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Displaced Mexican American Workers in Retraining Programs

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Abstract: One Stop Job Centers assist trade affected displaced workers in skills development and occupational retraining with the goal of re-incorporating them into the workforce. In this study, we explored the job loss and transitional experiences of two groups of low-literate, primarily Spanish speaking males. Findings included coping mechanisms and identification of barriers that included a failed method of instruction.

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) note that many displaced workers do not have transferable skills and are limited in employable skills. This is congruent with Daniels, Gobeli and Findley, (2000) and Carrol, Blatner, Alt, Schuster and Findley, (2000) studies of log and mill workers who lost their jobs due to NAFTA. Those studies indicated few people were retrained and few had transferable skills. The purpose of this study was to understand the transitional experiences of displaced Mexican Americans with low-English literacy to adult literacy and/or job training programs in preparation for reentry into the workforce. The research questions that guided this study were: a) How do Mexican American displaced workers describe their transitional experiences from worker to learner? b) What facilitated their learning and transition c) What factors hinder learning and transition among displaced Mexican American workers?

Literature Review

Displaced Worker is “person 20 years and over who lost or left jobs because their plant or company closed or moved, there was insufficient work for them to do, or their position or shift was abolished” (USBLS, 2008). Daniels, et al, (2000) and Carrol et al (2000) studies of log and mill workers who lost their jobs due to NAFTA found that few men retrained; and few had transferable skills. McAtte and Benshoff (2006) and Daniels et al (2000) found that the level of support the displaced worker had from family and friends was a predictor of whether a person participated in a retraining program or not and their subsequent success in completing the program. If the displaced worker has enough support from family and friends to cope with job dislocation and life transitions, he or she is more likely to participate in a retraining program.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study involving two groups: City A was group of recently displaced workers who were participating or have completed a retraining program sponsored by the Texas Workforce Commission. City B participants had already completed the training. Twelve participants were included in the study plus two instructors. Interviews lasting from 60-90 minutes and was the primary means of data collection. Creswell’s (2003) data analysis framework was used to analyze the data.

Findings

The participants’ self-perception as displaced workers, barriers, and coping mechanisms are congruent with previous literature studies. Their self-identity was tied to their job. Their coping mechanisms consisted on utilizing social networks as a support system. City A participants had a small social network and support system in comparison to City B participants

whose support system and network was larger. Perceived Barriers - City A and B participants encountered the same perceived barriers to be the lack of English language proficiency, low educational attainment, age, financial constraints, and uncertain future. Both Cities A and B felt high self expectations about completing the program, but at the same time they felt the expectations imposed on them by the agency were too high, due to the limited amount of time available to complete the training program. However, City B participants expected and demanded the agency to be more responsive to their needs. "How do they want us to learn in 6 months, where we already lost 4 months just in getting started," "It's very hard to be in a classroom after working all your life.... trying to learn algebra and things I had not seen in more than 30 years...." (Adan, City A). "The teachers only had us writing sentences and telling us to use our dictionary and to speak English.... but how? They never taught us to pronounce words; we never practiced in class how to speak English" (Carlos, City B). City B participants also stated more time was important. They expressed a need for qualified instructors and an instructional method that can teach them to speak English. They all expressed that they would like to have more time in which to finish the program and to be taught with an adequate learning method. On the other hand, the teacher from City A stated: To better understand these workers, "more cultural awareness is needed."

Discussion

Claypool (2005) points out grief and anger are emotions a displaced worker must resolve before he or she can go on. "Men's identities are attached to their jobs... (Claypool, 2005, p.30). These workers experienced a multitude of emotions due to financial hardship, limited literacy and limited English proficiency. Depression, stress, frustration are some emotions they experienced. All twelve participants expressed a need for a different teaching method that can better assist their learning needs, in addition, to needing more time to accomplish their educational goals.

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