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Patricia Leong Kappel
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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Reprising Roles: The Lived Experiences of GED Program Repeaters

Patricia Leong Kappel, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA

Abstract: Understanding the repeater phenomenon of students enrolled in GED preparatory programs, the factors that prompt their exits and initiate their returns, and the experiences they bring to and take from each new engagement can inform the programmatic and persistence strategies of adult basic education practitioners.

The Office of Vocational Education (OVAE) reported that in 2002-03, 40% of Adult Basic Education and ESL populations were enrolled in ABE programs (Park, Ernst, & Kim, 2007).

ABE Drop-Outs and the Stop-Out Repeater

However, sustained engagement in ABE is sabotaged by the situational barriers, associated with poverty and illiteracy, forcing many students to drop out. According to Fleischman, Fitzgerald, Morgan and Young's report for the National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs (NEAEP), 50% of adults who enroll in ABE classes and attend for at least one hour, drop out before completing 35 hours. Quigley (1997) states that at least one-third of incoming students are at risk of dropping out in the first three weeks of instruction.

As ABE students, GED program participants are especially challenged. A significant amount of study time is required, and GED credential aspirants usually need years of study to pass the test battery. Many pre-GED students, according to Reder, have very low reading levels, and the incidence of learning disabilities is high (as cited by Comings, et al., 1999). Because of its narrow, linear pathway to secondary completion, compared to other options such as an adult high school diploma or a portfolio option, Gopalakrishnan's study (1999) showed the GED was the least successful, with many students exiting adult basic education.

Not all program exits are permanent, however. Hayes (1991) found some students stopped attending programs but later returned--- some multiple times. Repeat program participants did not equate leaving to failure, nor did they equate stopping with quitting. Multiple stops and starts were regarded as intrinsic to individual circumstance rather than a deterrent to completion. These repeaters "stopped-out" but considered education important and exited programs with the intent of returning (Belzer, 1998).

The Value of a GED Repeater Study

Though drop-out literature is abundant, most is confined to high school or postsecondary students or economic consequences of termination. Little research exists on the long-term educational challenges of ABE populations (Comings, et al., 1999). Few studies have probed the reasons why individuals quit ABE programs (Tucho, 2000), why they start again, and how past educational activity impacts learning (Belzer, 2004). Integrating these elements into a qualitative study that seeks the perspectives of learner experiences could lead to an understanding of the ABE program repeater phenomenon. The experiences of GED repeaters could lend insight to the factors that motivate these individuals to re-enter programs multiple times. In addition, these experiences could identify the elements that encourage repeat efforts and thereby inform the programmatic and persistence strategies of ABE practitioners.

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