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# **The Power of Cliques, Friendships, and Social Networks in Strengthening Adult Basic Education Student Persistence and Retention**

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***Abstract:*** *This issue of student persistence and retention continues to plague most adult learning centers. This paper develops a theoretical perspective that uses social capital and network theory to explain why some students succeed in an ABE/GED program and go on to pursue post-secondary education and why some do not.*

## **The Problem**

Persistence and retention of adult basic education (ABE) students has been and continues to be a critical problem that many adult learning centers have yet to solve (Balmuth, 1988; Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999; Merrifield, 1998; Quigley, 1998). There are many reasons and excuses for low retention rates, most of which address low socioeconomic status, unfortunate life experiences, institutional barriers, and other situational barriers. As Quigley (1998) so eloquently points out reflecting on his professional experience as an adult learning center director, “I tried harder. I searched for more and better materials. I employed the best techniques I could find. I was as supportive as any teacher could be. But, somehow, even with my best efforts, things didn't change much. Some students stayed. Some didn't. I just couldn't get a handle on it. My best wasn't enough” (p. 1). This purpose of this research is to explore ABE student persistence and retention through the lens of cliques, friendships, and social networks. It connects the disciplinary perspectives of adult basic education, social network theory, and social capital theory.

The stereotypic argument can be made that the general nature of ABE students is the problem. They often come from disadvantaged backgrounds, have had a history of failure in their prior schooling, have had a history of not fitting into society, some have a criminal background, others had a teenage pregnancy, and others struggled with drug abuse. Though this picture does not apply to all ABE students, unfortunately it applies to many and the result is that a large and growing group of students are enrolling in ABE programs as a last chance effort to improve their educational skills in literacy and numeracy with the goal of passing the general educational development (GED) test. Yet, if they do not persist and are not retained, their ABE experience becomes another failed effort.

## **Cliques, Friendships and Networks**

In the winter of 2007-2008, I directed a statewide research project that included 5 focus groups with 69 ABE students that sought to describe and understand the collective experience of their adult learning experience. This qualitative research using structured focus groups was designed to better understand student realities through their words and interactions, and to make decisions about future programming and direction. Though much was learned from these students that continues to be used by adult learning centers in Kansas to improve their curriculum and programming, two items emerged from this research that are critical to student persistence and retention—a personal relationship with a student's teacher as a mentor and the

new cliques, friendships, and social networks that are formed in their adult learning center. Both were achieved unintentionally and without design.

Many students in these focus groups shared how their parents, families, spouses and friends did not see any value in earning a GED, and were told that they were “wasting their time” attending classes and working so hard. In order to succeed they needed to find others who supported them in this effort. One student in an emotionally moving statement said, “My old friends that I don’t associate with anymore said, ‘Oh, you don’t need an education.’” She went on to state that she had to leave these friends behind and form new friendships in her classes. Another student stated, “Most people come in everyday. Like, I’m friends with almost all the guys in my school and most of the girls. Twenty people and everybody gets along with everybody pretty much. It’s like we’re best friends.” He described this new circle of friends as a clique where everyone not only helped each other with homework and assignments but also provided rides when someone’s car broke down or shared babysitters so everyone could make it to class. The power of these new friendships was a key factor to these students’ success.

People who share common interests and purpose come together to form friendships, support groups and cliques. Framed like this, cliques can be empowering for ABE/GED students who all too often have been disenfranchised by previous educational experiences and in society at large. As do many teachers, I often encourage students who express their frustration in understanding a concept or completing an assignment to seek assistance from other students by pointing out that “they are not alone” in this struggle to learn and understand.

Using these focus groups as starting point, this research investigates the powerful relationship between cliques, friendships, and social networks within the social construction of education, classrooms, and curriculum. Hallinan and Smith (1989) argue that classroom structure and organization can affect the formation of “friendship cliques” in pre-adolescent students. This has also been my observation of adult learners. Thomas’s (2000) research with college students—similar in age to many ABE students—shows that social networks improve student integration and persistence. He relies heavily upon Tinto’s (1993) Student Integration Model to establish the relationship between integration and persistence.

Findings from the New England Adult Learner Persistence Project (Nash and Kallenbach, 2009) show that “a sense of belonging and community” (p.65) was an important component to strengthening student persistence. Comings, Parella and Soricone (1999) in their research on persistence among pre-GED students found that “The strongest positive force [keeping them in the program] mentioned by adult students was the support of people, particularly their families, friends, teacher, and fellow students...” (p.6). Drago-Severnson, Helsing, Kegan, Popp, Broderick and Portnow (2001) use a social constructivist model in their research to show that cohorts and collaborative learning increase the learning experience while strengthening a sense of belonging and emotional support. Their research showed that many students looked at their fellow students as “family” who showed concern for their well-being and offered help and encouragement when needed (p.20). In this sense “family” is an abstraction of a new social network in their adult learning center that strengthens their persistence to complete their educational degree, but does not necessarily replace or usurp their primary family or network. What appears to be missing from these seminal research studies is a comparison to how these educational networks relate to, replace, or supplement the adult learner’s primary social network, friendships or family.

## Social Capital and Network Theory

Student social networks can be viewed using social capital and network theory, especially if we want to analyze how students can minimize negative influences that might be attributed to their primary clique or social network. Social capital is generally defined as either centered on the individual or small group (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman 1993) or as a feature of communities, organizations, or nations (Putnam, 1995). This research uses social capital within individual and small group construction. It is something that is seldom intentionally built, especially among younger age cohorts, yet is fungible in that it is traded with other individuals through a complex set of values and cultural knowledge. Portes (1998) defines it as a source of social control, a source of family benefits and nonfamily networks. For young adults who have yet to develop their professional career, it is in part something that is inherited through their family and the community in which they are raised or in which they have grown to become a part of. It is the network in which they also develop their educational and work values and personal aspirations. Within this construction social capital is closely aligned to cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu (1986), which embodies a certain sense of fatalism in that the person's future is controlled by his/her culture. Coleman (1993) refers to this capital as primordial social ties which shape an individual's social norms. Hence, if a person is born into a marginalized environment he/she may inherit a set of values that devalues education within the public schools and post-secondary education. This subculture among low socioeconomic groups often has a limited sense of self-worth and potentiality. Therefore, it can influence and predict social and economic class mobility, thereby guaranteeing that the individual is a prisoner of their birthright.

Granovetter (1983) using network theory describes the differences between weak and strong social ties. "Acquaintances (*weak ties*) are less likely to be socially involved with one another than are our close friends (*strong ties*)" (p.201). Whereas close friends with strong ties represent high-density networks, acquaintances who seldom associate with each other nor readily provide fungible relationships represent low-density networks. Another way to envision this is that high-density networks have strong bonding among its individual members. And acquaintances represent bridges to either high or low-density networks that may or may not evolve into stronger linkages. For many adult education students, their primordial network is their high-density network, and their schoolmates are merely acquaintances within a low-density network. Therefore combining network theory, social capital theory, and what we know about student persistence and retention, for many adult students each acquaintance represents a potentially important bridge between two high-density networks or high to low density networks.

Weak ties and low-density networks are important to a group if it is to expand its fungible assets beyond the clique. For an individual, weak ties are essential to social and economic mobility. Granovetter's (1983) analysis of weak ties suggests that among lower socioeconomic groups ties to new networks are mostly among acquaintances of family and friends and do not serve to broaden opportunity by creating bridges to higher socioeconomic groups, which is in sharp contrast to higher socioeconomic groups that use these weak ties to bridge social and economic distance. Using Peter Blau's (1974) pyramidal construction of class structure, Granovetter (1983) argues that lower socioeconomic classes have "greater the relative frequency of strong ties" (p.210). Blau's (1974) "concept of social structure starts with simple and concrete definitions of component parts and their relations" (p. 616). These parts include class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and other socioeconomic strata. People reside in these social structures that determine their differences, spheres of influence, communication networks and social position

and influence. According to Blau, social structure implies social differentiation. Within these social structures all individuals are inclined toward homophily, where they choose friends who share common traits and values. Within lower socioeconomic groups this results in higher density of strong internal linkages (bonds) and lower density of weaker external linkages (bridges). Strong social capital requires somewhat of a balance between bridging and bonding linkages, albeit the bonding linkages are invariably stronger than the bridging linkages. What this therefore implies is that those groups or organizations with high-density internal bonds have lower social capital because their bridging capacity is lower. For low-income or marginalized groups this means that the individual is more dependent upon the group and benefits less from intergroup relationships or networks.

### **Discussion**

While it is generally accepted that students are more persistent and have higher retention if they feel a sense of belonging and have personal relationships with teachers and other students, what has not been researched is the influence of primary cliques or primordial networks upon school friends and cliques. If the family or student's primordial peer group does not value education and the benefits of a GED, then the student is less likely to receive encouragement or support from this group as she/he pursues their education. In this situation, in order to survive and succeed in school the student must become more dependent upon new less dense and less secure social networks, friendships and cliques that are created in school. For some students this transition from their primordial network to their school network suggest that the student must at some time sever or limit some part of their relationship with their primary peer group. This transition from a secure peer group to a less secure peer group requires further exploration and research. While it can be argued that this transition is necessary in order to move out of lower socioeconomic cultures to higher-level cultures with greater political capital, this is not merely a social construction problem. It requires an understanding of Freud's (1962) psychological instinctual forces of the "id" and the organized realistic forces of the "ego", resulting in the "psychic prison" created in each of us that limits what we see as our reality (Morgan, 1997).

Furthermore if the student persists and achieves their GED, what happens when they leave their school? Will they move back to their primary clique that devalues education, or will they transition into post-secondary education? Developing strong linkages among students within an adult learning center will not likely create bridges with higher socioeconomic networks if the majority of the student peer network is from the same lower socioeconomic culture. Yet they typically do have strong enough bridges to move to a technical school or community college, at which point new social networks are potentially created—especially at the community college level. This stepladder approach to education then allows potential movement to a four-year college or university, at which point opportunities may be created to develop bridges or linkages to higher socioeconomic networks that possess stronger cultural capital. Hence when adult learners move from a high density, lower socioeconomic primordial network via their educational pathway are they forming new social networks at each stage of their educational advancement? Education, therefore, is not only shaped by academic meritocracy but also by the pathway to higher socioeconomic capital via a series of progressively more influential social networks where each subsequent network has weaker high density bonds and stronger low density bridges.

The implication of this research is that ABE student persistence and retention can be

strengthened through positive cliques, friendships, and social networks that supplement or replace primordial cliques and networks. I also argue based upon my focus group research and experience with ABE students that intentional classroom and program strategies that strengthen school cliques and friendships can be designed and implemented in adult learning centers, requiring little or no cost. If successfully implemented these strategies potentially will improve student retention and persistence, as well as transition rates to post-secondary education.

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