

The Characteristics and Concerns of Adult Basic Education Teachers

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Key Findings

ABE teachers:

- have limited formal preparation geared specifically to teaching adults and have limited opportunities for professional development and continued learning.
- work under less than optimal conditions, lacking many of the supports that would help them do the best job possible.
- do not follow clear career paths into the field, and a significant portion don't stay in the field for long.
- typically play a limited role in the broader field of ABE.

ABE programs:

- vary considerably from one another in facilities and resources, and in policies and structures.
- shape how teachers organize instruction, assess student progress, and develop curriculum.

Key Recommendations

- Implement a comprehensive plan to improve teacher preparation and teachers' working conditions.
- Fund research on the connection between teacher preparation, working conditions, and student achievement.

This Research Brief highlights key findings from an exploratory investigation of adult basic education teachers' characteristics and concerns. This in-depth exploration documents what is commonly known, but not well researched, about teachers in the field; the challenges they face in teaching, in their programs, and as members of the field of adult basic education; the training and preparation they receive; and their current working conditions. The results confirm that teachers and programs are stretched, stressed, and challenged as they try to provide the best possible services to a large number of students.

This exploration grew out of a study about professional development for adult basic education (ABE) teachers. The goal of the NCSALL Professional Development Study

Supporting teachers to learn requires a systems approach: teacher preparation is related to teachers' working conditions, in that teachers will not be able to access training unless funding and structure support them to do so, and teachers are unlikely to invest in their own training unless they are preparing for jobs that are well-supported and stable.

—NCSALL Professional Development researchers

was to understand how ABE teachers change as a result of participating in professional development, and what factors influence that change. The study was conducted between 1998 and 2000 and involved 106 ABE teachers from three New England states. The Professional Development Study found that how teachers change as a result of professional development is influenced by a complex interaction between individual factors (e.g., educational background, motivation, years of experience teaching in the field), professional development factors (e.g., number of hours of professional development attended and quality of the professional development), and program/system factors (e.g., access to paid preparation time, benefits, and colleagues, and input to decision-making in the program).

In the process of collecting information from the teachers in the Professional Development Study (through questionnaires, interviews with teachers and their program directors, and visits to their programs), we learned about who teachers are as learners, as classroom teachers, as program members, and as members of the field of adult basic education.

Findings

We found that ABE teachers have limited formal preparation geared specifically to teaching adults, and have limited opportunities for professional development and continued learning. There are three avenues for teachers to learn: (1) on their own through self-study, from teaching students, or from their own

experience; (2) informally from colleagues (inside and outside of the program) and directors; and (3) formally through professional development activities. Isolation, part-time job structure, and limited opportunities for professional development may require teachers to rely more on learning from self-study or from their own experience, a difficult proposition for those teachers who do not have the time or sufficient training to study on their own.

Most ABE teachers do not follow clear career paths into the field, and a significant portion do not stay in the field for long. Typically, ABE teachers work under less than optimal conditions, lacking many of the supports that would help them do the best job possible. Teachers are strongly affected by their working conditions and respond to them by: coping with the situation; challenging and trying to improve the situation; or leaving their job, and possibly the field, altogether.

Teachers face unique challenges in their teaching because of the policies and structure of the ABE field, and how they approach these challenges is influenced by both program and individual factors. Programs' beliefs about the purpose of ABE instruction, their curriculum development and assessment practices, and their policies on enrollment shape teachers' approach. Teachers' own knowledge and skills in curriculum development, their beliefs about the appropriate role for ABE teachers, and their beliefs about the purpose of ABE instruction also strongly affect how they approach these challenges.

Programs in ABE vary considerably in facilities and resources and in policies and structure. Limited resources and policies imposed by external forces affect the programs' ability to provide the types of services to students that they would like to provide.

Finally, many teachers do not play a role in the broader field of ABE (e.g., advocating for students' needs, providing professional development to other teachers), either because they are unaware of opportunities or they are not inclined, prepared, supported, or even expected to participate outside of their program.

Implications

The main implication of these findings is that ABE teachers require better preparation, but even that is not enough. Teachers feel they need to be better supported if they are to provide high-quality instruction and services to students. In order to change the current situation, our field needs to recognize the needs of teachers as critical to the improvement of the field as a whole and then create a plan for improving both the preparation and working conditions of its teachers. A plan for improving teacher preparation and working conditions should be built upon research that demonstrates the connection between well-trained, well-supported teachers, student persistence and achievement, and impact on students' lives. We also need more research that investigates this connection.

Recommendations

After analyzing and reflecting on the data in this exploratory study, we conclude that the two most urgent issues for our field in relation to its teachers are the lack of preparation teachers receive to teach adults and the poor conditions under which they work. We recommend a plan of action for improving teacher preparation and working conditions, based on the belief that the field will only improve to a limited extent without attention to these issues.

A plan for improving teacher preparation and working conditions starts with policymakers in programs and states attempting to provide better working conditions for teachers, including more teaching resources, well-supported jobs (including a greater proportion of full-time jobs), opportunities for professional development, access to colleagues to share ideas and information, and input to decision-making in programs. Under such conditions, potential teachers may begin to see ABE as a career, rather than an accidental job choice. This process, which may be long-term and certainly will require dedicated funding, should start with a review of how ABE programs in some states have managed to create appropriate working conditions and well-supported jobs.

The Reality of Adult Basic Education Teachers' Jobs

Teachers' top concerns about their jobs relate to their program (structure and mission, facilities, and administration support) and their working conditions (salary, security, benefits, and number of working hours).

The main reasons teachers gave for why they would leave their ABE job were low salary, lack of benefits, limited working hours and, to a lesser extent, lack of job security.

Teachers reported a fairly strong desire to stay in the field, but they were less likely to want to work in the field five years from now (as opposed to one year from now), and even less certain they viewed work in the ABE field as their long-term career.

Well-supported jobs were the exception, rather than the rule, among the teachers in our sample. A well-supported job in ABE would include receiving a living wage and having access to benefits, more working hours, job security (or at the very least, program stability), paid prep time, and paid professional development release time.

Teachers had three responses to poor working conditions, which also affected programs and students: cope, challenge, or leave.

Second, policymakers and program directors need to work with universities to build formal coursework in ABE, and tie this to ABE certification efforts underway in many states to professionalize the field. With more career jobs in ABE, the field will have a stronger basis for expecting that teachers invest in their own preparation to teach adults.

Finally, federal and state policymakers need to fund research about teachers, answering two important questions: (1) What is the relationship between well-trained and well-supported teachers and adult student achievement, persistence, and other outcomes? and (2) What are the costs and benefits of investing more heavily in teacher preparation (both preservice and inservice) and support; i.e., what are the improvements in quality when funding serves fewer students and supports teacher training and working conditions instead?

In an era of increased accountability, funders of ABE are looking for concrete outcomes from the educational services they support. The findings from this study are an important wake-up call to those who make decisions about how to structure services for students. Devoting more funding to better support for teachers, at the expense of serving more students, should be seriously considered. The field will not improve without significant effort, and we argue that teachers are its most valuable resource. Without better teacher preparation and working conditions, the dedication and commitment of teachers will not be enough to ensure that adult students reap full benefits from participating in ABE.

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The mandate for teacher excellence rests equally with professional developers, teachers, and federal, state, and program-level administrators. Supporting teachers to learn requires a systems approach: teacher preparation is related to teachers' working conditions, in that teachers will not be able to access training unless funding and structure support them to do so, and teachers are unlikely to invest in their own training unless they are preparing for jobs that are well-supported and stable. The field needs to be strengthened so as to provide more financial support to programs; programs need to use that financial support to provide more tangible support and opportunities for teachers; professional development needs to be funded and designed to be relevant to teachers' needs and must be of high quality; and teachers need to hold themselves to a high standard of continually improving to best meet the needs of their students.

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To learn more about NCSALL's Professional Development Study and its products, please visit the NCSALL Web site at:

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