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Abstract: This qualitative case study investigated the impact of WIA funding on the providers and planners of programs for incumbent workers in one Midwest WIA region, examining the collaboration and power conflicts that are part of planning and implementing this legislation. The study applied Matland's (1995) ambiguity/conflict framework to WIA implementation.

Introduction

As with many adult education initiatives, policy implementation and program planning may be influenced by power and collaboration. Federal polices are a driving force in the collaboration of adult education providers (Hawley, Sommers, & Meléndez, 2005). One federal policy that requires close collaboration is the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). Since passage of the WIA in 1998, adult educators have worked to implement this act in ways that are beneficial to the learners who need skills to become and remain employable. One of the goals of the WIA is to help businesses and incumbent workers retain their competitiveness in a global economy. Incumbent workers are those currently employed in the labor force that may need additional skills or training to remain employed. Workforce development for the incumbent workforce is vital to the continued success of the U. S. Economy. While the WIA specifically provided for the inclusion of incumbent workers (Patel & Strawn, 2003), few resources have been directed to upgrading the skills of this group of workers. Incumbent workers may be served by WIA funds in three ways: through the regular employment and training services available at one-stop centers, through on-the-job training or special employer-based curriculums provided by the local WIA system, and through state-reserve funding that allows the states to provide innovative services directly (Barnow & King, 2003; Savner, 1999; US Department of Labor, 1999; Workforce Investment Act, 1998).

The incumbent worker aspect of the WIA act has received little attention in research and the literature, and as this study revealed, even in practice. Thus, the problem this research examines is the lack of research focusing on conflict and collaboration among program providers and implementing agencies for incumbent workers since the passage of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. The purpose of this research was to investigate the impact of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding allocations on the program providers and implementing agencies for incumbent workers in one specific WIA region in the Midwest. This research paper presents the findings of a case study investigating the impact of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding allocations on the providers and planners of programs for incumbent workers in one specific WIA region in the Midwest. It further examines the collaboration and power conflicts that are part of implementing this legislation.

Cervero and Wilson (2006) explain that educational programming is a political process that defines at the macro level, "*who* is at the planning table making evaluative judgments" and at the micro level the "political dynamics that occur *at* the table" (p. 230). WIA's effects on program planners for incumbent workers can be better understood by asking what the decisions reveal about stakeholders' political objectives, how their spoken objectives conflict with their

actions, and how both hinder or advance the explicit program objectives.

Literature Review

The literature review covers two key areas. The first focus is a review of the WIA and the related studies. The second focus is on the importance of critical theory and educational program planning in understanding the relevance of the research questions to implementation of the WIA. The literature review found that the WIA System intended to include incumbent workers; but the literature did not address how WIA implementation influenced the providers and planners of programs for incumbent workers (Hopkins, 2006). Critical theory provides adult educators and program planners with a theoretical framework for understanding the role of power "in maintaining the hegemony of privileged individuals and groups, existing class structures, access to limited resources, and control of productive capacity" (Cervero & Wilson, 2006, p. 176). Critical theory leads researchers to ask whose interests are served and can illuminate how these interests and relations serve as a catalyst for social change (Monaghan & Cervero, 2006).

The study also applied Matland's (1995) ambiguity/conflict framework to frame the WIA implementation, using it as a lens to consider policy conflict and ambiguity. Matland, as well as Cervero and Wilson (2006), emphasize the political nature of planning. Matland's (1995) ambiguity/conflict framework categorizes policy implementation conflict into jurisdiction conflict, which involve disagreements over the roles that participants play, and interpretation conflict, which is conflict that arises from differences in the interpretation of a policy.

Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative case study approach (Merriam, 1998). We chose the case study approach because it allowed us to gain understanding and knowledge about the conflict and collaboration that occurs among program providers and implementing agencies for incumbent workers in one specific WIA region in the Midwest. In particular, the qualitative approach lends itself to "understanding a phenomena in all its complexity and within a particular situation and environment" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 13). According to Merriam, a case study is an "intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single unit or bounded system" (1998, p. 12). Our research involved a bounded system because of the finite number of participants from which the information and understandings could be gathered. Trustworthiness' (validity) was ensured through multiple methods of data collection, building an audit trail, working with a research team, and utilizing member checks.

Six participants were purposively selected and interviewed to create a cross section of both state and local people involved with the WIA implementation process in the region. The participants were Mary, a current one-stop local center director; John, a local business representative and former Workforce Investment Board member; Jane, the Midwestern county's manager of service and performance for workforce development; and Dan, Ann and Dave, three upper-level managers at the state's workforce development office. Interview data were analyzed through the constant comparative method, using Matland's (1995) ambiguity/conflict framework. Matland's framework divides policy implementation conflict into *jurisdiction conflict* and *interpretation conflict*. Jurisdictional conflict involves disagreements over the roles that participants play. Interpretation conflict is conflict that arises from differences in the interpretation of a policy. Matland divides *ambiguity* into two types: *goal ambiguity* and *means ambiguity*. Goal ambiguity refers to a lack of clarity on a policy's intended results—the *goals* of the policy. Means ambiguity refers to a lack of clarity on the *process* by which a policy is to be

implemented (Cohen, Timmons & Fesko, 2005; Matland, 1995).

Findings

Participants in this study shared an understanding of WIA's two-fold goal of creating a seamless, locally tailored workforce development system and of developing the skills of the incumbent workforce. They agreed that the intent of WIA was to ensure that the training needs of business influenced the workforce development system. They also agreed that WIA requirements called for a system that emphasized job placement for the unemployed. This emphasis required everyone who sought WIA-funded career training to undergo job placement and general-literacy and job-skill development before accessing training. However, an incumbent worker could not access training unless the first two services failed to provide them an increase in income. These requirements presented obstacles to incumbent workers seeking the additional skill development they needed to maintain their current employment and improve their ability to contribute to the competitiveness of the local workforce.

Analysis utilizing Matland's (1995) framework revealed four themes in the data. *Change Agent Conflict* relates to conflicts about what the roles should be under the WIA system and who should foster implementation of the new policy. *Power Broker Conflict* corresponds to who had the real power irrespective of the assigned change agent roles. *Policy Interpretation Conflict* revolved around the participants' interpretation of the intention of the legislation toward incumbent workers. Finally, *Ambiguity of Means* addresses the clarity (or lack thereof) of the process for carrying out the programs to help incumbent workers.

Change Agent Conflict

This conflict centered on whom had the power to promote change. In this instance, the conflict was one that showed that the local level stakeholders had very different perceptions about the roles than did the state level stakeholders. The power structures from the previous JTPA legislation, existing prior to WIA implementation, continued after implementation, blocking substantial changes and favoring maintenance of the previous system. Both local level participants, John and Mary, cited strong resistance to the role of a change agent by those in power under the old and continuing legislation bureaucracy. John stated that the reality was that "though we were led to believe that there was going to be a change…there was a bureaucracy in place and it was not going to change." Mary's perception echoed Johns', as she explained the initial enthusiasm for change that did not take place: "Strategic calls were made by people [to say] this is different, this is not the bureaucracy…this is a chance to influence the training that's happening for people who are coming up… And some very important business people agreed to step up and make this be different. And, it wasn't. It wasn't."

Power Broker Conflict

This second jurisdictional conflict involved a disagreement in the perception of who had the real power to be a change agent. Local-level study participants perceived the state as maintaining control over the redesign of the workforce development system while, paradoxically, state level participants said that the power to redesign the system had moved from their hands to the local level. Mary stated that, "there was some politics with the old JTPA board that really forced the chairman who had the potential to drive this differently to say I'm not doing this, and walk out of a meeting, and the rest was history." The chairperson resigned and vowed not to be involved with the county-level workforce investment.

This jurisdictional conflict involving the disagreement in the perception of power between the local and state levels was demonstrated in the development of the state "option" system for WIA. Participants from the local level viewed this option as a state initiative to diminish local power. This evidence suggests that while the state administrators saw power over the system design moving to the local level, the participants at the local levels perceived the state as retaining and using that power, working to create a consistent state system when the legislation clearly was designed to include local administrators.

Policy Interpretation Conflict

This conflict centered on how participants interpreted WIA's language regarding the incumbent workforce: some study participants' interpretation was that the purpose of the legislation was to focus on incumbent worker training, while others interpreted incumbent workers as a minor concern of the legislation. Mary questioned whether incumbent worker training was an acceptable interpretation of WIA: "There have been several communities that have found ways to use these resources for incumbent workers but I would push that somebody might question whether that was legitimate." Dave who summed up the state level participants' interpretations, "I think that it was for incumbent worker training….What it did was it told the locals they could use their money for incumbent worker training, but it didn't give them any extra money for it."

Mary pointed out that early in the WIA process, all the participants interpreted the legislation to include incumbent worker training. However, there was conflict among the participants in the perception of the importance of the incumbent workforce in the achievement of the goals of WIA, the definition of incumbent worker, and interpretations regarding the supply or lack of resources to fund the incumbent worker portion of WIA.

Ambiguity of Means

This theme revealed that participants who were planners and providers did not find clear guidance on the process for providing incumbent worker development. Instead, they found guidance only on developing a system for serving youth, the unemployed and very low-income workers as individuals, independent of their workplace. Jane, the local legislative expert, made it clear that WIA did not provide much guidance about incumbent worker training. She explained, "If you look through [the guidelines] there's really not a lot…in terms of providing services to employers, although you are expected to…help employers [with] incumbent worker kind of training." The state level administrators agreed that trying to apply a fair standard in incumbent worker training is a major challenge, raising the issue of how to decide whose employees receive such training. As was made clear from the comments of the participants in this study, the legislation did not have any clear means, funding, accountabilities, or even incentives, for addressing incumbent worker training needs.

Discussion

The two conclusions drawn from this research reveal that the WIA affected planners and providers in ways that are contrary to the stated goals of the legislation. First, the WIA created a systematic structure that inhibited providers and planners from collaborating and engaging in incumbent workforce development. Second, the WIA implementation disempowered business representatives, which then lead to them becoming disengaged in supporting government-based workforce development efforts.

WIA Structure Prevented Incumbent Workforce Development

Several legislation issues contributed to WIA creating a system that supported services to

only unemployed and new workers, while effectively preventing providers from addressing incumbent workers. Although WIA included incumbent workers in its goals, it laid out specific tasks and requirements for serving the unemployed without providing similar guidance for addressing the incumbent worker. The study participants indicated that the resulting WIA system did not have the issue of incumbent workforce development as a goal, and further, it did not offer the structure, services, or expertise necessary to address incumbent worker issues. This is evident in their descriptions of how the system required a quick increase in individual income for incumbent workers as the criteria for both eligibility and for program success.

Disempowering and Disengaging Business Representatives

WIA's language emphasized incumbent worker development, local decision making, business influence on implementation, and services to employers. This created an expectation that local business representatives would be empowered to change the county workforce development system significantly to help employers provide incumbent worker training. However, WIA made no provisions for that training. As reported by some participants in this study, many businesspeople lost hope that the system was willing or able to collaborate with businesses and actually address workforce development.

Several forces contributed to this. First, even though businesspeople were brought into the system for guidance on how to address their workforce needs, the mandated one-stop structure did not provide a way to offer employer-based workforce development. Second, participants described a system that resisted change. Efforts to direct the system toward incumbent worker development were blocked by the power structures that existed prior to WIA implementation. Those in power used WIA's explicit requirements to defend these decisions. Because of these issues, trust between business representatives and public sector bureaucracies broke down. Businesses must be able to anticipate changes in the economic environment so they can respond quickly. Failure to do so can result in devastating effects to the businesses. Conflict in this area contributed to the breakdown in relationships between the public and private sector while disempowering and disengaging business leaders who had been highly motivated and committed to contributing to the workforce development system with the passage of the WIA legislation.

Conclusion

Economic development considers improved competitiveness of the workforce as a whole as one basis for evaluation, in addition to the benefit provided to each individual, making economic competitiveness a driving force behind decision making. While the services to meet individual needs are still primary, local employers' workforce needs play a much greater role in determining what skills are addressed and how they are addressed. Similar to Alfred's (2007) study examining how welfare reform legislation failed to adequately address black women's economic development, our study concludes that the WIA system design did not consider the context of incumbent workforce development from either the employers' perspective or the incumbent workers' perspective

Including adult education practitioners at the planning table is a way to ensure well-planned programs (Cervero & Wilson, 2006; Hansman & Mott, 2001; Hansman, 2005) and informed policy development that meets all stakeholders' objectives. Adult educators as program planners can link employers with workers by addressing and eliminating assumptions about skill needs, identifying the skill gaps between a particular workforce and the job-skill demands of their workplace, thus closing that gap in a way that facilitates the transfer of learning to the workplace. Finally, if business is to rely on the government for support in workforce development, trust must be rebuilt among all the WIA stakeholders and attention paid to the timeline conflict.

It is impossible to separate power dynamics and the need for collaboration from policy implementation and program planning. Too often, adult educators focus on a small part of our own pond and avoid moving upstream to find the source of the problems or engage in work of policymaking that directly affects adult learners. It is important that adult educators recognize that program planning in many contexts is constrained by public policy and become active in policy development and implementation to further the development of adult learners.

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