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Who Volunteers to Provide Reading Instruction for Adults and What Do They Know?

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Abstract: Volunteer instructors make a substantial contribution to adult literacy, yet little research has been conducted to better understand not only who the volunteers are but what they know about reading instruction. This study describes a national sample of 124 volunteer instructors and their knowledge of providing reading instruction for adults.

In the adult education field, volunteers have played a major role in providing reading instruction. Volunteers contribute in a wide variety of adult literacy settings for example, community-based organizations, libraries, correctional facilities, and federally funded adult literacy programs.

In general, about 60% of adult literacy instructors are volunteers (Ziegler, Bell, & McCallum, 2007). Although volunteers make a substantial contribution, very little research has been conducted that focuses exclusively on them and their role in instruction. Of the research that has been conducted, most explores volunteers' motivation for working with adults who want to improve their reading ability (Sandlin & St. Clair, 2004). While volunteers' motivation is an important aspect of their role, it does not address their knowledge about providing reading instruction. Only a few studies have directly explored instructional practices or professional development specifically related to reading (Belzer 2006a; Belzer, 2006b; Ceprano, 1995). Most of these studies used qualitative data from small groups of participants or programs so that the little knowledge we have about volunteers as instructors is very narrow in scope. We do not know, for example, what volunteers' educational backgrounds are, their experience in teaching adults, how they view their preparation for teaching, or the general level of knowledge about providing instruction to adult learners. The purpose of this study was to address the gap in the literature by describing a national sample of volunteer instructors and their knowledge of providing reading instruction.

Literature Review

Adult literacy in the United States consists of diverse programs that have different funding sources, occur in different settings, and have no agreed-upon standards for instructional quality. For example, 40% of the personnel reported by state-administered adult education programs in program year 2000 were volunteers. In many community-based adult literacy programs, including those offered in local libraries, all of the instructors might be volunteers. Although programs are possibly affiliates of a national organization, they are autonomous in the way they address the needs of the local community (Evans & Hugo, 2000). Correctional facilities provide adult literacy education for up to 25% of adults who are incarcerated and who have not graduated from high school (Harlow, 2003). This broad spectrum of program types challenges researchers because data from programs are difficult to collect and impossible to aggregate.

Adding to the challenge of multiple program types and settings is the preparation of volunteers to provide adult literacy instruction. Most volunteers in adult literacy provide one-on-one instruction, and in some cases small group instruction, rather than classroom-based

instruction. The types of instructional materials and methods vary widely across programs; the selection of curricula, for example, is generally up to the local program staff. Most adult literacy programs require some type of training before volunteers begin providing instruction to adult learners. Training varies from program to program depending on many different factors such as the size of the program, resources, the range of instructional philosophies, and assumptions about literacy and adult learning. Most volunteers receive from 2 to 20 hours of training prior to beginning instruction (Belzer, 2007).

Most of the current research focuses on why individuals are motivated to become volunteer literacy instructors (Sandlin & St. Clair, 2004). Only a few studies conducted in the last 15 years examined the quality of instruction provided by volunteers; these focused primarily on small samples of programs or individuals (Belzer, 2006a, 2006b; Ceprano, 1995). Belzer (2006a), for example, studied three tutor/student pairs randomly selected from different programs. Pairs worked together for at least three months prior to the beginning of the study. Findings suggested that the adult learners and volunteer instructors reported that they had achieved success. Volunteers did face some challenges. For example, they had difficulty selecting texts that were both of interest to students and appropriate to their reading level. Selecting appropriate materials is among many challenges that volunteer instructors face. Because volunteers offer approximately 60% of adult literacy instruction and because little is known about this population, the purpose of this study is to provide information to the field about the characteristics of volunteer instructors including their knowledge of teaching reading.

Theoretical Framework and Perspective

This study is based on a framework of research-based reading instructional strategies for adults that was developed through a federal grant from the National Institute for Literacy (Kruidenier, 2002). The framework was developed by the Adult Literacy Research Working Group (ALRWG) convened by the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) and the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). Members of ALRWG evaluated research focusing on reading conducted primarily with adult learners. Their work, reported in *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction (RBP)* (Kruidenier, 2002), identified principles, trends, and ideas for providing reading instruction to adults. The framework consists of four key aspects of reading: alphabets, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension and ways to assess them. Even though the body of research on adult reading instruction is relatively small, it describes instructional strategies that have received at least some level of scientific support. These aspects of reading are separated for research purposes but overlap in actual instructional settings (Snow & Strucker, 1999). While the use of this framework narrowed our understanding of reading, it facilitated our ability to gather relevant data from participants.

Research Design

Data for this study was drawn from the standardization data from a larger study to assess the knowledge that practitioners have for providing reading instruction to adults. We chose a quantitative design because of the size of our sample and its suitability for our research questions. Research questions included the following: What do volunteer instructors know about teaching reading to adults? Is there a difference based on highest level of education? Is there a relationship between volunteer instructors' knowledge and their years of experience teaching adults? Is there a difference based on teacher certification? Is there a relationship between knowledge and hours of

training? And finally, is there a difference between volunteer instructors and paid instructors? Volunteers were limited to those who provide instruction.

Participants. Our sample included responses from 124 individuals who described themselves as volunteer instructors or tutors. Most were female with a mean age of 53. With regard to their educational level, 32% had less than a bachelor's degree, 28% had a bachelor's degree; 29% had a master's degree, and 5% had an education specialist or doctoral degree. Volunteers worked in a variety of settings including community colleges, community-based organizations, family literacy programs, local school systems, libraries, and correctional facilities. Finally, participants rated their preparation for providing instruction as follows: 23% very well, 31% well, 30% moderately, and 16% minimally prepared. Participants were from four regions of the United States; 57 from the Northeast, 13 from the Southeast, 12 from the Midwest, and 42 from the West. Because responses from each area were not uniform, the participants are not necessarily representative of volunteer instructors as a whole.

Instrument. The *Assessment of Reading Instruction Knowledge – Adults (ARIK-A)* was designed as a professional development and research tool. The *ARIK-A* assesses teachers' and volunteer instructors' knowledge of providing reading instruction to adults. Items for the assessment were drawn from primarily from the framework developed by Kruidenier (2002). In the development and standardization of the *ARIK-A*, we worked with an expert panel recruited from the field of adult literacy and followed established procedures for creating a standardized assessment instrument. The *ARIK-A* consists of two main parts; the first requested information from participants and the second directly assessed their knowledge of providing reading instruction to adults. The instrument had 60 items that assessed the four aspects of reading and assessment. Approximately one third of the items assess factual knowledge and two thirds assess ability to apply knowledge. The objective portion of *ARIK-A* provides an individual score for each scale and a composite score for the combined scales.

Procedure. We received help in recruiting volunteers from state offices of adult education and professional development staff. For standardization purposes, we identified the number of full-time and part-time instructors and volunteer instructors in four regions of the country: Region 1: Northeast; 2: Southeast; 3: Midwest; and 4: West. We mailed 994 assessment packets, 511 were returned, and 468 were usable for standardization. In total, 124 individuals who identified themselves as volunteer instructors completed and returned the assessment packet; 57 were received from Region 1, 12 from Region 2, 13 from Region 3, and 42 from Region 4. Although we have representation from all four regions of the U.S., the participants are not necessarily representative of volunteer instructors as a whole. Complete description of the assessment and the standardization process can be found in the *ARIK-A Manual* (Ziegler, Bell, & McCallum, in press).

Results

Descriptive statistics, correlational analyses, and mean comparisons (*t* tests and one way analyses of variance) were conducted to provide information about volunteer instructors' knowledge of teaching reading to adults as determined by performance on the *ARIK-A*. These data address the first research question: What do volunteer instructors know about teaching reading to adults? Volunteers' mean scores on each of the five *ARIK-A* scales (Alphabetic,

Fluency, Vocabulary, Comprehension, and Assessment) were similar, ranging from about 8 to 9 raw score points. Each scale has 14 items; on the average volunteers demonstrated a little over 60% mastery on each scale. A repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated no significant difference [$F(1, 124) = .9, p = .33$] among the scale scores. Consequently, subsequent analyses were conducted using only the *ARIK-A* total score.

To determine if level of knowledge differed based on level of education, a one way ANOVA was conducted, comparing total mean scores on the *ARIK-A* for volunteers with less than a bachelors' degree, a bachelor's degree, and those with a master's degree or higher. The ANOVA indicated significant differences in knowledge based on level of education [$F(2, 114) = 7.99, p = .001$]. Post hoc comparisons (Tukey *a*) indicated that those with a bachelor's degree or less earned significantly lower scores than those with both bachelor's ($p = .003$) and master's degree or higher ($p = .002$). However, there was no difference in knowledge for those with bachelor's as compared to those with master's or higher ($p > .05$).

The third research question focuses on the relationship between knowledge and years of experience teaching adults, adolescents, and children and was addressed via correlational analyses. Significant positive correlations were found between years of experience teaching adolescents ($r_s = .20, p = .027$) and for years of experience teaching adults ($r_s = .33, p < .001$) but not for years of experience teaching children ($p > .05$). In general, as years of experience teaching adolescents or adults increased, volunteers' *ARIK-A* score tended to increase.

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a difference in reading instructional knowledge based on teacher certification. Volunteers who were certified earned significantly higher scores ($M = 39.38$) on the *ARIK-A* than those who were not certified ($M = 34.12; t = 2.45(111), p < .016$).

Correlational analyses were conducted to examine relationships between knowledge and training, the focus of the fifth research question. Specifically, correlations were conducted to determine if hours spent in training during the past four years (in conferences, workshops, college courses, and independent study) were significantly related to knowledge of teaching reading as determined by the total *ARIK-A* score. No differences were found; Spearman's r_s correlation coefficients ranged from $-.09$ to $.12$, all with $p > .05$.

A sixth question addressed the relationship between volunteers' self-rating of their preparedness to teach reading and their knowledge as demonstrated by scores on the *ARIK-A*. The relationship between the volunteers' self-rating and their *ARIK-A* scores was nonsignificant ($r_s = .04, p = .66$).

The final research question focused on differences in volunteers' adult reading instruction knowledge as compared to full-time and part-time paid instructors. *ARIK-A* means and standard deviations for instructors by employment status are presented in Table 5. An ANOVA was conducted to determine if level of reading instructional knowledge differed based on employment status (full-time paid, part-time paid, or volunteer). No significant differences were found [$F(2, 457) = .137, p = .87$].

Discussion and Implications for Practice

According to our results, volunteer instructors vary widely in their educational backgrounds, areas of expertise, prior preparation, and teaching experiences. Importantly, according to our results it is not reasonable to assume that volunteers know less than paid instructors do. Overall, volunteer instructors and paid instructors mastered about the same percent of content on the *ARIK-A* about 60%. This is consistent with Snow and Strucker's (1999)

recommendation for strengthened professional development for adult educators (regardless of whether they are paid or volunteer) who may have had very little direct instruction in the mechanics of reading.

Although conventional wisdom assumes that professional development for adult literacy instructors is critical for acquiring knowledge about effective practice, that relationship did not hold for these volunteers. In fact, there were no differences in the level of knowledge among the volunteers based on the types of professional development they received, the number of hours they participated, or their perceived level of preparation. Nonetheless, other studies have reported a positive relationship between training and instructional knowledge (Bell, Ziegler, McCallum, 2004; Smith & Gillespie, 2007). The contradiction in results may stem from the type of professional development offered for volunteer instructors. Belzer (2007) suggests that effective professional development must address the knowledge that volunteer instructors need to face the instructional challenges of working with a particular adult who has encountered problems with reading. The relationship between professional development and instructors' knowledge will continue to be the focus of research, but in the meantime, administrators of adult literacy programs are faced with the challenge of providing professional development for individuals who work on a voluntary basis. One of the challenges posed by the results of our study is how to create professional development for such a diverse group, particularly when programs have limited resources for ongoing education and training. Since volunteers are already contributing their time for instruction, program administrators may hesitate to request the contribution of more hours for ongoing professional development.

Adding to the challenges of providing professional development is the fact that volunteer instructors themselves begin their voluntary service with different levels of knowledge depending on their educational and professional backgrounds. The diversity among the volunteers suggests that there should be a diversity of resources and opportunities for professional development. A one-size-fits-all training is not likely to be effective for a group of instructors who have widely divergent backgrounds and experience. Notably, volunteers spent the highest number of hours of professional development in independent study. Hours of self-study are rarely accounted for in determining the level of an instructor's professional development; however, being a self-directed learner is a natural part of adult life (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Voluntary literacy programs can make use of the free resources available electronically for literacy practitioners who are interested in increasing their level of knowledge about reading instruction. In addition, resources are available from the NIFL through ALWRG, in a free electronic format, which focuses on describing instructional strategies that are supported by at least some research (McShane, 2005). Although the study is informative, the sample may not be representative of the group of volunteers as a whole. Results should be generalized with caution. Even so, we believe the sample reflects the diversity of the volunteer instructors and the relationship between certain volunteer characteristics and their level of knowledge about providing reading instruction.

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