

Adult Basic Education: Effective Classrooms and Successful Students: Executive Summary of Findings and Recommendations

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The purpose of this mixed-method study was to identify effective classrooms practices and educational materials. The overarching research question that guided this mixed-methods inquiry was: What contributes to students' success in adult basic education? While the number of Literacy Completion Points (LCPs, based on Test of Adult Basic Education, TABE) earned is the official definition of success, teachers and students identified other markers of success as well, including passing the GED exam, getting a job or a raise, attending college, and reaching personal goals. Other important covariates with success (contributing to success and also the result of effective practices) included consistent attendance, improved student self-efficacy, and the motivation to complete their education. Thus it is possible that a specific practice might contribute to student success and yet not be reflected in the number of LCPs earned because of influences beyond the control of the teacher and district. Nonetheless, LCPs earned is the official marker of program and student success.

With this in mind, we compared classrooms with high versus low value-added scores based on the number of LCPs earned. To identify effective and ineffective classrooms, we used quantitative analytic strategies with literacy completion points (LCPs) as our student outcome. LCPs represent students' literacy level. As students' reading and language skills improve (based on the TABE) they earn LCPs. Latent growth cross-classified models with students' LCPs repeated over time at level 1, student characteristics (e.g., initial literacy level) as rows and teachers as columns, we computed a value-added score for each teacher (please see full report for

details). Teachers with value-added scores falling in the upper quartile (very effective) and with value-added scores falling in the lowest quartile (less effective) were identified.

Once we selected teachers in Leon and Palm Beach Counties (n = 8), we employed qualitative methods, specifically ethnographic methods. This involved observing and video-taping the classrooms and interviewing teachers and students. Researchers, teachers, students and district administrators were not told which teachers were identified as effective and which as less effective. Additionally, we analyzed text books and curriculum materials regarding whether or not they included the critical components of reading identified in the National Reading Panel Report (National Reading Panel, 2000)

Four characteristics of effective practice appeared to be closely associated with students' successful completion of adult basic education according to these analyses. These were (1) the structure and organization of the classroom; (2) sources of influence that occurred outside the classroom; (3) the contribution or perceived contribution of the teacher; and (4) students' perception of their role in the course.

The Structure and Organization of Programs

We had the opportunity to observe classrooms that varied markedly with regard to value-added scores based on LCPS earned, how they were organized, how frequently they met, mode(s) of instruction generally used, and the variety of instructional opportunities offered. Interestingly, there was no consistent textbook or computer program that emerged as essential to the overall success of any course. Generally, all of the observed classrooms used computers extensively. Our review of text and curriculum revealed that no one curriculum or text provided adequate instruction in all five areas identified by the National Reading Panel (2001) –

metalinguistic awareness including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Materials were weakest in the area of metalinguistic awareness although emerging research suggests that for adult struggling readers, poor metalinguistic awareness continues to interfere with their proficient reading (Hock, 2006). More effective classrooms used a variety of materials and did not rely solely on computer programs.

More effective courses had higher and more consistent attendance levels. Value-added scores controlled for the number of students each teacher taught so students failing to complete the course lowered the value-added scores. Thus, students whose teacher utilized classroom structures and practices that contributed to consistent attendance earned more LCPs than did students in classrooms with poorer attendance.

Providing separate courses for students reading below fourth grade levels, which was observed in Palm Beach, was associated with stronger site scores overall. Both teachers and students remarked that having students share learning goals led to greater cooperation and achievement. This differentiation of instruction within classrooms was observed in effective classrooms as well.

More effective classrooms tended to be highly organized and diverse in their approaches to education. These classrooms offered a wider range of instructional opportunities allowing some time during each class for students to work together in small groups, to meet as a whole class, and to work independently or with one other student. These classrooms used computers, teacher led instruction, class discussion, and small group assignments. The materials used were also diverse and included text books, workbook pages, authentic texts such as newspapers, and teacher-generated materials. Teachers in different high achieving classes emphatically eschewed independent learning as an effective approach to education for their students when used to the

exclusion of other modes of instruction. They insisted that if independent learning “worked,” their students could sit at home with the materials and learn effectively. Instead, they saw value in the integration of multiple approaches and the interaction of students.

Additionally, classrooms in which there was a sense of community and where students worked together and supported each other were generally more effective, demonstrating better attendance and more LCPs earned. Within highly effective classrooms, teachers and students built important bonds that appeared to support students’ progress. The most objective evidence was that the more interactive sites earned value-added scores in the upper quartile compared to the least interactive sites where all students worked independently and where researchers observed almost complete silence during class time. Value-added scores for these sites fell in the lower half of value-added rankings.

Recommendations

1. Provide positive and supportive learning environments. Our findings suggest that one way to achieve a positive learning environment is to provide specific guidelines regarding what is appropriate behavior and to offer consistent, constructive feedback that explicitly supports high expectations for student achievement but affirms the students’ progress.
2. Encourage frequent interactions among students and teachers through small groups interaction and whole class instruction.
3. Avoid setting up classroom structures in which students are expected to work independently for the entire class period. More effective courses utilized a variety of materials and structures during any given class period. For example, opportunities for whole class, small groups, pairs, and individual work were provided in the most effective classrooms during the class sessions observed.

Sources of Influence outside the Classroom

Factors outside the control of teachers and staff contributed to students' success or failure in important ways. Work and family acted as both powerful motivators and as barriers.

One unexpected finding is that the work-release program was not associated with higher value-added scores. Interviews with teachers and students suggest that the classroom environment was affirming and provided a strong sense of community. Thus, this classroom offered a safe haven and a place where adults who had experienced educational failure through much of their childhood and adulthood could experience success. There appeared to be an unconscious unwillingness on the part of the participants to graduate from the course. The fact that students were paid while attending class but received no increase in pay once they graduated may have been exacerbated this tendency. In contrast, in situations in which students would earn a pay raise or promotion upon the completion of a course and/or the achievement of a goal (earning a diploma, for example), motivation was clearly articulated.

Frequently work was described as the compelling motivator and students expressed this clearly in their reasons for attending classes. Many wanted better paying and more interesting work. Others reported that they would receive raises once they had their diplomas. Still others wanted to pursue professions, such as nursing, and could not go to college until they had their diploma and appropriate TABE scores.

Although work certainly contributed to students' ability and motivation to attend, family and family concerns were more frequently described by students as both a motivator and a barrier to their education. Many students did not finish their high school education on time because of family issues. For example, one student reported that when her mother died, she had to drop out of school to rear her younger brothers and sisters, and another faced a similar

situation on the death of his grandfather. Others felt that their parents were not able to provide the support they needed at important times. Family obligations were among the most frequently cited reasons students gave for initially dropping out of school.

Yet at the same time, many students were motivated to return to school because they were deeply committed to their families. Several students shared that they wanted to be a better role model for their children or be able to tutor them. Others stated that they would have quit but their children or partners would not let them.

Generally, more effective teachers demonstrated slightly more consistency in their level of awareness of factors present in their students' lives, including family and work life situations, than did less effective teachers. This may have been related to the more interactive and collaborative nature of the effective classrooms and to students' positive perceptions of their adult education experiences.

Recommendations

1. The most effective teachers called upon each student's individual motivating influences and nurtured that specific motivation as well as actively encouraging an overall classroom culture that assumed success for all students.
2. Providing goals beyond just passing the GED exam, such as the graduation ceremony in Palm Beach or admission to Tallahassee Community College, appeared to enhance students' motivation to complete their course of study.

Students' Perception of Interactions with Their Teachers

One characteristic that consistently differentiated effective from less effective classrooms was whether or not students stated that their teachers were an integral part of their success. While

most students indicated their beliefs that their teachers were helping them pass the tests, there was a note of real gratitude and allegiance in the statements about more effective teachers that we did not generally note in statements about less effective teachers. Effective teachers were described as being competent, encouraging, supportive, approachable, accessible, and knowledgeable. There was also a perception on the part of the students that the more effective classrooms were also more organized.

Recommendations

1. Recruit and retain the most highly qualified and effective teachers.
2. Provide training and professional development that will build teachers' skills and knowledge.

Students' Perception of Their Role in the Classroom

Across sites, the students themselves served as important sources of influence on the overall efficacy of any given classroom. Many of the most successful students began with low literacy levels. Some were older, but many were in their twenties or thirties. There were successful students in every classroom we observed, but there tended to be a higher percentage of successful students in the more effective classrooms. Many of the students discussed the events and reasons that had led to their original decisions to leave school, and a significant number reported that they returned to school when they realized how important education was to their future goals.

In talking to these students, we found that all of them had clearly articulated goals regarding what they wanted to achieve and how they were going to achieve their objectives. Many had goals that reached beyond the attainment of a diploma and included attending college

and learning new skills. For some, proficient English language skills were their goal, but often those students also mentioned a desire to continue their educations at the college level. These students had relatively consistent attendance and stressed the importance of attending class on a regular basis in order to learn as much and as quickly as possible. They regularly completed assigned homework and took extra learning materials home with them. Generally, their statements indicated that just attending class was not enough for them to meet their educational goals; they needed to study outside of the classroom as well. They also had a positive attitude about their ability to succeed in completing the work of the class and passing their GED exam or TABE. When asked why some of their classmates were not as successful as they were, many replied that unsuccessful students had not yet learned to take their education seriously.

Recommendations

1. Examine ways to encourage students' ability to clearly understand their explicit and implicit objectives in attending class. Perhaps pair less motivated students with more mature students who have clearly articulated goals and objectives.
2. Classrooms that were more effective clearly explicated high expectations for academic advancement, attendance, and behavior. Teachers and administration followed through so that students who failed to attend or presented behavior problems were dismissed from the program.

Assessments

Assessment was an important part of effective classrooms. Teachers used a variety of assessments including the TABE and GED materials. But they also used other assessments,

many of them developed or established. Included in these alternative assessments were teachers' views on students' motivation, self-efficacy, and the ability to articulate and achieve long-term goals.

Nevertheless, the assessments used to define student success remained a school district decision. Many teachers expressed concerns that the TABE and GED exam were not well aligned. This in and of itself is not a problem unless alignment is defined as the goal of using both tests. In that case, the lack of alignment may seriously challenge teachers' and students' acceptance of test results. Based on a review of the psychometric properties of the TABE described in the manual, it is a well-constructed test that appears to be both valid and reliable. What may be needed are other assessments that reflect particular areas of the curriculum or desired affective factors associated with success.

Recommendations

1. Using assessment to guide students' placement in leveled courses appeared to be an effective strategy. A designated course for students achieving at or below a fourth grade literacy level appears to be associated with stronger achievement for those students.
2. To better assess student progress and teacher efficacy, better data are needed, including:
 - a. Finer grained TABE results such as scale scores and percentiles rather than LCPs
 - b. More student characteristics such as age, years out of school, socioeconomic status, job status, etc.
 - c. Site information
 - d. Teacher information
 - e. Student attitudes and perception of self-efficacy

3. Also needed is a better data base system so that teachers, students, and administrators have ready access to students' assessment results.

References

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