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C. Amelia Davis
University of Tennessee

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G.E.D in 3 Voices: Reconsidering what we perceive as “deficits”

C. Amelia Davis
University of Tennessee

Keywords: GED, students, instructors, stories

Abstract: In this research, I experiment re-presenting particular stories through poetic texts that contextualize and capture rich detail while honoring difference in experience between GED students and instructors. Drawing upon the evocative and consequential nature of performative writing I attempt to weave images through meaning, inviting readers to fill in the gaps, noting places where they are pushed to spaces that are difficult to fully understand or interpret.

As an adult education practitioner and a novice qualitative researcher who believes in the power of stories – their power to heal, their power to oppress, their power to empower – I understand the importance of sharing stories and making them accessible so that they become stories the reader will not be able to put down but will carry with him (Anders, 2007). I am drawn towards poetic texts that push the boundaries of traditional narrative presentation and evoke emotional responses (Denzin, 2003). It is through student stories that we gain more insight into instructors and vice versa. The student experiences re-presented here conjoin with previous field literature and research findings displaying how prior schooling experience acts to powerfully influence one’s overall educational experiences (Anyon, 1981; Belzer 2004). The experience of the composite GED instructor reiterates both the cognitive and social deficit perspective outlined by Beder (1991a; 1991b) and Fingeret (1984; 1992). The stories in this preliminary research are not explicit constructions of ‘truth’ but rather, one version of multidimensional and storied lived experiences of GED students and instructors.

Research previously conducted in the field of student and instructor perceptions and implicit theory has been conceptualized within a “deficit perspective” framework (Beder, 1991a, 1991b; Carmack, 1992; Dirkx & Spurgin, 1992; Fingeret, 1984; 1992), more specifically on social deficits. Fingeret (1984) spoke to the fact that the Adult Education Act reflects language that characterizes low literate adults as being dependent and unable to function effectively. Because this sort of language pervades professional and political systems, she claims it has the potential to guide instructional methods since “the deficit model emphasizes teaching illiterate adults the “correct” cultural norms” (p. 17). Regarding instruction, the social deficit perspective risks creating an environment where instructors are socially superior to learners (Beder, 1991; Dirkx and Spurgin, 1992). Beder (1991b) describes the social deficit perspective as one that disparages the subcultures from which adult basic education students come hence, limiting the instructors’ understanding of the “meaning their students ascribe the world,” and stymieing their ability to plan instruction geared towards students’ own experiences (p. 145). Dirkx and Spurgin (1992) posit the deficit perspective is reflected in the implicit theories instructors use to guide their instruction due to the fact that when instructors describe their students, they use phrases that reflect implicit norms or values.

Despite the previous research conducted, I argue that the voices of the GED students and instructors have not yet been truly heard. There is more to discover through their own words. In this ongoing study, which seeks to (1) determine adult basic education instructors’ perceptions of

their pedagogy and interaction with their students and (2) to explore adult student experiences in GED classes, I have constructed the re-presentation of data in poetic form entirely from the words of the participants - GED students and instructors.

The power of poetic re-presentation becomes evident in these stories. Through re-presenting the stories side-by-side, not privileging one voice over another, the poems begin to take on one voice that can be interpreted as a mutual understanding of experience between instructors and students. If this is true, what does it mean? What if there is a mutual understanding of experience between GED students and instructors? How would this impact previous research and how would this impact instructional practice? Does that sort of understanding come from tenure of practice or is it knowledge implied and learned through social interaction? These questions signify the need for further research.

Researchers must continue to explore how GED student experiences compare with the experience of GED instructors. This type of social awareness and sensitivity can allow practitioners, literacy volunteers, and program administrators to unpack the issues adult students face both in and out of the classroom. This type of awareness may lead to fewer presuppositions on the part of instructors, opening up basic education programs that are less socially, culturally, and racially biased. As socially conscious educators, we are obligated to let adult students know that they are welcomed, and that their experiences are valid. The result has the potential to increase participation and be rewarding for both the student and the instructor. Interpreting the stories of GED students and instructors will move us in that direction.

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