"THEY JUST DON'T INVEST IN THOSE STUDENTS..." ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION AND THE SHIFT TO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: CONVERSATIONS WITH VETERAN EDUCATORS IN THE US

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ABSTRACT

The 2014 reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) – a major source of funding for adult education programs in the United States – meant even greater emphasis on workforce-focused skills in the classroom and intensified tracking of occupational outcomes. Concerns have been raised about how a move away from critical literacy has impacted some of the field's most vulnerable learners, those at the lowest levels of literacy. This paper examines the experiences of veteran adult literacy educators to illuminate the impact workforce-focused policies have had on educational services for adult literacy level learners.

Keywords: adult basic education, adult education policy, workforce development, WIOA

INTRODUCTION: ADULT EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS OR EMPLOYERS?

Adult education policy and practice are manifestations of sociopolitical, economic and cultural ideologies in the US that often uphold neoliberal discourses (Shin & Ging, 2019). The 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is only the most recent iteration of a workforce readiness, market oriented focus in the adult education field (Belzer & Kim, 2018; Shin & Ging, 2019). Workforce curricula is currently the foundation for most classroom instruction and student assessment, and programs are judged and funded based on the number of students who maintain any type of employment (Shin & Ging, 2019). While strengthening the connections between education and work is certainly beneficial to adult learners, concerns have been raised about the impact that the emphasis on employment and the attendant "creaming" of relatively high achieving students who can quickly attain occupational outcomes, has on students with very low levels of literacy. These are students who are generally in adult literacy and Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes. They may require more time to achieve outlined educational and occupational goals due to learning challenges; and they often struggle to find employment as a result of their legal status (e.g., undocumented); some are not immediately interested in obtaining employment in light of personal goals (e.g., homemakers; disabled or retired workers) (Belzer & Kim, 2018; Isserlis, 2008)

Veteran adult educators offer a valuable perspective on how employer-centered demands have been framed and implemented over time. Their understanding of policy implementation is unique since they work with some of the field's most ostracized and challenged learners.

METHODS: ENGAGING VETERAN ADULT LITERACY EDUCATORS

Interviews with five adult literacy/Adult Basic Education (ABE) educators (three women and two men) - Sheila, Marilyn, Linda, Charles and Frederick (all pseudonyms) - informed this preliminary study. Three of the instructors identified as white and two as Black/African American. The average age of the instructors was 64 years old and they had been teaching in

the field between 15 and 30 years. All of them had taught in culturally diverse, economically stratified metropolitan communities.

Four key research questions helped to organize the semi-structured interviews with educators:

1. What do you feel has been the specific impact of employer-driven educational policies, like WIOA, on teaching and administrative services in the field?
2. How have you and/or your program resisted policy changes that emphasize job/workforce readiness over education?
3. What impact do you think the shift to employer-centered readiness outcomes has had on your students' academic and occupational motivations, interests and/or aspirations?
4. What does adult education in the US need to look like if adult literacy educators and learners are to truly thrive?

FINDINGS: "ADULT EDUCATION MONEY HAS GOT TO BE THE MOST POLITICALLY CHARGED MONEY…"

Adult education students and educators are culturally and politically marginalized in the United States. ABE students, in particular, are often viewed as individuals who failed to take advantage of educational opportunities when they were younger; the complexities of their lives are minimized (Isserlis, 2008). The impact that policy shifts like WIOA has had on service provision to students who are disproportionately of color; experience multiple traumas - including those that are a result of poverty and oppression - and/or struggle with often undiagnosed learning disabilities, was a source of distress for adult literacy educators who were interviewed. A lack of awareness regarding students' needs resulted in broader policies that did not take into consideration the detrimental impact that inadequate resources had on their ability to support themselves and their families. Despite this, these educators strove to create classroom environments that were emotionally responsive and resisted negative ideologies. They also struggled to manage constraints on the occupational choices available to students through these schemes, many of whom had more nuanced goals as a result of their life experiences. Finally, they knew that in order for students to receive the education they deserved a shift in attitudes had to underlie sociopolitical change.

"People shouldn't be forced to have to reach a certain end goal"

The need to achieve specific educational gains and occupational outcomes, increasingly meant that ABE-level students were less likely to be accepted into some programs. Students with significant literacy challenges were seen as having a negative impact on the program's ability to meet their targets quickly and they were often referred elsewhere. Sheila remarked that over the years she had noticed that:

> …No one has the time for when a student comes in with low Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) scores and they can see that that student's going to take a long time to get test ready, they just don't invest in those students. And they know that they're not going to get a lot of gains out of those students and they wind up referring them to other places - but I've looked into some of those referrals…and they're sending them to no place, [they're] sending them to nothing. The phone numbers don't go anywhere…

Marilyn also highlighted the issue of turning away lower level students and suggested that programs were failing at their basic mission when they did this:

> …sometimes the programs don't want to take in people that are at a very basic level. And that would break my heart because I would think, "Here are people who can acknowledge their skills are basic, and they still have the courage and are willing to come to a school to try to improve, and schools don't want them because they need education."

In addition, for Marilyn, a lack of respect for these students' search for knowledge, and a failure to truly appreciate what they brought to the classroom, led to an appalling type of diminishment:

> …if people are coming to class, whether their scores show it or not, they're getting something. If they keep coming back they're getting something out of it…Those people matter so much to their world to their children that they're raising, and very often they take another family member [in] to keep them from going into foster care. I mean they're heroes in their world, and then to not be respected, to me that's just heartbreaking

Frederick, like his colleagues, understood that programs were often in a bind – they needed the funding to stay open, and their ability to meet specific outcomes was tied to maintaining those funds. Charles felt the lack of respect for students directly impacted the ability of educators to influence policymaking: "There doesn't seem to be advocacy for adult education in the places that can make the difference" he noted, with the result being a disconnect between who students are, what they actually want and need, and what funders and legislative stakeholders think is important, "the funding is tied to what I think are unrealistic expectations."

Many of these expectations in WIOA focus on students obtaining low paying job opportunities that are not on a real career pathway. Charles felt the focus was on students to "get menial jobs [rather] than get a diploma. And so these agencies put a lot of pressure on the students to not come to class. Basically, go get a job." A dwindling commitment to sustained education also does not facilitate access to living wage careers that align with students' skills, personal interests and goals. Students are often pushed into programs in health care that start them at the bottom of the field (e.g., home health care aid), are non-union and erratically scheduled. Sheila and Linda found that many of their students not only knew these jobs were second-rate, but that the funding structures did not take into account all of the employment opportunities they aspired to. Sheila noted that "[students] don't want to go into healthcare and they don't want to go into technology. They couldn't be the least interested." While Linda described students who "wanted to go into the service [i.e., armed forces], it's not included in this thing, somebody else wanted to open their own business, not included [either]."

Overall, the educators felt that the idea of trying to meet employer-defined, federally-regulated occupations and goals within an ill-informed timeline for achievement, was antithetical to the student-centered, literacy work that brought them into the field, and that they knew transformed students' lives. Said Charles: "I don't teach the test…I teach them to think…we're going to learn how to think outside the box, how to think critically."

"I closed my door, it was our world"

WIOA's limited framing regarding what students needed to thrive, strengthened each of the educators' commitment to creating supportive, affirming and responsive classroom environments for their students. Despite having to develop lessons that incorporated a restricted understanding of "career readiness," they found ways to both honor and lift up students who were undervalued by policy makers, who, according to Marilyn: "don't understand the obstacles for students, who really never walked around feeling like they

couldn't learn, who never walked around feeling they weren't important and they don't matter."

As a result, all of the instructors worked to make the classroom a place where students not only experienced success, but where they could talk about their fears and dream beyond the limits imposed on them. For Charles, helping students understand the larger issues impacting their lives as an economically, culturally and educationally marginalized community was also important:

> My class, very often we will sit and talk about these issues that are impacting the program and programs like ours and why it's happening, and we talk about the social injustice, we talk about the racism and the fascism... [I tell them] we'll get through it because we have no choice but to get through it, and make a way for ourselves…

Linda focused on helping students see their strengths, a response that she felt brought out the best in them:

> I try to get people to be in a place where they feel strong... From what I've read and what I understand and what I've experienced myself, if you're starting from that kind of a place then you are likely to have better outcomes…So, I try to start from that place, that students have within their own selves, they feel their own supports and their own strengths and they're coming from a positive place.

Reflecting on the type of education students should receive, Marilyn remarked: "[Students] should be able to own this, it's their achievement, it's their path. And if education is supposed to make you more empowered, then there should be no scolding…"

In his work with people navigating the criminal justice system, Frederick found that helping students unpack their circumstances was both liberating and a violation of norms; he described an interaction with a student and the response of the administration:

> …one student, he recognized me, and he said… "You're trying to give [us] something in here because if there is nothing in here, when you go up the river to the real jail, you go crazy." That same day, they fired me from there. And as I was being escorted out through all these offices, the officers were saying, "Every time they have a good teacher, they fire him." But it's only many years later, it occurred to me what was happening.

His experience highlights the risks these educators took to resist narratives that kept students uninformed and uncritical. Creating an empathetic space where they equipped heir students with knowledge that challenged the status quo was sometimes actively discouraged by administrators. Sheila was proud of the students in her course who had been able to access post-secondary education, but this was not necessarily championed by others; she described a specific incident:

> …I had a beautiful classroom...I took time to make my classroom beautiful…so whenever they had someone come in, they took them to my classroom…I had art in my classroom because I believed in art…So [a funder] comes out and afterwards that's when I thought I'd show her the wall [of achievement] with all the students on it…And I said, "Yeah. And every one of these students is going to college." And behind her I could see the principal is going, "Stop. Don't say this"…after [the funder] left, I said, "What was that about?" He said, "You don't understand…Going to college for them is a negative outcome." And I said, "What the f**k are you talking about? How could going to college be a negative outcome? How could that be?" He said, "Well, they want them to get jobs first…In order for us to fulfill this contract on them, they need to work at a job for two years. And if they go to college, we find that they don't stay in their jobs, they leave the jobs. They don't work full-time."

The fact that higher education is a "negative outcome" reinforces the notion that ABE courses should be focused on preparing students for employment that they don't necessarily aspire to. Utilizing critical literacy to challenge this structure, wreaks havoc on a system that relies on squashing the ambitions of these students. Educators working to create classrooms that center and elevate learners facilitate their development and awareness, while also endangering their own livelihoods and programmatic fiscal support.

"I think we need a change in how people think"

The future of adult education for these educators rested on the creation of a movement that both critically examined educational policymaking, and privileged the complexities of adult learners' lives. Charles felt: "We need a change in how people who are not part of this community think about this community. There's still that sense in this country that if you're poor and uneducated it's your fault, and we need to change that…I don't know [how] but I think that's the biggest hurdle." A failure to understand the structural and institutional inequities that underpinned the challenges these students faced, diminished the sense of empathy and respect the more fortunate felt for their plight. Marilyn observed:

> [We need to change ideas] developed in the minds of people who don't understand, who really just don't understand what it's like to raise children and grandchildren on a fourth grade education, doing whenever you can, working in a laundromat folding everybody's clothes, doing everyone's laundry. This is not an easy life or a happy life. But they saw how to make happy times and do everything on an extremely low budget, and instead of that being seen as brilliantly resourceful, it's seen as like you don't matter.

Sheila described the "fight for crumbs" that seemed to embody the adult education community's search for support, and how the disconnect and scarcity it generated made it difficult for the field to organize with similar constituencies, like anti-poverty, anti-racist, feminist and progressive groups.

For some educators, like Charles, the poor wages, unpredictable scheduling and limited career opportunities of adult educators themselves, generated a powerful sense of connection and compassion with their students. However, this did not necessarily seem to facilitate organizing, especially at the national level. Both students and educators were in some ways on the fringes; lacking the power and clout required to upend a system that failed to take into consideration their strengths, fears and desires.

Concomitantly, there was a sense that some educators – especially those in leadership and administration – were, often unconsciously, indifferent to students' daily struggles. Marilyn found that: "a lot of staff don't even live near the community at all, or in communities like the student's community. They live in places that look different, that are kept differently, that are treated differently. They just don't know daily life of garbage flying around, it's just a whole different life." Charles felt that the managers and directors did not "reflect the student body…where 80-90% of the students are of color and immigrants…almost every program I've ever worked for everybody at the top is white, middle class or upper middle class." He found that this sometimes meant that the perspectives of teachers of color – who often faced the same struggles as their students – were sidelined: "[educators of color are saying] 'you know I think this might be a better approach,' [white leadership says] 'no,' [but] how would [they] know?" He strongly believed that seeing teachers and administrators of color was important to students: "I think [it's] important people see examples, theory is nice and being told that

education is something - you can do it - that's nice, but if you've never known or seen anybody who has done it, it's kind of like a fairytale."

The work of changing perspectives, of seeing what ABE students have to offer to their programs and the world, was deeply connected to the field being self-aware. A failure to understand how racism and classism infused programmatic structures only served to reinforce the broader injustices that dashed the hopes of the many students determined to have a future of possibility.

ADULT LITERACY EDUCATORS: AN IMPORTANT PERSPECTIVE

Examining the experiences of veteran adult literacy educators in the US illustrates the ways in which educational policy, cultural attitudes, and resistance to change intersect to isolate vulnerable communities. It also highlights educators' often unsung role in creating learning spaces that both push back against this intolerance and nurture learners' resilience. Their stories reveal how critical literacy – with its commitment to the worlds and words of students (Darder, 2015) – can still flower, and still inspire students to enact their dreams. Teaching with students and in programs that are often relegated to the margins gives adult literacy educators a "profound edge" (hooks, 2014), a viewpoint on the field that cultivates radical reflection. But it is a perspective that is not always sought. Sheila noted that being asked to speak about her experiences for this study was the "closest I ever got to an award…it was the first time anyone ever acted like my insights on this field…are even valid." Wondering whether what she thought and did mattered, was to her the "song of the adult educator: I tried. I did my best. I hope someone listened. I hope it did some good." Further study will center the voices of a wider range of adult literacy educators; their keen and sensitive insights can benefit the entire adult education community by disentangling the dilemmas of policy and practice.

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