

Forum: Improving Service to Adult Literacy Learners

(Part 1 of 3)

Each One Can't Just Teach One

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Daryl¹ arrives at an adult basic education (ABE) program, eager to learn to read but without knowledge of some foundational components of reading. For example, he does not have mastery of letter/sound correspondences. To participate in the reading class at this program a student must have a minimum score on the entering reading assessment, but Daryl scores below the minimum. Therefore, he is paired with a tutor, with the hope that one-on-one attention will bring Daryl's score up to the point that he can participate in class. However, after 4 months of coming regularly to his tutoring sessions, Daryl's tutor decides he no longer wants to work with him, because he believes Daryl isn't making any progress. The program decides to allow Daryl into the reading class, but he struggles to make progress in that setting too. Eventually, he is asked to leave the program and referred elsewhere, in the hopes of him finding a better "fit."

I observed this chain of events in a real program. Although I lost contact with Daryl after he left the program where I was volunteering, my research and teaching experiences suggest that he might have encountered a similar experience at the next program. Currently, and seemingly in perpetuity, U.S. adults who come to adult education programs wishing to learn to read are met with teachers and tutors who have insufficient preparation to help them do so. This may be particularly true for adults who have experienced difficulty learning to read, either from lack of educational opportunity, learning disabilities, or a combination of these and other factors. Throughout this article I refer to these learners as *adult literacy learners*. Viewed according to the six Literacy Proficiency levels derived by the

Programme for the Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), these learners would most likely be assessed as Below Level 1 and Level 1. However, some learners who place at Levels 2 and above might also experience difficulty reading or improving their reading skills.

At a national level, we know very little about how many of these adults enroll or attempt to enroll in ABE programs or volunteer tutoring programs. Although much data is collected in the National Reporting System for WIOA-funded programs, participants' reading assessment data is not publicly available. Many volunteer tutoring programs don't use standardized assessments, and results from the assessments they do use are typically not made public. We do know that ProLiteracy member programs reported that 29% of students enrolled in basic literacy/high school equivalency programming had "beginning" entry reading levels, and another 23% were described as having "developing" reading levels (ProLiteracy, 2022, p. 1).² These programs also reported that 33% of participating English language learners (ELL) were "unable to read English" (p. 1). However, as with the PIAAC assessments, this report does not differentiate learners new to reading English from learners new to reading in any language, sometimes called adult "emergent readers" (see Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011, p. 121). These percentages suggest that there is substantial need for effective reading teaching in adult tutoring, ABE, and ELL programs, but much more data is necessary to understand the true scope of the need.

Although many adult learners would likely benefit from improved reading instruction, there is particular need to

¹ Daryl is a pseudonym.

² ProLiteracy member programs included both tutor and teacher-led instruction and WIOA and non-WIOA funded programs.

enhance instruction for learners who read at the most basic levels; both to address the moral issues of social inclusion and equity for adults marginalized by literacy difficulties in a print-saturated society and because the discourse of contemporary adult education practice has evolved away from learner-centered concerns for this student population, which often focus on reading improvement. Federal adult education agendas focus on literacy in the service of workforce development and the attainment of academic competencies; this approach incentivizes service to higher performing learners (Pickard, 2016). Furthermore, practitioners who work with adult literacy learners often experience frustration with their ability to help these learners improve their reading skills, as Daryl's experience with his tutor illustrates. These circumstances call for a re-evaluation of the field's approach to serving adults who demonstrate difficulty learning to read.

Re-Evaluating Common-Sense Processes of Service

When a learner arrives at an adult education program with very low reading scores or starts a program but isn't making progress in the expected way, the typical solution in our field is to pair this learner with a tutor. There is a common-sense thinking directing this approach. If an adult learner is performing poorly, the thinking goes, they might need more attention than a classroom teacher can reasonably give. Pairing the learner with a one-on-one tutor allows learners to take the material at their own speed, slowing down the pace of instruction if desired.

However, underlying this common-sense thinking are often too-simplified understandings of the processes of reading and reading instruction and the implicit belief that anyone who knows how to read can use that knowledge to teach others to do so. Using this logic, Frank Laubach coined the optimistic slogan "each one, teach one" to describe how volunteer tutors might teach adults in their communities to read; this approach structured Laubach Literacy campaigns in the U.S. and around the world (Nelson Christoph, 2009, p. 84). However, from my experience as a teacher and researcher, I have come to believe that, especially in terms of reading, each one *cannot* always teach one. For many adult literacy learners to succeed, teachers and tutors' good intentions and

everyday knowledge of reading must be coupled with a toolbox full of research-informed approaches to adult literacy instruction.

Much public attention is currently being paid to research about literacy instruction for children. As of January 2024, 40+ states had passed laws requiring reforms of K-12 curricula to include the "Science of Reading" (SoR) (Goldstein, 2024). Although adult literacy researchers more commonly use the phrases "evidence-based" or "evidence-informed" instructional approaches (e.g., Comings et al., 2003; Shore et al., 2015, etc.), the central thrust of all these ideas is that instructional practice should be guided by what research tells us will produce the best educational outcomes for learners. In the SoR view of learning to read - and overcoming difficulty learning to read, which is a central concern for many adult literacy learners - systematically-taught phonics must be used alongside other evidence-based strategies for reading instruction.

Adult literacy scholars and practitioners have wrestled for years with the role of phonics as a component of learner-centered curricula, with some scholars arguing that for adults who encounter difficulty learning to read, systematic phonics instruction is particularly important (Snow & Strucker, 1999, in Purcell-Gates et al, 2001). Although efforts to identify effective and appropriate instructional approaches for adult literacy learners are ongoing, we know from existing research that teachers and tutors of adults may not use systematically presented or evidence-based approaches to teach reading. Past national analysis found that teachers and tutors of adult reading possessed a 62% mastery of evidence-based components of reading instruction (alphabeticity, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and assessment) (Bell et al., 2013), suggesting substantial gaps in teachers' and tutors' knowledge. Furthermore, reading practitioners' decisions are sometimes impromptu, based on intuition and their own learning experiences rather than research, and are not always made with a clear sense of instructional purpose (Belzer, 2006b). As Perry and Hart (2012) describe it, teachers and tutors are sometimes "winging it" (p.116).

There are many complex, interconnected reasons for teaching reading in this way, including patterns of attendance, lack of resources, working conditions,

policy constraints, the available evidence about effective interventions, and the knowledge base from which teachers and tutors make decisions about reading instruction. Even within these constraints, however, there are steps we can take to improve the services provided to adult learners who are seeking help to improve their reading.

Suggestions for Improving Service to Adult Literacy Learners

The suggestions for improvement outlined below consider WIOA-funded ABE programs and non-WIOA-funded volunteer programs as interconnected parts of the system of educational services available to adult literacy learners. Although WIOA accountability policy has hampered ABE programs' abilities to meaningfully address literacy and learner-centered aims, many WIOA-funded ABE programs still enroll adults who have interest in and need of foundational literacy development, while ; others rely on volunteer literacy programs as a sort of "shadow system" to help students attain a level of readiness to enter WIOA-funded programs (Pickard, 2024). Changes in both settings are needed and, given their relationship, improvements in one setting are likely to impact the other.

Expand Upfront and Ongoing Training for Volunteer Reading Tutors

For years, many have called for improved preparation for adult reading instructors (Smith, 2017; Snow & Strucker, 1999). Scholars in adult literacy education have generally agreed that specific knowledge of reading instruction is required to teach reading successfully, but research suggests both teachers and tutors lack sufficient reading knowledge for effective instruction (Zeigler et al., 2009). Volunteer programs should expand upfront training regarding reading instruction and provide substantive ongoing support for volunteer tutors. Belzer (2006a) concluded that just-in-time support would help volunteer tutors tailor instruction to individual learners' needs and circumstances. Perry and Hart (2012) proposed that both upfront and ongoing support could improve tutors' instructional practices and address differences in tutors' varied backgrounds. The volunteer tutors who participated in their research articulated the following needs: (a) teaching tools and techniques, specifically pedagogical content knowledge, meaning *what* to teach

and *how* to teach it; (b) people resources, including mentoring, a designated "reference person" to whom they could ask pedagogical questions over time, and opportunities for formal/informal networking with other educators; and (c) "other" supports, such as cultural education/awareness.

Expand Adult Reading Teachers' Knowledge Base Through ABE Certification

For WIOA programs, states should consider offering - or requiring - pre-service certification for ABE educators who teach reading. This certification might include training in working with adult learners, addressing learning disabilities, and evidence-based instructional approaches to reading. Although such an effort may sound daunting, there are examples from Texas, Massachusetts, Colorado and elsewhere of voluntary or required certification for adult basic educators (Smith, 2017), some of which have demonstrated that ABE-centric pre-service certification can support improved outcomes for learners (Payne et al., 2013). This step could quickly improve the quality and breadth of the current teacher knowledge base about reading instruction, especially if loans acquired to attain this certification could be repaid by time spent teaching in publicly funded programs, as K-12 teachers can do. Furthermore, having a certification requirement targeted to ABE reading teachers might benefit literacy learners across types of programming - paid or volunteer - as ABE educators who receive certification can be drawn on as a resource to improve the training and supports provided in volunteer programs.

Address Policy Constraints

Federal adult education policy has constrained ABE practitioners' attention to literacy concerns, both via accountability measures that disincentivize serving lower-performing learners (Pickard, 2021) and by shifting the discourse regarding the purpose of the field itself (Belzer, 2017). One possible remedy is to adjust WIOA to better facilitate the inclusion of literacy learners in WIOA funded programs. This might include allowing different assessment tests or alternative means of demonstrating improvement, or by expanding the list of allowable outcomes to include some that are more relevant to adult literacy learners. Another possibility is to develop additional federal adult education legislation

and infrastructure that explicitly addresses adult literacy learning. In these efforts, the recent attention in the popular press to the SoR, explicit instruction, and dyslexia means lawmakers are paying closer attention and allocating funding towards initiatives that address these concerns. Adult literacy advocates could capitalize on the popularity of these topics to advocate for increased funding for training adult educators in reading instruction and to promote the inclusion of literacy instruction as an essential component of adult education initiatives.

Improve Data about Adult Literacy

While I am hesitant to suggest additional reporting burdens for WIOA-funded programs, sharing participants' reading assessment information in the NRS would be a relatively easy way to improve our understanding of whether and where adults with reading support needs are enrolling in our federal adult education system. Furthermore, future iterations of the PIAAC and other assessments of adult competencies should differentiate between adult English language learners who are successful readers of other languages and those who are emergent readers. Given PIAAC's estimates that 48 million adults in the United States perform English language reading tasks at the two most basic levels of its assessment (Mamedova & Pawlowski, 2022), it is imperative to refine our understanding of adult literacy learners and how they are (or are not) being served.

Expand the Research Base and Disseminate Findings

A number of recommendations for effective adult literacy instruction have been articulated, and research in this area is ongoing. (See, for example, Alamprese et al., 2011; Greenberg, Rodrigo et al., 2007; Greenberg, Wise

et al., 2011; Hock & Mellard, 2011; Kruidenier et al., 2010; Mellard et al., 2011; Shore et al., 2015). Nonetheless, many questions remain unanswered, and a sufficiently robust evidence base has yet to be established (National Research Council, 2012). Research that would answer questions about adult literacy learning and teaching is consistently hampered by an extreme paucity of funding, the small size of the scholarly field, and the generally limited policy interest in adult literacy teaching and learning. However, it is imperative that research continue to identify strategies for effective adult literacy instruction and that findings are disseminated to programs and practitioners. The federally-funded professional development program Student Achievement in Reading (STAR) is targeted to intermediate level learners, but provides a model for dissemination of research findings that could complement teachers' and tutors' pre-service training in evidence-based reading instruction for adult literacy learners.

Conclusion

If we want to support learners like Daryl, dramatic improvements to reading instruction are needed in adult education programs. For federally-funded programs, a significant course-correction is required to return attention to adults who need and desire literacy education. For volunteer and WIOA-funded programs, enhanced training for teachers and tutors is essential. Advocates for adult education should center adult literacy learners as important participants in the field and insist on better teacher and tutor preparation, ongoing support for instructors, and the incorporation of evidence-based strategies into reading instruction. An adult education system that substantively addresses educational needs for learners at every level is within our reach, but not without our concerted efforts to create it.

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