drank, and didn't go to work until I needed money again.

I had a partying stage ... I got caught at 17 for selling cocaine, but they dropped it down to a possession charge because my ex took the rap.

Alcohol and drug use developed early in life and was followed by serious employment and health consequences.

Yeah, I was drinking when I was at home on the farm ... my cousins and I would make homebrew.

I used to come to work drunk ... I told the guy when he hired me that if I go out and get drunk, I'll be to work the next day ... I used to drink every other day of the week for three years ... went to work and never thought nothing of it.

The consequences of going to jail also had some negative effects that carried into work life.

If places are doing a police check on you ... then it comes up and says you have charges ... so then they're going to say, "Well we don't want to hire you because it would cost more money in insurance for us to bond you."

Turning Points and Hopes for the Future

At various life stages, participants experienced events that significantly affected expectations about education. Teachers were well positioned to be good role models, and when they took the time to show an interest and help out, their efforts stood out in positive ways. Family responsibilities, in particular, having children, were also powerful influences on decisions about the future and the role of school in it. Participants talked about the need to consider long-term goals because they imagined and wished to actualize a healthy life for their children. They wanted a future different from their past.

Teachers were influential and instrumental in decisions made during their school years as well as later in life. When participants felt that their teachers cared about them, they were more compassionate toward themselves.

I give it to my grade 8 and 9 English teacher ... if it wasn't for him, I don't think I would have made it past grade 9 ... he knew whenever something was bothering me or if I was upset ... he'd always take me aside and said, "Do you need to talk?"

I went to this night school and they have a program for basketball ... I started talking to the coach ... he liked me, my skills ... he used to tell me, "Don't hang out with these people, these people going to lead to bad things."

When criminal activities hit close to home and affected their families, participants described feeling responsible. This guilt prompted contemplation about how much it could cost their families and themselves to continue on that path.

[People broke in and] stole money and my brother was crying and shaking ... they put a gun to his head and told him they were going to shoot him ... when I came home, my brother was crying ... I was so sorry, I felt so guilty.

I want to get married I want to have kids ... drugs are never going to lead me there ... what kind of a girl would want to be with somebody who doesn't have a skill and all he knows is how to sell drugs?

The birth of children was also a major turning point. It was a time when participants thought about how all their decisions had an effect not only on themselves, but on a child who had no choice about what she or he would be exposed to early in life.

The really big change came when my sister had her first child ... I realized that his dad was a total deadbeat ... that I'd most likely end up being the male influence in his life ... so I had no interest in seeing him grow up with the lifestyle that I had led.

I don't want him to ever see me weighing out drugs or selling drugs...I don't want him to be around that sort of influence.

For the future, they concentrated on having a better income, manageable employment responsibilities, and continued learning opportunities.

I need to make myself do this, but need the help of this place to get me through the transition between welfare and work.

Going to school now isn't easy, but I have to think about the long term ... I'll have a chance to get a decent paying job and that's what I'm hoping for.

I want to go to college ... I'd like to be teacher ... I get along with kids really well.

Summary

Participants described a range of influences on their adult learning experiences. All spoke of their early years and what had happened for them in their families, schools, and broader communities. These systems were deeply personal, persistent contributors to their present-day attitudes, circumstances, and expectations.

The needs of their families to be physically safe and survive financially focused their efforts on assisting others at home. The needs were acute and immediate; long-range planning was a luxury none could afford. Being poor meant feeling and being different from others as well as continually experiencing vulnerability and fear.

In school, teachers and other professionals held tremendous influence. When they were singled out as students from struggling families, the attitudes of those in positions of authority compounded their difficulties in catching up after changing schools or being out of school for a while.

Being excluded in their communities because of race, ability, or class contributed to the development of connections with others who also felt marginalized. Together, recognizing their limited opportunities for being part of the mainstream, they did what they could do to cope. Drugs and crime became ways of getting by, alcohol was a way to cope with difficult circumstances, and the consequences were health problems and jail.

Despite their multiple challenges, participants described positive experiences with their teachers and families. The birth of children in particular was seen as a chance to start over, to improve things. They described their desire for better work and education opportunities for their children than they had had themselves.

Discussion

Most studies on adult literacy and barriers to adult learning have been premised on models of deficits and dysfunction. Furthermore, many studies examining adult education have excluded certain demographics such as low-income people, members of visible minorities, single mothers, and incarcerated people. This study adopted an approach that attempted to document the barriers to adult literacy participation for individuals who did not enroll in adult basic education programs or who left programs before their goals were achieved. The information gained from acknowledging the experience of the marginalized and oppressed adult learner provides a clearer, more accurate lens through which we view participation in education.

For the participants in this study, the factors that most affected their educational attainment as children, adolescents, and adults were often related to circumstances beyond their control. Family values, socioeconomic status, parental educational level, culture, race, and gender were all major determinants of academic interest and achievement. Many participants were born into poverty and had parents who for one reason or another did not or could not value education. Some experienced discrimination or violence as youth and were exposed to illicit substances in their family of origin. The effect of such varied and perilous circumstances cannot be objectively measured. As researchers, we are simply left with the stories, the experiences of those people whose educational success was greatly affected by marginalization, oppression, and even abuse.

We hope to reflect a more contemporary way of thinking about (and therefore studying) marginalized persons and groups. Thus barriers are conceptualized in the context of privilege, not personal deficit. This study informs the attributions we make about members of our society who have low educational achievement or literacy levels. Specifically, the attitudes and values of these individuals must be examined in terms of broader societal influences such as racism and oppression. It is important to consider that the attitudes and values of illiterate adults are not necessarily internally driven or developed by choice.

For those “invisible” members of our society who attempt to succeed in the face of adversity, education is not viewed in the same light as it would be by a privileged person. To the disadvantaged, education may be a luxury pursuit, an endeavor that may or may not lead to a means of supporting oneself and one’s family. Furthermore, the inequality still prevalent in Canadian society often acts to prevent the disadvantaged from excelling academically and thus obtaining a functional literacy level.

Two limitations to this study are worth noting. The sample used in this study was homogenous (i.e., mostly Caucasian males). Thus the codes and themes generated do not necessarily speak to the diversity of the Canadian population. Also, the interpretation of the interview data and the development of codes and themes were subjectively derived, which may introduce researcher bias. Despite these limitations, the results of this study indicate that further investigation to inform practices, policy, and the allocation of resources for adult education is warranted.

Future Directions

This study had two goals: to identify the multiple barriers to education and to identify ways to assist the “invisible” members of our society in increasing access to and retention in literacy programs. Given what we have learned from the participants in this study, it appears that interventions to prevent educational attrition should focus on children who live in unstable and impoverished circumstances. Children who come from unstable or low-income families may need additional support in terms of after-school activities, tutoring, nutritional intervention, and guidance. Also, teachers had a considerable effect on the adult learners in this study, both negative and positive. Perhaps teachers-in-training might be educated on the negative effects of poverty and familial instability (i.e., substance abuse and frequent moves) on students’ educational attainment and self-esteem. It appears that after-school programs would have been beneficial to the participants in this study to keep them motivated and focused on their studies. These programs might also have helped to prevent them from engaging in destructive or criminal behavior outside the school setting and from family violence.

For adults interested in returning to school, broader system supports that help remove barriers to participation in adult education must be made available. These supports might include day care, transportation, access to proper nutrition, and ongoing mentoring and support to ensure academic success. In addition to addressing some of the practical barriers to education, it is imperative that the current literature on barriers is complete and all-encompassing.

Conducting a thorough literature review on this topic illuminated the disparities in the literature on non-financial barriers to adult education. Few studies considered the effects of disabilities (i.e., learning or physical) on adult literacy, attendance, and completion of adult education programs. If disabilities were mentioned, it was often in the context of elementary education, centered on school-aged children and adolescents. Future research may fill such gaps, perhaps focusing on developmental life trajectories and the risk factors for poor education attainment and employment outcomes. Findings could inform government and program-specific policies for adult education.

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