

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SELF-SUFFICIENCY AND ECONOMIC VIABILITY IN WELFARE-TO-WORK RHETORIC

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the issues and implications raised when speaking of 'self-sufficiency' and 'economic viability' in welfare to work and provide an alternative context for discussing welfare-to-work programs and their success. Drawing on welfare-to-work literature, I clarify the difference between 'self-sufficiency' and 'economic viability' and discuss two main approaches used by welfare to work policy makers. Although both terms are used interchangeably, research that concludes welfare programs are successful is often misconstrued by (1) ambiguously defining these terms (2) and by inconsistent indicators and outcome measures of achievement. The major issues surrounding the improper use of these terms in welfare to work programs will be addressed followed by a discussion of its implications for adult educators.

Introduction

Over 14 million individuals receiving public assistance in the United States were affected by welfare-to-work policy (Evers-Williams, 1996). Despite the push of federal legislation to encourage welfare recipients to be self-sufficient, evaluative research on the success of welfare programs has yielded blurred results (Long, 2001). Inadequate definitions and determinants of self-sufficiency have made it difficult to determine whether programs and policies are meeting their stated objectives. Although there is documented data that suggest welfare programs are successful, it is misleading because success is only measured in terms of welfare departures and immediate employment (Long, 2001), ignoring other criteria that moves the recipient out of poverty (Hayes, 1999). Many former welfare recipients are still out of work suffering from homelessness, hunger, and lack of adequate medical care (Gillis, 2001; NCH, 2001).

Although many are engaged in education training programs or waged employment, few welfare recipients have achieved financial self-sufficiency (Long, 2001). The National Coalition for the Homeless (2001) reports that a "working parent in a family of three loses access to Medicaid if his or her monthly gross income exceeds \$666" (NCH, 2001). Basic education and training programs have also had little positive effect on employment and earnings of welfare recipients (Grubb, 1996; Hayes, 1999). "Out of the 1,440 people who reported working, 45.3 percent were homeless and 67 percent of the employed respondents reported that they do not receive health insurance from their employer" (NCH, 2001). Post-employment services have also been ineffective in helping welfare recipients retain jobs or advance to better positions. In fact, many return to welfare within three years of exiting (Harris, 1996).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the issues and implications raised when speaking of 'self-sufficiency' and 'economic viability' in welfare to work and provide an alternative context for discussing welfare-to-work programs and their success.

Most federal programs omit defining the term 'self sufficiency' and offer distorted indicators of attainment. Self-sufficiency, in a general sense, means maintaining without help (Long, 2001, Webster, 2002). Although self-sufficiency has been used interchangeably with economic viability, I argue that there is a difference. Self-sufficiency merely means leaving the welfare caseload (Meckier, 1999) or independence from cash assistance (Van Ryzin, Ronda, & Muzzio, 2001). These definitions not only ignore the social contexts that make recipients independent, but it reduces welfare recipients to a numerical value and underestimates their worth as a human resource. Economic viability, on the other hand, means the capacity to work, function, or develop

adequately as an independent unit with a reasonable chance of succeeding (Webster, 2002). Economic viability reflects the degree to which an individual is capable of longevity and mobility in personal, social, political, and economic spheres. The latter embodies a stronger commitment to self-development than does self-sufficiency and serves as an important perspective in planning and implementing welfare-to-work programs.

Self-Sufficiency and Welfare-to-Work Approaches

Welfare programs have buried the term self-sufficiency in their confused application of human capital development (HCD) and labor force attachment (LFA) strategies. The formerly applied HCD strategy emphasized upgrading welfare recipients' basic academic skills and educational credentials as preconditions to stable employment (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 2002). LFA, or the work-first approach replaced the appeal of HCD by arguing that quick labor force entry was the link to long term self-sufficiency (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 2002). Although there is "limited and conflicting evidence" that LFA leads to long-term self-sufficiency (Johnson & Corcoran, 2002, p. 3) for most welfare recipients, most states have moved to the work-first approach (Crowell, 2001). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 further reinforced the LFA approach by imposing time limitations on welfare receipt. The belief is that welfare recipients (mostly women) who take any job, regardless of pay or full or part-time status will eventually secure higher pay and full time work (Johnson & Corcoran, 2002; Young, 2000).

Despite policy makers' emphasis on LFA strategies, "there has been a secular trend for the motives and learning capacities of the workforce to play a more strategic role in the capitalist labor process" (Livingstone, 2001, p. 19). The two prevailing beliefs about surviving in the new economy rest on the link between work and learning. A learning society must be created through "a knowledge-based economy, which requires a much higher proportion of highly skilled workers... [and] an emphasis on lifelong learning" (p. 20). States are authorized to establish advanced technical or vocational programs, or assist recipients in pursuit of college degrees, but most do not. The cost is expensive and the duration of time that recipients are engaged in such programs leaves them 'without a job.' Although welfare recipients desire the opportunity to acquire technical skills or a college degree, post-high school classes are not considered as a legitimate work activity in most states (Young, 2000). These behaviors are seen as counterproductive to becoming self-sufficient. Thus, lengthy education and training programs have become less viable options for program planners and participants (Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 2002).

Programs that seek only to help welfare recipients 'maintain' without help will likely ignore the resources that help the individual to function as an independent unit. If the trend is calling for a highly knowledgeable workforce, then why are welfare activities inconsistent with the demand in the labor market? Without an increased knowledge base, welfare recipients will be unprepared in meeting the challenges outlined by most workplaces and ill-equipped for reaching economic viability. They will however, be self-sufficient, off of the caseload with a job.

The Issues

The problem with self-sufficiency in welfare-to-work language is the blurred terminology being used by policymakers. Although they expect welfare recipients to be self-sufficient, no universal definition and pre-established criteria of what this means (other than having a job) has been formulated. Self-sufficiency, as welfare-to-work's overarching goal should be clarified. "When welfare rhetoric invokes self-sufficiency today...it doesn't mean being literally independent from engagement with others to meet one's needs. It means only having a job...no longer drawing on public funds" (Young, 2000, p. 27). It diminishes the worth of other socially valuable, but unpaid activities; and focuses welfare reform on micro systems "aimed at changing the values, behaviors and work ethics of recipients (Crowell, 2001, p. 159). It produces defective measures of welfare

success (Long, 2001), makes it difficult to track welfare-to-work outcomes (Long, 2001), and impacts the eligibility of participants for funded services (www.nyatep.org).

Linking self-sufficiency with having a job, any job, regardless of pay and benefits is a distorted indicator of being able to maintain without help. Because 'employment' and 'welfare departure' are easily observable measures, researchers have used these indicators to evaluate welfare's outcomes. As opposed to evaluating these measures together, evaluators have measured program impacts separately. Reported outcomes include those who are forced to leave welfare despite little or no income; and results about the impacts on employment include families that work very few hours and who still depend on welfare for most of their income (Long, 2001). This is a problematic indication of self-sufficiency.

Even when employed, many former recipients and their families still live in poverty and rely on various forms of government support (Foster & Julnes, 2001, p. 126). In mandating the work-first approach, policymakers ignore the larger social systems that impact a recipient's life. Having a job alone is insufficient in a permanent transition off of welfare (Rickman, Bross, & Foster, 2001). Leaving the welfare caseload or having a job does not indicate that families are able to successfully maintain on their own. Many who remain employed and off of public assistance still struggle (Green as cited in Foster & Julnes, 2001). This is largely due to policymakers' failure to employ a holistic view of recipients' contexts.

Creating economic viability takes into account the social contexts that contribute or inhibit self-reliance and uses these contexts as support for the development of a person's capacity within personal, social, educational, political, and economic spheres. Welfare policy can be more broadly tied to employment and human capital investment-so as to raises wages, open opportunities for the acquisition of qualifications, and expand the supply of good jobs.

Language, as an important tool in shaping attitudes (Dill, 1998), relationships, and processes, is critical in fostering efficient relationships and shared understandings (Rees, Cervero, Moshi, & Wilson, 1997, p. 65) between planners, employers, and recipients. In shifting the language from 'self-sufficiency' to 'economic viability', there must be shifts in the language used to communicate what we mean when we say something. Encouraging dialogue around economic viability shifts the conversation from independency to self-investment. In a society where interaction, networking, and pooling of resources is encouraged, the idea of 'independence' and 'fending for one's self' seems to only apply to the poor (Sparks, 1999). This double-edged sword restricts recipients' political and economic progress, and reflects an elitist attempt at limiting the power and mobility of those already marginalized.

Implications

The issues and implications surrounding the improper use of these terms could distort the focus of welfare programs' objectives, activities, and intended outcomes. The focus will remain on basic education programs that have not worked (Hayes, 1999) and promoting "working poverty" (Funk cited in Sparks, 1999). Issues of economic injustice (see Sparks in Hayes & others, 1998), social service access (Watlov, 2001), and pre and post-employment development for welfare recipients (as vital work and community assets) will remain ignored as well as the structural and systematic factors that keep families dependent and impoverished such as social isolation, limited social mobility and tight labor markets (Wilson as cited in Crowell, 2001). The realities of "limited social networks, perceived and actual discrimination, limited connections to vital organizations and institutions, will foster limited world views, internal feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem, and low aspirations" (p. 159). Ignoring the socio-political and socio-cultural limitations around welfare language and activities will continue to produce the working poor.

As adult educators assume greater roles in welfare reform, we are also instrumental in redefining and restructuring current welfare-to-work focal areas, policy decisions, and implementation activities. We have the opportunity to disseminate new themes and contributions to discussions

on welfare, work, and productivity as we partner with colleges and universities, social and private organizations, and other researchers and practitioners. The future of work calls for a highly skilled workforce, thus individuals "should be equipped with more than 'basic' literacy skills" (Hart, 1992, p. 80). Individuals cannot achieve economic viability solely on a basic skills education, absent of any further development or alternate considerations.

Examining the issues and implications of self-sufficiency and economic viability provide a median for more effective practice, stronger program implementation, more accurate indicators of program success, and minimize barriers to economic viability for transitioning welfare recipients. This discussion has the potential to refocus welfare objectives and remove the stigma of seeing welfare recipients as cheap labor, replacing it with a renewed vision of people as vital human resources. A shift in dialogue (towards economic viability) could result in moving welfare recipients from simply 'employable' to 'marketable.'

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