My Children First: Conflicting Choices about Education For Mothers who Receive Welfare

Mary Ziegler
University of Tennessee

Abstract: Participation continues to perplex those who provide adult education. This study explored the reasons women who receive welfare chose not to participate in adult education programs designed for them. Countervailing forces of poverty and participants' aspirations of a better life for their children interacted with personal, relational, and institutional factors.

Participation and nonparticipation are among the most researched topics in adult education implying that they continue to perplex those responsible for funding and delivering educational programs for adults. Nonparticipation was an issue in one southeastern state that provided twenty-hour a week adult education classes as a part of its welfare reform initiative. Legislation provided funding for adult literacy classes on the assumption that the low educational levels of many welfare recipients would restrict their employment options. Although the opportunity was available for increasing basic skills or preparing the General Education Development (GED) credential, almost half of those eligible had not enrolled, and more than 25% of those who did enroll dropped out within 30 days (Ziegler & Ebert, 1999). If public policy provides funding for programs that will benefit participants, why do only a percentage of those eligible participate? The purpose of this study was to understand participation from the perspectives of the women who received welfare and who chose not to participate in the adult literacy programs that were designed for them.

In studying participation, adult literacy researchers have focused primarily on barriers. Their findings build on the framework identified by (Cross, 1981) that clusters barriers into three types: dispositional, situational, and institutional (Beder, 1990; Quigley, 1997; Ziegahn, 1992). Cross (1981) identified a model of barriers to participation that described not only discrete variables that affect participation but how the interrelationship of these variables influences the adult decision maker. Research on barriers to participation provides evidence of the complexity of the issues facing individuals with low literacy skills; this complexity compounds when applied to adult literacy programs that are a part of welfare reform. Particularly challenging is the integration of the self-identified needs of women who receive welfare with the comprehensive public policies designed to benefit the group as a whole. Fallacious assumptions that welfare recipients do not value education and are not motivated to participate persist even though research indicates otherwise (Jensen, Haleman, Goldstein, & Anderman, 2000; Ziegahn, 1992). Adults who receive public assistance are not a homogeneous group whose characteristics and problems are easy to identify (Beder & Valentine, 1990; Hayes, 1988; Quigley, 1993; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990), yet assumptions of homogeneity often drive policy.

In this study, we explored participation in adult education programs from the perspective of women who receive welfare in order to contribute their unique perspective to a practical theory that could guide program administrators and policy makers in aligning participants self-identified needs with programs and services intended to benefit them. A key research question guided this study: What are the reasons that welfare recipients choose not to participate in adult literacy classes? We used qualitative research methodology to identify participants' perspectives.

Qualitative research methods help researchers understand the complexities of human behavior in the social contexts in which they live. Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was the method selected for this inquiry because this approach relies on discovering the

underlying social forces that shape behavior, constantly compares and integrates data into an emerging conceptual framework, and generates a theory grounded in the data. Interview questions were semi-structured facilitating an open-ended and non-threatening interchange that focused mainly on topics identified by other researchers as relevant. These included family background, past schooling experiences, educational level, and experiences with adult education and welfare programs. Interviews elicited participants' perceptions of their experience and the meaning they ascribed to them.

Participants in the study were mothers who received welfare and although eligible, were not attending adult literacy classes. To gather data, we visited local welfare offices and invited eligible women who were keeping routine appointments to participate in the study. A small gift certificate was offered for the investment of their time. Ultimately, 23 women ranging in age from 18 to 40 were interviewed; 19 lived in an urban area and 4 in a rural area. The majority had completed some high school. Fifteen were African American and eight were European American. All but three had previously participated in adult literacy classes. Interview tapes and researcher's notes were transcribed (and entered into QSR NVivo data analysis software. Following Merriam's (2002) guidelines, we rigorously analyzed data as we collected them. Data were coded in two ways. First, open coding enabled us to develop codes from the participants' own language and second, codes were selected from the relevant literature and applied to the data. In a collaborative process, we refined categories and identified emergent themes. Findings are presented in two sections, a) countervailing forces of participants' aspirations and the social milieu of poverty and b) facilitators and deterrents to participation. Findings may be limited by potential for researcher bias and the location of interviews in welfare offices.

Countervailing Forces: Participants' Aspirations and Social Milieu of Poverty

Two countervailing forces dynamically affected the group of women in this study: their compelling aspiration to create a better life for their children and the social milieu of poverty. Describing their desire for a better life for their children, participants saw themselves as mothers; motherhood was their most salient role. As mothers, they were concerned with their children's illnesses and proud of their accomplishments in school. They did not want to be "on" welfare and did not want their children to consider welfare an option. A better life for their children was one that was qualitatively better than their own life. Most described the goals of education and a "good paying job with benefits" as ways to achieve their aspiration. Almost all of the women reported that they valued education, not for education itself, but because it was a bridge to a better life for their children. A "good paying job with benefits" would provide health care for their children, a wage that would meet their basic needs, enable them to provide for their children, and offer the possibility of career advancement rather than a "dead end." Their aspiration for a better life stood in stark contrast to the social realities of poverty that confronted them daily. Participants identified community issues such as inadequate housing, physical danger, discrimination, poor transportation, and lack of good jobs. These parallel research that shows women who leave welfare for work encounter environmental barriers and are often in worse shape financially than when they were on welfare, and that many ultimately return to financial assistance (Edin & Lein, 1997; Hershey & Pavetti, 1997; Jensen et al., 2000). Participants described a shortage of money to support daily living requirements and the struggle to "make ends meet." Many of the mothers expressed distrust for the adequacy of daycare. Participants were caught in the countervailing forces of aspiration for a better life for children on one end and the reality of poverty on the other. Three factors facilitated or deterred participants' move in one direction or the other. These factors, personal, relational, or institutional, acted as a

type of force field (Lewin, 1938). A force field is characterized as a state of imbalance between driving forces (propelling them toward their educational goal and mitigating the consequences of poverty) and restraining forces (holding them back from achieving their educational goals and reinforcing the challenges of poverty).

Facilitators and Deterrents Affecting Participation Educational Activities

Personal factors affecting participation related specifically to the individual mother and included a) sense of self, b) attitudes toward school, c) perceptions of learning abilities, and d) health. The first factor, sense of self, related to self-advocacy and asking questions of authority. In their roles as parents, most participants described a strong sense of self. For example, one mother talked about visiting several daycare centers until finding the one she preferred. Another was proactive in getting the information she needed, "I called the Board of Education myself." Those with a stronger sense of self were active on their own behalf, questioned authority, and had the belief their effort made a difference. Other women described a weaker sense of self that led to feelings of powerlessness. For example, one mother explained that she did not understand why her children were placed in foster care but she did not pursue finding out the reason. Participants who had a stronger sense of self were more likely to have been active in trying to reach their educational goal while those with a weaker sense of self were more likely to describe themselves as being prevented from acting because of external reasons. The second personal factor was attitude toward school. Most participants liked school and dropped out for personal or family reasons. One mother explained, "I couldn't deal with a household, a baby on the way, a husband, and schoolwork on top of all of it." Those participants who had a positive attitude were more likely to see themselves in a formal educational setting; the few that disliked school did not want to go back to a school environment. Perceptions of learning, the third personal factor, varied. Some saw themselves as "quick" learners who could pass the GED examination on their own without going to class Although some had a clear sense of their abilities, others were less sure. "I'm kind of slow and that's why I don't know if I am able to pass," reported one mother. In addition to their own educational achievement, most women wanted to help their children with their homework and they saw their own education as a support for doing this. The final personal factor was health. Health is often an invisible facilitator of participation in any activity; when it was present, participants did not mention it. Rather, they mentioned the debilitating effects of illness, their own, their children's, or that of other family members had on their goals. When personal factors were positive they promoted participation; when negative, they had the opposite effect. Personal factors are interrelated with relational factors.

Relational factors were the second set of facilitators and deterrents to participation in educational activities. Relational factors were associated with participants' relationships with others and included a) children as a priority, b) involvement of family and friends, and c) reactions of program staff and peers. Children as a priority became the lens through which participants viewed education. They wanted to be good role models for their children. "I need to get my education for my children." Although participants were clear that the GED would help with finding a good job with benefits, competing priorities interfered. Participants did not agree that they could simultaneously put their children first and get an education, even though they valued education. Children as a priority were simultaneously a driving and restraining force. Involvement of family and friends was the second relational factor. Children encouraged their mothers to continue school. According to the mothers in this study, their status in their children's eyes would improve if they had a GED. Family relationships led to tangible support such as childcare, transportation, clothing, food, and housing. Participants' mothers often provided

supportive relationships. For some, however, their relationship with their families was a source of discouragement. Either they were abandoned at an early age or they could not depend on family members for support. Husbands or boyfriends were supportive; in contrast, ex-husbands or boyfriends who were fathers of participants' children were not supportive financially or otherwise. The final relational factor, for those participants who had experience in adult education programs, was the reaction of their case managers, teachers, and peers. For some, teachers were role models who listened to them and helped them solve problems. Others believed that teachers treated them like children. This same contrast is evident in relationships with peers. For some these relationships were motivating because of mutual support; others thought peers were disruptive and antagonistic. Supportive relationships facilitated the multiple roles of parent, student, job seeker, and family member. In combination, these forces magnified. A good relationship with a teacher would affect participation but in combination, for example, with family support and healthy children, they facilitating factors were even more powerful.

Institutional factors were structural in that they dealt with services that participants perceived they needed. These included a) welfare policies, b) information, c) instructional methods, d) alternative educational activities, and e) the school-work dilemma. Welfare policies enabled some participants to find a "place to turn" when they were in need, the same policies frustrated others who could not integrate policies with their own situations. Information, the second factor, contrasted with misinformation or an incomplete or confusing explanation of a policy as it related to an individual's circumstances. Some local policies differed from one county to another. Instructional methods, the third institutional factor, related to formal adult education programs. Some participants found formal classes and teaching methods to be congruent with their needs. "If you can't do it . . . you just call one of the teachers in there and they help you. They are real good with helping people up there." In contrast, other participants felt formal classes took too long or that teachers were not responsive to needs. "They don't help you, they just throw you a book." Although participants wanted a high school credential, many had tried alternative education other than formal classes. Some paid tuition for special programs, others bought the GED preparation book to study on their own, and one participant established a small study group. Most agreed that receiving the GED was "unfinished business," and passing the examination would be a personal victory. The final institutional factor was the school-work dilemma. All of the participants who wanted a high school credential were caught in an irreconcilable dilemma of equal but conflicting priorities. On the one hand, most needed immediate employment to supplement their public assistance. "I only get $185 a month. I really ain't got diaper money, clothes, little things you need for your house. That's the reason that people do not stay in school." Attending school was a long-term investment that was difficult to afford. "School can't get you paid except down the years later . . . You wait two weeks till you get paid. You're going to go to school and you're going to wait two years to get paid." On the other hand, parents reasoned that adult education would help them achieve their goal of getting a good job. "Without a diploma, you can find a job okay, but not a good job. . . you get judged by your education." Consequently, many women took jobs on a short-term basis, tiring jobs they neither liked nor planned to keep for long. Torn between education and immediate employment and receiving often contradictory advice from family, friends, neighbors, and program staff, participants found it difficult to choose which path to take. And, rather than make a choice, many wanted to do it all: be a good mother, find a good job, and earn a high school credential.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand welfare recipients' choice not to participate in educational activities; participants gave various reasons for both their participation. They described two countervailing forces that that dynamically affected them. All participants wanted to create a better life for their children and saw education as a way to obtain "a good job with benefits." Counterbalancing this aspiration was the pervasive economic hardship they experienced while surmounting challenges to personal safety, health, meeting their basic living needs, and completing their education. How do mothers receiving welfare move from economic hardship toward their aspiration to create a better life for their children?

Policy answers this question by providing educational activities as part of the work requirement because of the link between educational level and higher wages (Boudett, Murnane, & Willett, 2000). Participants generally agree with policy makers echoing the findings of Jensen et al. (2000) that welfare recipients valued education and what it could do for them. Where the participants' perspectives differed from policy was that their aspirations were not to achieve self-sufficiency, but to provide a better life or their children. All participants saw their primary identity as mother, not student, or worker. This corresponds to the findings of Scott, Eden, London, and Mazelis (2001) that identified the same compelling identity shaped by motherhood.

Parents in this study were trying to *balance* single parenthood, work, school, and in some cases elder care or extended family care. Like most adults, they found it impossible to achieve balance. For the working poor, balancing multiple life roles may be even more difficult; they "are likely to be far more circumspect in how they can commit their resources to family needs" (Niles, Herr, & Hartung, 2001). Cognitive research suggests that achieving balance of life roles is an inappropriate goal because the demands of contemporary society require more than balance, more than the acquisition of specific skills or the mastery of particular knowledge; it requires thinking differently about one's situation (Kegan, 1994). Secretan (Secretan, 2000) says it is not balance that adults need, but integration. Otherwise, adults continually strive for balance—and fail. "Balance implies either/or, that investing in one role requires taking something away from the other" (p. 29). Motherhood is the most salient role for welfare recipients; therefore they face a dilemma because they see education and preparation for long-term employment as competing with their primary life role on the one hand and enhancing it on the other. Focusing on integration through education and training could enable mothers to maintain their primary role and not see it in conflict with other roles.

Findings from this study underscore the complexity and challenge of addressing issues of participation in adult education programs. When seen from the perspective of the participant, participation is a complex phenomenon involving variables that interact and change as circumstances change. Personal, relational, and institutional factors that affect participation are not independent variables; they interrelate and change from impact of the environment. Their affects cumulate and compound in different ways that make the effectiveness of a "one size fits all" program highly problematic. The construct of the force field helps illustrate some of the complexities involved and points to the need to address individual situations within more broadly conceived adult literacy programs.

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