Documenting Outcomes for Learners and Their Communities: A Report on a NCSALL Action Research Project

A NCSALL Research Brief

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Various national efforts, particularly the National Reporting System, measure outcomes of adult education programs, but many questions remain about how local programs might document outcomes in ways that are immediately useful to students, teachers, and programs. This study is a response to those questions.

Over the course of two years, three teams of teachers and administrators from three adult basic education programs in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia—with NCSALL researchers serving as facilitators—took part in action research focused on developing approaches local programs can use to document the outcomes of student participation in adult education programs. We determined that action research, an approach grounded in practice, might be an effective way to explore the issue.

Methodology

The research was conducted in two stages, the first with one program team and the second with two additional teams. The research began with a series of activities that enabled teams to examine their current practice and consider how outcome documentation fit their program needs. The facilitators offered possible approaches, including EFF, that might prove useful in this effort. Each team built on these activities through a cycle of planning, implementation, and evaluation to develop their own documentation processes. Documentation focused on aspects of students' lives that the program or the students identified as areas in which change was desired.

Impact on Practitioners and Learners

As they participated in this action research, team members changed their understanding of their practice and had opportunities for reflections that led to improved classroom practice. Developing processes to document changes in learners' lives resulted in greater understanding of their students' lives. Identifying desired outcomes led to a greater focus on instruction designed to meet learners' goals and achieve desired outcomes. Thinking through program processes led to increased appreciation of how different program aspects—goal setting, instruction, outcome documentation—can be aligned. Team members also gained a greater understanding of research and greater awareness of research as a source of knowledge that might contribute to their work.

Therefore, those responsible for professional development in adult education should use action research more extensively. However, teachers need to be paid for time spent in action research, states need to accept action research as professional development, and facilitators need to be available. Involving students in action research to identify goals and develop processes to document goal achievement may have a positive impact on student persistence and should be pursued and evaluated.

Key Findings

- Local programs can develop documentation processes useful for planning and assessing their work.
- Action research is effective for professional and program development in adult education.
- Action research is a tool to help students set and monitor goals.
- Action research focused on outcomes can enhance processes for improving program quality.
- Action research can support and enhance performance accountability but more work is needed at the local, state, and national levels.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

- Those responsible for professional development in adult education should use action research more extensively.
- Teachers should be paid for involvement in action research.
- Facilitators should be available to support action research.
- Action research should involve students in both setting goals and documenting their achievement.
- Local and state administrators should encourage action research use to improve program quality.
- States should use participatory processes to build consensus on performance accountability goals, and locally defined goals should be part of consensus building.
- State and federal resources are needed to design flexible yet rigorous outcomes measurement and reporting systems.
- Action research should be evaluated as a tool to further learner persistence.

Impact on Program Improvement Processes

Action research focusing on outcomes can contribute to building local program quality by supporting systematic thinking about what the program does and why. Combined with ongoing action and evaluation, this helps a program focus on continuous improvement. Local and state adult education administrators should encourage use of action research approaches to improve program quality. Resources such as *How Are We Doing?* (Bingman, 2001), a guide for local programs based on this action research project, can help facilitate local inquiry into program improvement, particularly when local programs have access to financial support for staff time.

Impact on Performance Accountablility Systems

This action research project addressed four principles supporting effective performance and accountability in adult education: consensus on goals and indicators of their accomplishment, mutual accountability relationships, resources to meet goals and measure achievement, and a variety of performance measurement tools. Currently, the National Reporting System and most state systems require standardized measures of only a few outcomes. More extensive action research projects that involve more teams in a program or a state have the potential to build an accountability system that integrates a variety of performance measurement tools. This system must report the kinds of data collected by teams that take part in such projects. Although national legislation focuses on economic outcomes of adult education, learners have a wider variety of goals. Programs need the ability to focus on individual as well as nationally established goals.

Local efforts themselves cannot build a comprehensive performance accountability system. The work must extend to the state and national level. States should build consensus about the goals underlying their performance accountability systems, using such participatory processes as action research. The action research should include locally defined goals as part of consensus building because this seems to build programs' ability to implement performance accountability systems. A more extensive and focused process of examination and consensus building around goals involving all the programs in a region or state could undergird a state performance accountability system. Mutual accountability should go beyond teachers and students to include state and federal agencies. Systems of feedback and accountability need to be put in place.

Resources should be committed at the state and federal levels to designing outcome measurement and reporting systems flexible enough to include a variety of goals as well as rigorous enough to measure performance. These might include performance-based assessment frameworks, such as that of EFF, and Web-based reporting systems that allow reporting of specific evidence of goal achievement.

For programs to have the capacity to truly be accountable for both measuring and meeting goal achievement, the challenges identified in this project, particularly limited staff time, will have to be addressed.

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