ADULT LITERACY LEARNERS IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT: “EDUCATION DEBT,” UNPAID

By

AMY PICKARD

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by AMY PICKARD

Dissertation Director:

Dr. Alisa Belzer

The publicly-funded adult literacy system constitutes the largest network of available adult basic education (ABE) programs (Beder, 1991). However, since the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) instituted accountability measures related to ABE students’ standardized test performance and their rapid acquisition of jobs, researchers and practitioners have been concerned that programs were implicitly being forced to limit program access for adults who have difficulty with reading, among whom students of color are disproportionately concentrated (Beder, 1999; Comings, 2007; Condelli, 2007; Pickard, 2016). With the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act’s added emphasis on rapid transition of adult literacy students into post-secondary education, this concern has intensified (Pickard, 2016).

This ethnographic study explored the experiences of learners enrolled in a publicly-funded ABE class targeted to adults who have difficulty reading and examined the relationship between the federal policies that fund and regulate adult literacy programs and these learners’ classroom experiences. Findings include that learners in this class encountered significant barriers of access to public literacy programs, were exposed to deficit-based programmatic practices that possibly worsened their educational marginalization, and had their cultural and personal strengths largely ignored during classroom instruction. Furthermore, it was observed that the pressures of federal accountability policy activated or deepened these practitioners' deficit beliefs about learners. Critical race theory (CRT) methodology (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) was used to construct counter-stories that focus on learners' strengths and to imagine opportunities for adult literacy instruction that are grounded in learner assets, rather than driven by deficit beliefs.

Ladson-Billings (2006) argued that there is an "education debt" owed to racially minoritized students in the U.S., rooted in the highly discriminatory "historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies" (p.5) that shape our society and our educational systems. Similarly, the literacy issues of adults who have difficulty reading have been influenced by a multitude of complex, interwoven sociopolitical and educational factors. This study found that participation in a publicly-funded adult literacy class left the education debt owed to these learners largely unpaid.

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Article 1

“There’s really no places for them”:

Barriers to access in adult literacy education

Introduction

Scholars and advocates have documented how our political and social history of de jure and de facto segregation, along with racialized deficit beliefs, continue to limit African-American and Latinx students' access to basic educational resources in the K-12 system, including schools free from violence, sufficient and equitable classroom materials and instruction, safe and healthy school buildings, support services such as guidance counselors and nurses, proportional and reasonable discipline, and availability of advanced classes that would support admission to and success in college (Blanchett, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Graham, 2015; Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Oakes, 2005; Solorzáno & Ornelas, 2002; Yosso, 2006). The high proportion of these students who leave K-12 before graduation is consistent with these conditions; according to the National Center for Educational Statistics, for the academic year 2010-2011, graduation rates for Asian/Pacific Islander students were 87%; White students, 84%; Latinx students, 71%; African Americans students, 67%; and Native American students, 65% (Stetser and Stillwell, 2014). However, these national statistics mask the even lower graduation rates for African-American, Latinx and Native American males and the substantially lower graduation rates in urban school districts, where the bulk of minoritized students are concentrated (Orfield, Losen, Wald & Swanson, 2004; Swanson, 2009). Furthermore, these numbers do not include students who separate from school before the ninth grade, a statistic which is rarely calculated; however, the California Department of Education reported that 3.5% of California eighth graders dropped out of school in 2010 (Blume, 2011).

Adult literacy programs serve adults who have separated from the K-12 system before high school graduation or who have graduated but seek support to further develop their educational skills, and publicly-funded programs constitute the largest network of available adult literacy services (Beder, 1991). Although the number of adults without a high school diploma far exceeds the number who go on to enroll in adult literacy programs, in the academic year 2015-2016, there were 829,948 adults enrolled in federally-funded adult literacy programs[1]; 57% of these adults were African American or Latinx (Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education, n.d.). Once enrolled in a public program, many of these adults are assessed as reading at Beginning ABE Literacy, Beginning Basic, or Low Intermediate Basic levels, meaning they are likely to have difficulty with identification of simple words, decoding, reading and understanding texts longer than a few lines, and understanding texts with unfamiliar vocabulary.[2] In 2014-2015, 62% of African Americans adults and 45% of Latinx adults who enrolled in public literacy programs were assessed as reading at these levels (Pickard, 2016). However, since the passage and enactment of two federal statues that regulate and fund public adult literacy programs, the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), researchers and practitioners have expressed concerns that federal requirements for programs to focus on postsecondary and workforce development aims may limit access for different groups of learners, especially adults with difficulty reading (Condelli, 2007; Pickard, 2016), African-Americans (Pickard, 2016), and women who receive welfare subsidies (Sheared, McCabe & Umeki, 2000; Sparks & Peterson, 2000).

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[1] "Adult literacy programs" and "adult basic education programs" are used interchangeably to indicate adult education programs designed to serve students seeking up to and including high school equivalency preparation. Statistics and analysis in this article do not include services to adult English Language Learners (ELL), which comprise a distinct branch of adult education programming.

[2] These skill descriptions correspond with "Educational Functioning Levels" defined in federal accountability standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Limited access to adult literacy programs has a number of potentially negative implications, both for the adults who seek services and the communities in which they live. Many adults have specific educational goals that are related to supporting the literacy and schooling efforts of their children or grandchildren; some are interested in pursuing better jobs or qualifying for job training to better support themselves and their families; numerous others seek to accomplish personal literacy and educational goals that have social, political, or psychological benefits (Beder, 1991; St. Clair, 2010). Limits to the accessibility of adult literacy programs can severely hamper adults' ability to engage with or accomplish this wide range of educational goals, particularly for those who have limited income and cannot afford to engage private educational services and for those whose reading difficulties constrain efforts at self-directed learning. Limited access to publicly-funded programs for African-American and Latinx adults also provokes questions about the adult literacy system's role in supporting or denying equitable access to literacy for these racially minoritized adults.

While much prior research exists on barriers to participation in adult literacy programs, this research has tended to avoid questions about how policy contributes to or creates barriers, and few studies have focused specifically on students of color. This article begins to fill these gaps by reporting on barriers to access described by African American and Latinx adults who were enrolled in a publicly-funded adult literacy program and connecting these barriers to the policies regulating adult literacy education.

Although all learners included in this study managed to enroll despite having to navigate barriers to enrollment, they often continued to experience policy-related barriers to participation once enrolled. Knowing the types of barriers these learners encountered can help us understand what other potential participants might experience and point to areas for improvement. The research questions guiding this inquiry were: What barriers to access did learners experience as they tried to enroll and participate in the program, and what relationship did these barriers have to policy? Improving our understanding of these barriers can shed light on the need for revised federal and state policies that support more equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for racially minoritized adults.

Framing Access in Adult Literacy Education

Access to adult literacy education program participation is best understood as one facet of the many complex concerns about access to literacy for minoritized adults. Researchers have articulated multiple social, political and educational conditions that can undermine minoritized adults' access to literacy, including differing definitions of literacy in programs, policies, and communities; questions about who has the power to define literacy; dominant language groups' treatment of minority literacy practices; restrictive political and social expectations for minoritized adults; and the availability and accessibility of literacy services (Amstutz and Sheared, 2000; Flowers, 2000; Gadsden, 1990; Street, 1987). Given my focus on barriers to access affecting enrollment and participation in a federally-funded adult literacy program, the literature review presented here includes research on the differing ways enrollment and participation in adult literacy programs have been conceptualized and researched.

My intended meaning of the term *barriers*, as it is used in this study, is borrowed from Hayes and Darkenwald's (1988) work on adult learner participation. These researchers preferred the term *deterrents* instead of barriers, because they felt that barriers implied an obstacle that could not be overcome. However, my use of the term barriers in this article reflects the more common terminology used to describe obstacles but is intended to retain Hayes and Darkenwald's framing of these obstacles as not always deterministic of whether or not learners are ultimately able to enroll in a program. My focus on barriers to *access* instead of barriers to *participation* is drawn from research regarding educational access for minoritized populations in the United States (e.g., Gadsen, 1990; Harper, Patton & Wooden, 2009). This research locates responsibility for facilitating access within policies, systems and institutions; in contrast, research regarding barriers to participation often locates responsibility within the learners.

Within the adult literacy research on participation, many scholars have framed their research questions around understanding what forces discourage the participation of adults who choose *not* to enroll in adult literacy programs, as opposed to understanding what obstacles stand in the way of those who *do* want to participate. The distinction may be subtle, but it is important; research focusing on non-participators is predicated on the idea that many adults need to improve their literacy skills, but choose not to enroll, despite the presumed benefits of participating in an adult literacy class. Research on non-participators has often emphasized the psychological characteristics of adults and utilizes negative, deficit framings of adults' skills and decision-making capacities (Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg, 1992). For example, Hayes (1988; 1989) sought to create quantitatively-based typologies of dispositional/psychosocial barriers, including personality traits, values, or internal thought processes, that act as deterrents to enrolling in adult literacy programs. Other researchers have created categorizations of types of barriers that would prevent participation in adult literacy programs (Beder, 1990; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988; Flynn, Brown, Johnson & Rodger, 2011). These categorizations included dispositional/psychosocial barriers but also emphasized situational barriers, meaning life "circumstances" that impede a person's ability to participate, such as lack of childcare or unaffordable transportation costs.

Both dispositional and situational barriers in this body of research are generally framed as politically neutral. Systemic barriers, such as governmental policy, or systemic inequalities, such as institutional racism or gender-based oppression, receive limited attention. Furthermore, deterrents that are arguably the product of institutional and systemic barriers are sometimes categorized as reflective of internal attitudes, rather than external circumstances. For example, Hayes and Darkenwald's (1988) factor analysis of barriers sorted learners' responses of "I tried to start classes but they were already full" into the category of "negative attitude to classes," and "I didn't have time to go to school" was categorized as "low personal priority" (Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988, p.22).[3] Not being able to attend class because there is no space in the class clearly reflects institutional and systemic barriers, rather than personal attitude; many adult basic education programs have persistent waiting lists, which may be due to lack of funding, space constraints, or high demand for literacy services (Young, 1995). None of these conditions are indicative of learners' negative attitudes. Not having time to go to school may reflect the structural conditions for many low-income adults who have multiple jobs and many demands on their time; "low personal priority" implies that adults don't want to go, rather than it not being possible. Research that explores educational decision-making in a politically neutral frame ignores how systemic and institutional factors shape the situational "circumstances" of individuals' lives and, in so doing, can perpetuate deficit framings of adult literacy learners.

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[3] Hayes and Darkenwald's (1988) research offers an excellent example of how researcher subjectivity can influence quantitative analysis. 'Objective' factor analysis was used to group learners' responses together, but it was the researchers who interpreted and named these groupings. The names chosen for the groups reflect the researchers' own implicitly negative understandings of adults who don't read well but don't participate in adult literacy education.

Denny's (1992) exploration of potential reasons for African American adults' non-participation in adult literacy programs is an exception to the general lack of political context in this type of research. In her interviews with African-American participants and prospective participants in a New York adult literacy program, interviewees' suggestions about why learners don't participate still often focused on characteristics of adults' internal dispositions, such as not valuing education, ego and embarrassment; however, the respondents situated these reasons in a socio-political context that included the negative impact of persistent racial discrimination on educational and economic opportunities. Denny concluded that adults' relationships to and perspectives of their own social power can inform or limit their access to literacy and their decisions about whether to participate in adult literacy programs.

While research on non-participants has focused mostly on individuals' internal characteristics and reactions to their life circumstances, other research has explored the defining role that external policy and systemic conditions can play in structuring adults' life circumstances and opportunities for participation in education programs. Rubenson's (2006) and Rubenson and Desjardins' (2009) research comparing the Nordic welfare-state model with other types of state welfare systems suggested that countries with more comprehensive social welfare policies produce less economic and literacy inequality in their populations. Furthermore, they argue that more comprehensive social welfare policies facilitate increased participation in all types of adult education programs by providing supports for overcoming situational barriers, such as offering family leave policies and subsidized childcare, and by reducing dispositional barriers through changing the individual's perception of their relationship to the marketplace and the state.

In contrast, Amstutz & Sheared's (2000) and Sheared, McCabe and Umeki's (2000) analyses of the dramatic reduction in social welfare benefits and the effort to force low-income adults into employment (regardless of educational needs) instituted by the United States' 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) suggested that these policies had the potential to restrict low-income adults' access to and participation in college, job training, and basic education programs. Goldrick-Rab & Shaw's (2014) comprehensive quantitative analysis of the impact of WIA and PRWORA on enrollment in post-secondary education documented that for all adults who received welfare, but particularly for Hispanic and African-American adults, the "work-first" emphasis in these two policies actually reduced the number of adults who went on to enroll in post-secondary education.

Our understanding of the impact of these and other federal policies on access to adult literacy programs is limited. The qualitative research presented in this article is situated conceptually within a frame that seeks to understand how systemic and policy conditions impact interested African American and Latinx learners' abilities to participate and acknowledges that differential access to literacy because of racial marginalization is an historic and present reality in the United States. In her research on marginalized learners' access to literacy, Gadsden (1990) proposed that, "Countries may regard literacy and schooling as a human right yet may differ in their goals and expectations for various racial, ethnic, and language minority groups" (p.20). She suggested that these varied goals and expectations are visible in policy choices that determine how literacy is made accessible to different groups of adults. The study described here focuses on the accessibility of literacy services for a group of African-American and Latinx adults who had been identified through standardized testing as having difficulty reading and the role policy played in shaping their access. For the learners profiled in this article, *barriers to access* created by policy and institutional systems were sometimes but not always insurmountable; however, they frequently served to decrease motivation and limit or delay participation. For other adults with difficulty reading, similar barriers to access may have proved insurmountable and prevented them from enrolling altogether.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

This ethnographic research study was conducted at The Literacy Center (TLC),[4] a federally- and state-funded, urban adult literacy program that offered a wide range of educational services, including adult literacy and high school equivalency classes, English Language Learner classes, and family literacy classes. The program's website describes the typical student attending TLC programs as female, African American, and low income, and the bulk of adults who sought services from TLC's adult literacy program were classified by TLC as "basic" and "intermediate" readers. These categorizations oversimplify learners' capacities and can reinforce deficit thinking (Rex et al., 2010) but are commonly used in the field to indicate a student's performance on the intake assessment tests required by accountability policies and to sort students for placement purposes. The class that was the focus of this research was a basic level reading class, and participants were predominantly African-American; however, the majority were male. For many students in the class, "basic" literacy tasks such as writing a sentence or reading a short paragraph were indeed a struggle, and it was this struggle that motivated them to enroll at TLC. For others, their assessment test performances offered an inaccurate portrait of their more advanced literacy skills, and (mis)placement in a basic reading class was time taken away from working towards their educational goals.

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[4] All names of people and organizations in this article are pseudonyms.

The reading class met two times a week for two and a half hours each time, and eleven regularly-attending class participants agreed to be interviewed for this study. Nine participants were African American (three women, six men) and two were Latinx (one woman, one man). The oldest, Sister Hester, was a 72-year-old African American woman who wanted to pursue an Associate's Degree in counseling, and the youngest was Bobby, a 26 year old African American man who had a high school diploma but wanted to "brush up" on his skills in order to enhance his employability. Both Latinx participants, Arturo and Migdalia, were of Puerto Rican descent but grew up in mainland USA and spoke English fluently. Nine of the eleven participants reported having been identified as learning disabled or placed in special education during their K-12 experiences.

Additionally, six program staff members who interacted with these learners agreed to be interviewed as part of the research: the reading class teacher, Ms. Birch; a referral and transitions counselor; the tutor coordinator; and three upper-level administrators - the executive director, the director of education, and the associate director of instructional quality. A seventh practitioner, a GED teacher who had been with the program for 17 years, was interviewed for additional perspective on the context of teaching, learning, and administration at the program.

Data Collection

The data in this article were collected using participant observation, interviews, and artifact collection (Creswell, 2007; Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007; Patton, 1987). As participant observer, I acted as a volunteer classroom aide in the reading class roughly twice a week for four months; in all, I acted as a classroom aide 23 times. 20 of these classroom visits were audiorecorded and transcribed. I conducted follow-up visits to the classroom or program site once or twice a month for four subsequent months. During this eight month period, I also attended a new student orientation, a meeting for all students in the program, and twice observed a different ABE reading class for comparison purposes. Observational data during visits to the class or program site were documented through the use of field notes written during or immediately after visits (Creswell, 2007; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011; Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007).

During the data collection period, learners were interviewed twice, either in a private room at the program or in their homes, with three to six months between interviews. Two learners were unable to complete the second interview for personal reasons, and one learner was interviewed a third time via telephone. The reading teacher was interviewed four times spread across the study period, the referral and transitions counselor twice, and the GED teacher and administrative staff once each. Interviews were semi-structured. Questions for learners addressed their past educational histories, their experiences enrolling at TLC, and their educational goals and hopes for their participation in the present program. Interviews with teachers and staff focused on their perceptions of TLC's and the government's responses to the needs of adult literacy learners. Interviews ranged in length from 18 minutes to 141 minutes; most were in the 30-80 minute range. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with the exception of the telephone interview, which was documented by extensive field notes. Publicly available documents at the site, such as informational flyers and program promotional material, as well as instructional materials and other written documents provided to the students by the teacher, were collected for inclusion in the analysis (Patton, 1987).

Analysis

My analysis of data used iterative qualitative methodology appropriate for ethnographic data (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007; Maxwell, 1996). During the process of data collection, I listened to recordings of interviews and classroom interactions, reviewed my field notes, and wrote memos recording thoughts, questions, and any early sense of themes and trends I observed. After a participant's first interview, I listened to the recorded interview and wrote or dictated a memo analyzing the framing of questions and subjects, in order to focus and clarify questions for other participants and future interviews (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007; Maxwell, 1996). After all observations and interviews were completed and all recordings transcribed, I used the qualitative software Atlas.ti for open coding of the transcripts as a way to identify emerging themes in the data (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). In the course of open coding, several themes emerged, including the invisibility of learners' knowledge and experiences (reported in Pickard, 2017a), marginalization that took place during instruction (reported in Pickard, 2017b), and the constraints to access learners experienced as they attempted to enroll or stay enrolled at TLC, reported here. After identification of the theme of constraints to access, focused coding was undertaken for data related to learners' experiences of enrollment and participation. The analysis presented here focuses on barriers to access and the implications they have for policy, practice, and research.

Findings

My analysis of the barriers learners experienced during their attempts to enroll and remain at TLC will be explored through the stories of three learners in this reading class, David, Arturo, and Bianca. These three learners were selected because they represent a range of skill levels within the class, which informed their experiences of barriers. Their stories echo the variety of ways barriers to access affected many of the other learners in this reading class and highlight significant issues regarding access to publicly-funded literacy services. The barriers identified here were primarily related to (1) availability of classes and (2) institutional procedures related to eligibility and assessment. These barriers were specific to how practitioners at TLC interpreted and enacted policy requirements; however, it is likely that similar barriers to access may be present at other programs operating within the same funding and policy constraints. Below, I will share David, Arturo, & Bianca's stories and then I will analyze the connections between the barriers to access they experienced and the policy and institutional conditions present at TLC.

Learners' Experiences of Barriers to Access at TLC

David: "They gonna kick me out the classroom!" David, a 46 year old African American man, had always had great difficulty reading. He reported that due to his involvement with mental and behavioral health systems as a child, his literacy skill development had received little attention. David first found out about the availability of adult literacy programs about two years prior to our interview, when he was in a halfway house as part of his release from prison. The halfway house referred him to the city adult education office, which referred him to TLC. TLC assessed him, but told him his reading level was too low for the classes they provided at the time, so they referred him to a church-funded tutoring program in his neighborhood. He began attending the church program and appreciated the help they were providing, but reported being disappointed that the program was closed over the summer and that there were no substitutes available when the tutor was out sick. After a year and a half at the church program, his tutor suggested he also try to enroll at TLC, which had begun offering a basic-level reading class. David did so, but reported being placed on the waiting list for four or five months before he was able to enroll in a class.

In reflecting on this extended road to participation at TLC, David expressed regrets about not having known about adult literacy programs earlier in his life:

> I ain't know nothing about this program. … if I would have been knew something about this program I would have been *got* in this program when I was younger, you know what I mean?

Even though David's assessed level was still somewhat low for TLC, they eventually agreed to place him in the basic reading class and arranged for him to participate in supplemental tutoring sessions at TLC, in order to support his reading development. The reading class was large, with usually around 17 students present, and had only one teacher. Although it was a "basic" reading class, the students in the class actually had a range of reading levels and the work Ms. Birch provided was often too difficult for David to do by himself. David consistently felt like he couldn't get the attention he needed, and on several occasions I observed him being asked to just wait, with nothing to do, for half an hour before the teacher was able to work with him; one time he was left to wait for a full hour. My field notes from a class early in the study recorded this occasion:

> Throughout the morning, [Ms. Birch] has given [David] separate work to do. At one point they go out of the room together. At another, she gives him a separate worksheet. While we are working on the Habitat reading, she tells him that she will give him something else to do. He sits and waits, but it seems like she forgot to give him any other work… for the entire last hour of class, he was sitting at the table with nothing to do. He couldn't even follow along with the worksheet because she hadn't given him a copy. He looks down at the table, takes his glasses off… He rubs his bald head occasionally as he sits and waits. He does not use his phone or write or draw or even look unhappy.

My interviews with David outside of class revealed that although he displayed great patience during these times, he didn't like having to wait and these experiences contributed to his feeling that he wasn't getting the attention that he needed in order to improve his reading.

Throughout the fall, David continued to work with his tutors, once a week at TLC and twice a week at the church. In December, David's tutor at the church got sick and was planning to be out for an indeterminate period of time. Around the same time, rumors started circulating among the staff that students at TLC who didn't attend regularly or didn't show progress might be dismissed from the program. Then, in late January, when David and I met for our second interview, he was very concerned that he was going to be dismissed from the class at TLC. He felt he wasn't making progress, despite the fact that he had been regularly attending his class and tutoring sessions. The prospect of getting dismissed from the class he had waited so long to get in to and that he came to so regularly was frustrating and very discouraging, as the following exchange from our interview illustrates:

> David: Yeah. I'm just gonna quit everything. Find me a little job.
>
> Amy: Yeah?
>
> David: Yeah.
>
> Amy: Huh. Well, what about your reading?
>
> David: I…I don't need it no more. It's like, I don't know, I could do, I was coping without it, so might as well cope without it again… Know what I mean? But I *wanna* read. Ain't as though I don't *want* to do it, I *do* wanna do it, but I don't think they helping me now.
>
> Amy: Well, what do you mean, what's not helping?
>
> David: [Not helping] is, they gonna kick me out the classroom! It's like, come on. What y'all gonna do. I'm not coming here no *one* day. You know what I mean? So then I won't come, that's a waste of time.

In this interview and throughout all my interactions with him, David consistently expressed a clear desire to learn how to be a better reader, and it was this desire that drove his participation in the program. His suggestions here that he would "quit everything," find a job, and that he "might as well cope without [reading] again" indicate just how discouraging the prospect of getting dismissed from the class was: it undermined his hopes of achieving his educational goal and sapped his motivation to continue trying.

David was so concerned about getting kicked out that he interrupted our interview to go talk to an administrator; when he returned, he reported having been assured that he was not getting put out of the class. One week later, however, David was informed that not only was he being dismissed from the class because he wasn't demonstrating score improvements on his reading tests, he was also told could no longer work with his tutor at TLC due to his lack of progress. He was offered a referral to another program.

Arturo: "I'm going to forget everything I know." Arturo was a 36 year old Puerto Rican man who had always struggled to read and write. He reported consistently having had trouble learning to read in school as a child, but not getting much help from his teachers and being passed from grade to grade anyway. TLC was the first adult literacy program in which he had ever enrolled. He lived in a small town of about 10,000 people a 45-minute train ride away from the city where TLC is located. Despite the inconvenience, Arturo had enrolled at TLC because it was the closest adult literacy program to his house. He paid $16 for a round-trip train ticket to come to class; initially, four times a week. When his family began helping him locate a program, he had been surprised that there was nothing closer, but he felt working towards his goal of improving his reading skills was important enough to enroll in the class, anyway:

> That's what I kept telling [my girlfriend], you sure ain't nothing [closer]? That is a long ride and a lot of money I gotta put out…It's seven dollars, I mean eight dollars to go, eight dollars to come back…[But] I don't mind it, you know, paying it, if it's gonna benefit me.

When Arturo reached out to TLC about enrolling, he, too, was placed on the waiting list, and he had to wait close to a year before being able to begin. After initial assessment, he was placed in a "basic" level class that met four days a week at a TLC neighborhood site north of downtown. After a few months, the site was closed and the students and teacher were relocated to the main TLC site downtown. The following month, the program shifted its procedures in an attempt to meet its contractual obligations with the state. Students' participation was reduced from two subjects, reading and math, to one; they could only participate in a class covering the subject in which their test scores were lower. Arturo was removed from the reading class and was told he would only be allowed to participate in the math class. At the meeting where this was announced, Arturo was visibly upset. My field notes from the day record my impression of his reaction:

> Arturo on the verge of tears... "I pay $15 to get here every day," "I don't want to work on my math." His eyes were red and teary, he was shaking and quivering. Bianca was trying to comfort him, rubbing his knee, saying, oh you mad? He said no, I'm just trying to keep it together, I'm upset.

Arturo asked the program administrators if there was any way he could stay in the reading class, but reported that they said there was nothing they could do. They said, "This is what it is," and informed him that if he improved his math scores enough at the next six-week test, then he could move back to the reading class. At this point, Arturo started to become discouraged and contemplated quitting the program:

> I was a little frustrated, I was a little upset because I accomplish knowing what I know now and for them to take that away from me, that's like a smack in the face. Like, wow. I'm going to math now? I'm going to be coming for math? Now, how about my reading? I'm going to forget everything I know, you know?

However, after I spoke privately with the teacher and an administrator, Arturo was allowed to remain in the reading class and chose to continue in the program. My status as a doctoral student carried more weight than Arturo's as an impassioned adult literacy learner in over-riding the new policy.

Bianca: "I think I'm just a little bit more advanced…" Bianca was a 56 year old African American woman whose goal was to become a peer counselor to other recovering addicts. In order to become a peer counselor, she needed to have her GED and it was for assistance in achieving this goal that she had sought an adult literacy program. After her case manager helped her find TLC and she completed the program assessment and orientation, she was placed in the basic reading class. However, this placement was confusing for her, because she felt like she read "very, very well." My observations of her reading in class and her skill in completing her homework led me to the same assessment.

In trying to explain her placement, Bianca recalled her experience on the day of orientation and wondered if the pressure of a timed assessment had compromised her performance, causing her to be placed in the basic reading class:

> When I first walked through the door I was kind of nervous and stuff…'Cause when we first came to orientation we took, like, three or four tests with the circle thing and everything was timed…So I have to learn how to work better, like I said, under pressure…I don't know, I think I could have done better. 'Cause I don't know, this class we in, I don't know if that's a lower class…I'm not saying I'm better than anybody, but it's just that I think I'm just a little bit more advanced than a lot of people in the classroom… I think Ms. Birch see that, too.

Bianca was reluctant to assert that she was in the wrong class, but to me, it was obvious that she had no trouble reading and understanding the material in class and that she would be successful in a higher-level class where she could work on her goal of getting her GED. However, Bianca decided that she would go with the flow and not protest her placement. It made her feel good that the other students in the class came to her with questions, and she enjoyed helping them, but she was also excited to move up.

After four months in class and two more times taking the placement test, Bianca's assessed reading score jumped to GED level. At that point, she was taken out of the reading class and placed in an intermediate, non-GED level math class, since the new restrictions at TLC only permitted her to enroll in a class targeting the subject where she had the lower score. With the referral and transition counselor's help, she enrolled in a free, distance education program operated through the mail, in order to continue working on her reading.

Barriers to Access in the Context of Policy

The barriers to access experienced by David, Arturo and Bianca all center on the *availability* of appropriate public programs and interested learners' *eligibility* for those programs. Barriers of availability can be seen in the long wait times learners experienced before they could begin, the inadequate number and type of classes available, and learners' lack of awareness of adult literacy classes. Barriers of eligibility were related to institutional decisions about how TLC assessed and placed potential learners. Both types of barriers were heavily influenced by the adult literacy policy context in which TLC was situated.

Waiting lists. Lengthy waiting lists have been reported in previous research studies about adult basic education (e.g., D'Amico-Samuels, 1990; Rosen, 1999; Young, 1995), even at times when research and policy efforts were focused on encouraging more people to enroll. However, waiting lists to enroll in adult literacy programs present obvious barriers of access. First and foremost, lengthy wait times prevent interested adults from being able to work on their literacy skills when they feel ready, as opposed to when slots become available; this is particularly true for those who need substantial teacher support or guidance due to difficulty with reading. Additionally, given patterns of high residential mobility demonstrated in one study of adult literacy learners (Schafft & Prins, 2009), long wait times might mean that when space in a program becomes available, the contact information for the potential participant has changed, or they are no longer located near the program where they attempted to enroll. Finally, encountering a lengthy waiting list can diminish learners' interest in participating in adult literacy programs and negatively affect their motivation to achieve their educational goals.

Learners who are assessed at the lowest reading levels may be those most likely to be placed on a waiting list. At TLC, David and Arturo, along with many other learners in the class, were placed on a waiting list before they could enroll. According to interviews with one administrator and one student, shortly before this study began, TLC had approximately 1,000 people on its waiting list. There were at least two reasons for the length of this list. First, there had recently been a substantial reduction in the number of programs receiving federal and state funding, so fewer programs were available in the city where TLC was located. According to the Executive Director at TLC, the 2008 recession had caused a financial crisis in the state government; as a result, the number of government funded adult literacy programs in the city had shrunk from 28 to five. It seems likely that this substantial reduction in funding meant that many fewer students were able to be served and waiting lists were long. Secondly, TLC had a reputation for being willing to serve learners that other agencies would not. In multiple interviews, administrators discussed the large numbers of “basic level” learners who were referred to them from across the city. Again, it seems likely these referrals increased the length of TLC’s waiting list and delayed these learners’ access to services. Additionally, a previous study of state policy indicated that programs were encouraged to place students they perceived to be “not classroom ready” on a waiting list, with neither guidance as to what constituted “classroom ready,” nor suggestions for getting students off the waiting list and onto a program roster (Pickard, 2014). Therefore, despite David’s high motivation and clear educational goal, his low test score may have been interpreted by those assessing him as meaning he was not “classroom ready.” Other programs I have observed reported using this procedure as a way of avoiding enrolling learners that they believed would not show educational gains. However, no one at TLC reported following this process, despite the inclusion of similar procedural recommendations in guidelines provided by the Department of Education in the state where TLC was located.

Inadequate number and type of classes available. Expectations tied to policy and funding have enormous influence over how many classes adult literacy programs are able to provide, as well as the curriculum guiding those classes. In the context of WIA and WIOA, a program’s failure to comply with these expectations means risking the loss of federal funding. Limits in the number and type of available classes affected David, Arturo, and Bianca in different ways. David’s and Arturo’s experiences will be addressed in this section, while Bianca’s experiences are better understood in the context of eligibility, and will be discussed in that section.

Few classes for adults who have difficulty reading. There are potentially numerous adults who have difficulty reading and would like to enroll in literacy classes, but many federally-funded programs do not directly serve these learners. Historically, a precedent was set in the 1970s that volunteer tutoring organizations would serve adults who have difficulty reading and this model continues in many contemporary programs (Sandlin & St. Clair, 2005). Additionally, accountability in the current policy context may disincentivize programs from serving these learners. Programs may be concerned that adults who have difficulty reading may show little to no gains on the standardized tests they are required to administer (Beder, 1999) or may worry that enrolling these learners could work against their performance on WIOA outcomes measures that tally how many program participants enroll in post-secondary education within one year (Pickard, 2016). David's reading difficulties meant he was not eligible for any publicly-funded class in the city at the time he initially wanted to enroll, because there were no publicly-funded adult literacy programs that would accept readers at his assessed level. Instead, he was referred to a church-funded tutoring program, where he stayed for two years before being able to enroll at TLC.

At non-government funded agencies, such as the church tutoring program, literacy learners are often paired with a volunteer tutor. Common wisdom and common operating procedure in the adult literacy field assume that learners below a certain level are better off working one-to-one with tutors than in the group setting of a class, even though most tutors are volunteers, may have little experience with education generally or literacy instruction in particular, and receive relatively few hours of training prior to being matched with students. Research on the quality of instruction that learners receive when they are paired with volunteer tutors is scant and conflicting. Sandlin and St. Clair's (2005) review of the literature regarding volunteer tutors suggested that researchers and practitioners were concerned that volunteer tutors were inadequately trained in effective reading instruction and were unprepared to cope with adults with learning disabilities or those at the lowest reading levels. In Belzer's (2006) case study of the instructional practices of three tutors, the tutors had difficulty in selecting appropriate level texts for the learners, employed a limited number of ineffective strategies to support learners' efforts to learn new words, and utilized almost no comprehension strategies or writing instruction. Ziegler, McCallum and Bell's (2009) quantitative survey of a national sample of paid instructors and volunteer tutors suggested that there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of their knowledge of teaching reading and their ability to apply that knowledge; both groups demonstrated about a 60% mastery of the reading instruction content and application skills included on the assessment instrument. However, increased knowledge of reading instruction was significantly correlated with practitioners' having a post-secondary credential in any subject, and all adult literacy teachers employed in publicly-funded programs in the state where TLC was located were required to have at least a bachelor's degree. In David's case, his tutor at the church had once worked at TLC and thus had some familiarity with adult literacy instruction; even so, he preferred the class setting. He felt he got more out of the class, even with his concerns about not being able to get enough attention. After he was told he had to leave TLC, it is likely that David would not be able to find another literacy class in which he could enroll.

David was not alone; during the time of this study, numerous adults in the city who struggled with reading also struggled to find classes and programs in which they could enroll. According to the Director of Education at TLC, a city-sponsored effort to increase access for adult literacy learners by offering an online adult literacy program was structured in such a way that it excluded adults who had difficulty reading from participating. Even TLC’s basic reading classes had a cut-off level, and those students whose assessed reading scores were below the cut-off were referred to non-government funded, tutor-based programs, because no publicly-funded programs would serve them. In a conversation with the referral and transitions specialist (RTS) at the program, she described the situation as a “competition” to *not* serve these learners:

> RTS: I have a list of maybe three organizations that are not [government agency] funded that accept [these] learners, because that's what we had to try and figure out. Because most of the [government agency]-funded, it's like a big competition, so we had to find other organizations where we knew they would take the students…
>
> Amy: What do you mean it's like a big competition?
>
> RTS: A lot of the agencies, they don't want the lower-level learners, so ... they'll send them somewhere else, and then they'll send them somewhere else, and then they end up back here, screaming. I've had students, “You send me there, and they send me here, and they sent here, here, now I'm back here!” It's so sad, because there's really no places for [them].

Earlier research and policy efforts have focused on increasing the program participation of adults who have difficulty with reading (Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988). However, improving reading and writing skills generally seems no longer to be aligned with the goals of government policy. The current policy priority is to focus support on adults at or closer to GED preparation levels. This shift potentially has a disproportionately negative effect on African-American adults who seek literacy services, because a substantial majority of them are assessed as having difficulty with reading (Pickard, 2016). The lack of available programming for these learners and the diminishing policy interest in providing literacy services for a broad range of purposes in addition to workforce development present a substantial barrier to access for this group of adults.

Few classes overall. The lack of publicly-funded adult literacy classes, or any adult literacy classes, in Arturo's hometown presented a significant barrier to his ability to enroll. The distant location of TLC was a barrier he was fortunate enough to be able to overcome. That the closest literacy program was a 45 minute, $16 train ride away from his home means it is likely that others from the same area who might have been interested in enrolling in adult literacy classes would have been unable to do so. By the time Arturo almost lost his placement in the reading class, he had spent close to $1000 on transportation; this expense would be an insurmountable barrier for many who seek adult literacy services. According to the Director of Education at TLC, the already-scant federal and state funding had been targeted to what were considered the higher-need urban areas of the region, meaning fewer programs for students outside of the city. However, many students who lived in the city also reported traveling close to an hour from their neighborhoods to reach the TLC downtown classroom; this is likely due to the aforementioned dramatic reduction in the number of programs receiving government support and to the centralization of services offered by TLC, a phenomenon explored in more detail, below.

Awareness of adult literacy programs. Previous research into adult literacy participation has noted that lack of awareness of adult literacy programs can act as a barrier to access (Beder, 1990; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988). In Hayes & Darkenwald's (1988) quantitative analysis of barriers to participation for adults who had difficulty with reading, lack of awareness of programs was the single most significant factor identified by study participants. In David's story, we see that this issue is an ongoing concern. Although Nitri (2009) argued, with good reason, that the disproportional incarceration of African Americans serves as an impediment to literacy access, it was via prison re-entry services that David first became aware of and enrolled in a literacy program. That prison can serve as a connection point for adults who otherwise haven't heard of or had the opportunity to enroll in literacy classes highlights the imperative to fund and develop literacy programs in prisons, but also suggests that there may be limited awareness of adult literacy programs in community settings.

In the city where TLC was located, a lack of community awareness of adult literacy programs might be due to the shift away from neighborhood-based programs and towards a model where services were offered in a centralized spot in the city. According to the Executive Director (ED) of TLC, this shift was a result of an increasing dependence on government money for program support. When the recession of 2008 happened and the government money available for adult literacy suddenly dried up, there was not enough community support to keep the literacy centers in the neighborhoods open. However, he suggested that before this shift, community identity and neighborhood connections had been strong factors in both funding and student enrollment:

ED: [E]ven before the recession, I started to think we have a lot of organizations that are solely dependent on this [government] money. What if something happens, you know? …Nobody believed it would ever happen, and it happened! So I end up in an organization where you have a large chunk, maybe 80%, of the funding is government funds. Which I think has, over the years, changed the mission of TLC.

Amy: Can you say how?

ED: Yeah, I think in 1968 in [neighborhood 1], and then in the '70s, TLC branched out to [neighborhood 2], [neighborhood 3], um ... I think we had [neighborhood 4], and all these places, *very* neighborhood-based, *very*

> connected to the individuals. And so the discussion we had earlier about when you live in a [city] neighborhood, the neighbors know what's going on, so you have a TLC center there and people know - at that time, it was mostly learning how to read, with some GED - the neighbors know, if one of the neighbors can't read, this is where you go, and this is how it's supported. So I can read and I have a job. TLC needs some money. I'm going to make a donation… So when you end up with government funding, we moved to a centralized location, we went to a classroom model, we started to implement these standards, and you couldn't have somebody from the neighborhood volunteering because they didn't meet these [standards], you know? And so you push all those folks out. In the process, we pushed them out of the funding cycle. They weren't cultivated at all. So what I'm sitting here doing is saying, "Hey, guys, we have to go back, and we have to cultivate our neighbors." [This] is a city of neighborhoods.

The centralization of TLC was less the result of an intentional plan and more of a response to changing patterns of funding and the requirements that came along with that funding. This shift limited TLC's physical presence in city neighborhoods and undermined its relationships with community members. However, Thompson's (2015) research on literacy mediators affirms the importance of community-based centers in providing access and support for adults who struggle with basic literacy. At TLC's newly-centralized location, multiple referrals to the program came via social service professionals, like Bianca's case manager or David's half-way house. Other students said they saw an advertisement on television or had family members who found the class online, like Arturo; only a few said they came because of a word-of-mouth referral. It seems likely that the funding constraints that spurred the shift to a more centralized model had been detrimental to TLC's capacity to maintain its visibility in city neighborhoods and had diminished a potentially important path to access for learners like David.

Eligibility and Assessment

Other barriers to access were related to the way TLC interpreted and enacted public policy in the process of determining learners' eligibility for classes. TLC's government funding agreements required that a certain percentage of students must show gains on standardized tests of reading or math skills, so TLC (and most programs who receive public funding) administered these tests as part of the enrollment and placement process. In David's case, as articulated above, he was initially deemed ineligible for reading classes anywhere in the city because his reading scores were too low. Once he was enrolled in the class at TLC, David's eligibility to remain there turned on his ability to produce the standardized test score improvements the program needed in order to fulfill the requirements of WIOA. When he was not able to produce these gains, he was deemed no longer eligible to participate.

For Bianca and Arturo, eligibility-related barriers to access were the result of TLC's enactment of a different process as it attempted to meet the demands of its funding contracts. TLC's contract with the state required that it serve a certain number of students and that a certain percentage of these students show test score improvements. Initially, TLC offered both reading and math classes to each student and assessed students in each subject. However, the state only "counted" improvements in the subject where students had the lower pre-test assessment score towards the fulfillment of the program's contract. When TLC found it was struggling to enroll enough students and to show the number of improvements it needed, it began limiting existing students to one class, enrolling more students who could potentially show gains, and moving students around every six weeks so they would always be in the class where they had just shown the lower score.

Therefore, when Arturo’s score in reading improved slightly over his math score, he was no longer eligible for reading class, in which he was clearly deeply invested. The way the state tracked improvements and the resulting shift in placement procedures created eligibility-based barriers of access for many students, who were no longer able to focus on the area of instruction in which they were most interested. Additionally, this process significantly undermined the learning progress that had been initiated during the period of instruction just prior to assessment. Taking learners out of a class just as they are beginning to show progress is counterproductive to their learning, to say the least. However, administrators at TLC felt that this arrangement was the best option available, given the accountability requirements and potential loss of funding which they were facing.

Bianca’s experiences with assessment highlight still other concerns about how accountability policies can structure program eligibility practices that produce barriers to access. While she experienced moving from class to class as described above, TLC’s reaction to her initial low assessment score created the primary barrier to access for Bianca. Instead of re-evaluating her placement when she clearly demonstrated higher level skills than those that were the focus of a basic reading class, she was not moved to a more advanced class until her scores rose to a specific predetermined point. This choice was made at the program level; placement in a particular class is not a funding requirement. However, the program’s reliance on the state-mandated assessment test as a stand-alone indicator of classroom eligibility may reflect the program’s general emphasis on compliance with accountability policies and the desire for program processes to mirror the idea of progressing through “levels” of adult literacy education that is embedded in accountability standards. However, because of this choice, Bianca spent months in a basic reading class that was not appropriate to her skill level and that significantly slowed the progress she could make toward reaching her educational goal.

Furthermore, Bianca's experiences point to the limitations of a purely quantitative, outcomes-based approach to evaluating program quality. Since programs get "credit" for students who demonstrate test gains, and Bianca demonstrated a substantial gain after four months, Bianca's reported outcomes data would have looked like a success story for the program. It is only by looking behind the numbers at Bianca's lived experiences that we are able to see how accountability-related eligibility and assessment requirements as they were instituted at TLC limited her access to coursework appropriate to her skill level.

Conclusion

This article has explored several significant barriers to access identified by a group of African-American and Latinx adults who were assessed as having difficulty with reading. The barriers to access these learners encountered as they sought to enroll and then participate in a publicly-funded adult literacy program were specific to a policy context of federally-mandated accountability as enacted in a particular state and institutional setting; thus, these experiences are not generalizable to all states and programs or to all African American or Latinx adult learners. Furthermore, most of the barriers identified are not exclusive to African American and Latinx adults; however, given the disproportional representation of people of color in adult basic education programs and the historical educational inequalities that contextualize these adults' participation in literacy programs, the considerable barriers to access experienced by the African-American and Latinx adults in this study raise critical questions about whether federal and state policies that fund and regulate adult basic education, and the programs and practitioners that are required to implement them, are complicit in promoting racial inequality. The barriers described in this study were often the result of accountability requirements outlined in WIA and, later, in WIOA. That receipt of federal funding was tied to these requirements disincentivized TLC from serving adults who had difficulty with reading and created conditions in which there were few adult literacy programs where they were eligible to enroll. The high percentage of African American adult learners who are assessed as having difficulty with reading should cause particular concern about the way barriers to access for this segment of the adult learning population are perpetuating highly unequal educational outcomes and limiting learners' opportunities to achieve a myriad of educational goals connected to their personal and economic aspirations, their families, and their communities.

However, access *to* programs, in and of itself, is not sufficient to ensure educational equity or the development of improved literacy skills (Espinoza, 2007; Gadsden, 1990). Efforts to ensure equitable opportunity and outcomes in adult basic education classrooms must also grapple with issues of power and culture within programs and must critically address the way literacy instruction is framed and approached (Amstutz & Sheared, 1990; Gadsden, 1990; Kamezek, 1988; Rex et al., 2010). How well students of color are served by public adult literacy programs is presently unknown, although the field overall has consistently shown extremely high levels of attrition (Beder, 1999; Porter et al., 2005) and instances of culturally-responsive instruction are few (Amstutz, 2001; Guy, 1999). Future research should specifically address the question of the success of students of color in public adult basic education programs; both quantitative and qualitative research in this area are needed. National- and state-level data that disaggregate trends in adult literacy programs by race or ethnicity for attrition, attainment of high-school equivalency degree, or improvement in literacy outcomes should be analyzed. However, Bianca's experiences serve as a cautionary tale about how "successful" outcomes data do not necessarily represent a "successful" experience at the student level; qualitative investigations are needed to provide a critical understanding of quantitative data. Ground-level, critical policy analysis is needed to better our understanding of the effects of implementation of federal, state and local policies on programs, practitioners, and students. Additionally, there is a particular paucity of research on the experiences of Latinx students who participate in adult basic education programs, rather than English-language programs for adults. Nuanced qualitative research should be directed towards understanding the experiences of these learners in order to specifically address barriers to access and equity they may encounter in the adult basic system.

Time, resources, and research energy must be dedicated to transforming the policy and instructional contexts of adult basic education if the promotion of access and equity is to become a norm of the field. Given the large numbers of adults of color who have already left the K-12 system, as well as the reality that inadequate conditions in schools and disproportional graduation rates have proven, despite many efforts, to be enduring issues, ensuring equitable access to and successful outcomes in adult basic education programs for minoritized adults is a critical part of the ongoing struggle for educational and racial justice.

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ARTICLE 2:

Better than nothing?

Public adult basic education and the marginalization of struggling adult readers

> [F]or *me*, it felt like they trying to get us up *out* of there, so they can get the *other* people in there. But in order for you to get the people in there, we need to *learn*, you know, 'cause if we don't *get* it, that mean we got *problems,* we got *issues*, you know, that we need to *work* on, that we need some *help* on, you know?
>
> - (Interview with Arturo, adult basic education student)[5]

Introduction

The educational marginalization of adults who struggle with reading is very often exacerbated, rather than improved, by participation in publicly-funded adult literacy programs.[6] These programs operate under conditions of chronic, critical underfunding, varying instructional quality, a shortage of research, and policies that promote test gains and employment as solutions to complex educational and social problems (Beder & Medina, 2001; Hamilton & Pitt, 2011; Smith & Gillespie, 2007; Sparks, 1999). Additionally, participants in adult literacy programs are frequently viewed by policymakers, institutions, and practitioners through a deficit lens. Programs are largely populated by adults who are low-income, and students are disproportionately people of color - characteristics which make them the targets of negative stereotypes, discrimination, and implicit bias, including in the field of adult education (D'Amico, 2004; Pickard, 2014). For adults who struggle with basic reading, stereotypes about intelligence and educability can compound the discrimination they may already experience. Furthermore, as contemporary accountability policies increase federal influence on local classrooms, educational goals set by students, communities, and literacy programs are increasingly placed to the side (Belzer, 2003; Hayes, 1999; Quigley, 2001; Sparks, 1999). This article reports on findings drawn from a larger ethnographic study of the educational experiences of struggling adult readers who enrolled in one publicly-funded, basic-level reading classroom situated in this context. Specifically, this analysis focuses on the following questions: what forces were driving the educational marginalization of struggling adult readers, by what processes did marginalization occur, and what were students' affective and intellectual responses to marginalization?

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[5] In excerpts from transcripts used throughout this article, italics are used to indicate speaker emphasis. Commas and periods in transcription reflect where speakers paused or completed a thought, not necessarily conventions of standard written English.

[6] In this article "adult literacy programs" and "adult basic education programs" are used interchangeably and are intended to denote all levels of adult basic educational programming up to and including high school equivalency preparation. The variety and overlap of terminology in the field of adult literacy can be confusing, but to best understand this article, it is useful to be familiar with the following terms: High school equivalency classes are frequently referred to as "GED" classes, and classes below this level are often called "literacy," "ABE," or "Pre-GED." This article does not address services to English Language learners (ELL), which constitute a distinct branch of adult basic educational services.

Two key terms used in this article need defining: "struggling adult readers" and "educational marginalization." "Struggling adult readers" is intended to indicate learners whose reading assessments upon entering a public adult literacy program placed them in the Beginning ABE Literacy, Beginning Basic, or Low Intermediate Basic levels, as defined in federal accountability standards[7] (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Students at these levels may struggle with identification of simple words, decoding, reading and understanding texts longer than a few lines, and understanding texts with unfamiliar vocabulary. In my experience as a practitioner, very often these learners cite improving their ability to read as one of their primary educational goals.

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[7] I have intentionally used Educational Functioning Levels (EFLs), rather than the commonly used Grade Level Equivalents (GLEs), because of the deficit perspective implied by using elementary school reading levels to describe the reading skills of adult students.

"Educational marginalization" is a slightly less straightforward concept, and its meaning, as it is intended in this study, is specific in its application to adults. Marginalization, generally speaking, is both a process and a set of conditions that result from that process; it refers to the creation and conditions of material inequality and to the deprivation or absence of 'voice,' due to membership in an oppressed group (Freire, 2010/1970; Young, 1990). *Educational* marginalization refers to these processes and conditions regarding education; UNESCO (2010) described educational marginalization as "situations of acute and persistent disadvantage in education" (p.5). In the research presented in this article, educational marginalization will refer to the processes and experiences of marginalization that are specific to an adult educational setting. While material inequality affects marginalized learners across the age spectrum, in the education of adults, the loss of voice and decision-making power is a critical component of how learners are marginalized (Freire, 2010/1970). Sheared, McCabe, and Umeki (2000) described this loss for learners in adult literacy programs as "the act of being in the margins when someone else (teachers/educators, program administrators/managers, and policy makers/legislators) is in the center" (p.168). Young's (1990) definition of marginalization as being partially constituted by "the deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions for exercising capacities in a context of recognition and interaction" (p.55) is particularly relevant to the institutional conditions prevalent in adult literacy education, where learners are consistently deprived of recognition and treatment as full, competent adults who are able to make good decisions for themselves about the course of their education and their lives (Fingeret, 1985; Freire, 2010/1970; Ilsley & Stahl, 1993; Sheared, McCabe & Umeki, 2000). Thus 'educational marginalization' as it is used in this article is intended to encompass the following three aspects of marginalization, which are conceived of as both processes enacted by the program and resulting conditions experienced by the learners: material inequality; the deprivation of voice and decision-making power; and unrecognized capacity as an adult and as a learner.

This article offers a detailed description of the processes and experiences of educational marginalization in the context of one class in one federally-funded adult literacy program and analyzes the interrelationship between accountability policies, practitioners' beliefs and practices, and the marginalization of the struggling adult readers in the class. Documenting the drivers and processes of educational marginalization as well as students' affective experiences in this one case is helpful to understanding the potential negative impacts of contemporary public programs more generally and can point to needed changes at the policy and institutional levels.

Background

In order to provide a contextual frame for the marginalizing practices described in this article, this section will explore the literature and background of two important forces shaping contemporary adult basic education: high stakes accountability policies and practitioners' deficit-based beliefs about adult literacy learners. Since it is likely that a deficit perspective of learners pre-dates - and informs - current accountability policy, I will begin by exploring the nature and history of the deficit perspective in adult literacy education.

Valencia (1997) described the deficit thinking model in education as "positing that the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies.

Such deficits manifest, it is alleged, in limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior" (p.2). In my experience as a practitioner and researcher, a deficit perspective of adult literacy students is rampant throughout the field of adult education. This could be explained, in part, as a reaction to the population it serves: most adult literacy learners separated from the K-12 system without graduating, and some consider these learners as having "failed" to learn what they already "should have." A deficit perspective may also be a reaction to the notoriously low outcomes and persistence rates in adult literacy programs. Porter, Cuban, Comings, & Chase (2005) reported that 80% of learners who enrolled at their study sites left within a year of enrollment. However, prevalent negative characterizations of adult literacy learners can also be explained as rooted in historical deficit-based arguments about the learning potential of low-income students and students of color. These arguments are continuous from racialized discourses prevalent during colonization of the Americas and have influenced the schooling opportunities made available throughout the course of American history (Menchaca, 1997). Contemporary deficit thinking in education relies on a combination of these racialized arguments about genetic intelligence/capacity, stereotypes about a "culture" of poverty, and presumed cultural/environmental inferiority (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997).

In adult literacy education, deficit-based stereotypes about race, gender, and class have influenced curriculum materials and instruction (D'Amico, 2004; Quigley & Holsinger, 1993). Quigley (1997) has suggested that teachers bring socially-learned stereotypes about adult literacy learners with them to the field. Belzer and Pickard (2015) identified a typology of five adult literacy "characters" who were prevalent in the research literature and argued that these characterizations might also serve as unacknowledged frameworks undergirding practitioners' approaches to instruction. One of these prominent character types, The Needy (Problem) Child, was particularly marked by deficit: this learner type was presented as "having such significant personal challenges that meeting learning goals seems unlikely at worst and especially challenging at best," and these learners were "located in some gray area between childhood and adulthood" (p.255). However, some deficit-based understandings have been intentionally perpetuated as part of adult literacy teachers' professional development, such as the idea that students are members of a "culture of poverty" that informs their value system, motivation, ability to plan, and participation in educational programs (Prins & Schafft, 2009).

In the classroom, deficit understandings can underscore teachers' feelings and beliefs about students, even when those feelings are positive. Fingeret's (1985) qualitative evaluation of six adult literacy programs in North Carolina found that many teachers described learners' motivation in glowing terms and that some cited it as part of what they loved about their teaching jobs. However, at the same time, teachers perceived this motivation as part of learners' attempts to overcome a lifelong history of failure, rather than as an extension of learners' strengths and successes:

> [A]lmost all instructors appear to assume that the motivation they attribute to ABE students is the result of students' desire to break a cycle of repeated failures throughout life, rather than related to a sincere desire to build new skills upon a foundation already developed through positive work and family experiences (p.82).

This view of learners as failures was the foundation of teachers' condescending and infantilizing treatment of learners; as an example, one teacher described the adult learners in her class as "little lost sheep" (p.82).

The deficit perspective of students is so deeply ingrained in the adult literacy field that even when explicit attempts have been made to push back against it and create programs from an assets-based perspective, programs have had trouble translating this perspective into actual teaching practice (Ackland, 2014; Auerbach, 1995). This difficulty can be attributed to practitioners' individual interpretations of progressive policy discourses and to the persistence of a "bootstraps" mentality that positions responsibility for socioeconomic or literacy difficulties squarely on the shoulders of the students. Even in the face of clear evidence of social and structural barriers to adult literacy program participation, such as the absence of public transportation, practitioners in one family literacy program continued to attribute participants' difficulty attending to individual failings such as lack of motivation, membership in a "culture of poverty," and placing insufficient value on education (Prins & Schafft, 2009).

While much research has been dedicated to understanding the impact of learner motivation, learner self-efficacy, and various program models and types of instruction on improving persistence and outcomes (e.g., Beder, Tomkins, Medina, Riccioni, & Deng, 2006; Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999; Pickard, 2013; Quigley, 1997), relatively little scholarship has focused on the impact practitioners' deficit perspectives of learners can have on the distribution of resources, curriculum offerings, and student learning in adult literacy programs. In contrast, K-12 scholarship has clearly established a strong correlation between schools' and teachers' deficit perceptions of the learning abilities of low-income students and students of color and negative consequences, such as the unequal distribution of materials and teaching resources, the prevalence of curriculum that focuses primarily on rote learning or "skill drill," and depressed educational outcomes (Anyon, 1980; Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Oakes, 2005). Whether these correlations would be consistent in adult literacy education, or whether conditions are sufficiently different to render distinct conclusions, the strength of these findings suggests that further exploration of the relationship between practitioners' deficit perspectives and learner outcomes in adult literacy programs is warranted.

The other force which significantly shapes the practice of contemporary adult basic education is the enactment of top-down, high-stakes accountability policies. A flurry of studies in the late 1990s and early 2000s grappled with understanding the impact of new federal forms of accountability, specifically as enacted in the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) (e.g., Belzer, 2003; D'Amico, 1999; Hayes, 1999; Sheared, McCabe & Umeki, 2000; Sparks, 1999; Sparks & Peterson, 2000). These two laws shifted the focus of federally-funded adult basic education programs away from literacy education for a broad range of purposes and towards the idea of literacy for workforce development. PRWORA placed restrictions on the amount of time welfare recipients could spend in adult literacy classes, insisting instead that people be engaged primarily in "work-related activities," regardless of their educational levels and goals; WIA and PRWORA held programs accountable for the number of students who entered employment. To promote educational accountability, WIA created the National Reporting System (NRS) and mandated that federally-funded programs monitor and report students' standardized test scores to their state's administering agency. Students are pre-tested at enrollment, and program funding became contingent on a certain proportion of students demonstrating a gain of one “Educational Functioning Level” on a post-test administered after 50 hours of instruction. Researchers noted with concern that these accountability measures would shift program emphasis away from learners’ own goals to externally-imposed ones and set up impossible tasks and unattainable performance standards for programs (Quigley, 2001; Sheared, McCabe, Umeki, 2000). Qualitative studies have suggested that adults who struggle with reading the most tend not to show rapid gains on standardized tests, and many providers were worried that they were implicitly being forced to reduce access to services for these learners (Beder, 1999; Comings, 2007; Condelli, 2007). Although Condelli (2007) suggested that initial concerns about federal accountability regulations encouraging “creaming” in adult literacy programs were unfounded, his conclusion was based on extremely limited data; the evidence presented in this research and elsewhere (Belzer, 2003) suggests that, in fact, this practice is a reality in contemporary programs.

In 2014, WIA was updated and renamed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which increased the emphasis on workforce readiness and added a new focus on preparation for and entrance into post-secondary education, as part of a “career path” to higher, family-sustaining wages. These federally-articulated goals shifted the purposes of publicly-funded adult basic education programs even further away from literacy services for struggling adult readers; a focus on workforce preparation has the potential to limit class time dedicated to reading and writing, reduce the variety of texts to which participants are exposed, and further emphasize instruction directed toward the passage of gate-keeping tests (Pickard, 2016). Despite the potential for negative implications and the sizable proportion of adult literacy participants who are assessed to be struggling adult readers (49% in 2014-2015[8]), little research has explored how these shifts in policy have influenced instruction and services for these learners.

In the program described in this article, the possibility of losing funding because of providing service to a high number of struggling readers who might not be able to demonstrate test gains in the time allotted was of enormous concern for teachers and administrators. The intense pressure practitioners felt for students to "show progress" on state-approved standardized tests negatively influenced interactions between practitioners and learners and often motivated practitioner instructional and programmatic choices that marginalized or ignored learners' educational goals, undermined their literacy growth, and limited access to educational services. Rather than critique the accountability policy, however, practitioners often fell back on deficit explanations of adult literacy students as unmotivated or uneducable to rationalize these choices. This article offers a detailed account of how accountability policy activated commonly-held deficit views of learners and how, together, these two forces drove the marginalization of struggling adult readers enrolled in this public adult literacy program.

Methodology

Setting

This article reports on the findings of an ethnographic study (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007; Maxwell, 1996) of one basic-level reading class offered by a federally-funded, well-established adult literacy program situated in a large urban center. At the time the fieldwork was conducted (2014-2015), The Literacy Center (TLC)[9] had been in operation for almost 50 years and offered a range of free classes, including adult literacy, high school equivalency, English language acquisition, family literacy, and educational services for out-of-school youth. Adult literacy classes were categorized as ABE (basic level), INT (intermediate level), and GED (high school equivalency level). According to the administrators and the program website, students served by the program were primarily low-income women of color.

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[8] Figure calculated using data from the Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education's National Reporting Service database, available at https://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OVAE/NRS/login.cfm.

TLC had recently undergone substantial structural changes: its long-time director had retired, and the numerous neighborhood sites across the city where the program once offered classes had been closed, leaving one primary site remaining, located in a non-residential neighborhood of the city. Furthermore, the 2014 legislation changes that heightened the state's emphasis on workforce development had caused the director and board members to reevaluate the agency's mission to provide community literacy education; they were considering either changing the agency mission or not applying for future government funding in order to be able to continue offering literacy services. As a result of these changes, the center was struggling to find its philosophical footing as well as meet its enrollment and outcomes agreements with the state.

Participants

This study focused on the experiences of adult students in a class categorized by the program as an "ABE" class, which was the most basic level class offered by TLC. This class served a heterogeneous groups of students who had been assessed as reading at the Beginning ABE Literacy, Beginning Basic, or Low Intermediate Basic levels. Most students in this class struggled with a range of reading skills, including letter/sound identification, sight word identification, decoding, and comprehension. The class had particularly consistent attendance for an adult literacy class; 10-22 students were present in the class on any given day (mode and median were both 17). It is difficult to give an exact number of how many students were enrolled in this class during the course of the study, as the number was constantly in flux; new students were being added every week, and procedures for dropping students from the rolls were fluid and inconsistently applied.

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[9] All names of people and organizations in this article are pseudonyms.

The large majority of students in the class were African-American; three Latinx students and two White students participated in the class during the time of my fieldwork. The students who attended this class were also disproportionately male (on average 60%); this is potentially due to separate family literacy class offerings for parents with children, as well as classes tailored to participants receiving public assistance to support children, both of which may have drawn women away from this class. However, the predominance of men in this class is notable given that the website and administrators reported that TLC primarily served women. Neither statistics for the entire program nor for the portion that was dedicated specifically to adult basic education were available at the time of the study, but nationally, the student population of adult basic education/English language learning programs is 55% female, and in the state where TLC was located, 60% of students enrolled in these public programs identified as female.[10]

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[10] Figures calculated using 2014-2015 data, available from the Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education's National Reporting Service database at https://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OVAE/NRS/login.cfm.

Further research is warranted to better understand whether and how the demographics of the adult literacy student population have shifted over time.

Thirteen focal learners were recruited for the study based on their regular attendance; eleven agreed to participate. Nine of the focal participants were African American (three women, six men) and two were Latinx (one woman, one man). Participants ranged in age from 26 to 72. Seven practitioners - the teacher of this class, as well as another teacher, the tutor coordinator, the referral coordinator, the assistant director of instructional quality, the director of education, and the executive director - also agreed to participate. The teachers, the referral coordinator, and the assistant director were African American or Latinx. The tutor coordinator, the director of education and the executive director were White.

Data Collection

Data collection procedures included participant observation, interviews, the writing of field notes, and the collection of classroom and program artifacts (Creswell, 2007; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011; Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007; Patton, 1987). For four months, I acted as a volunteer classroom aide in the reading class, which met twice a week, for two and a half hours per session. In all, I attended 23 class meetings over the four-month period; for 20 of these classes, group interactions during teacher-led instruction and small group work time were audio-recorded and transcribed. During these four months and over the subsequent four months, I visited the classroom or program site 21 other times, in order to conduct interviews or further observations, including visits to the classroom, a new student orientation, a meeting for all students in the program, and two observations of a different ABE reading class for comparison purposes. Descriptive field notes were written for each visit, and artifacts, such as instructional materials, informational pamphlets about work opportunities distributed to learners, and intra-staff communication, were collected. Additionally, I met one-on-one several times before or after class with three students, David, Lamont and Arturo, to work on reading material I had provided in order to supplement the instruction they were receiving in class.

Semi-structured interviews with the 11 focal learners were conducted. Eight of the 11 learners were interviewed twice over the eight months; first, early in the observation period and second, three to six months after the first interview. One other learner was interviewed three times. For some learners, the first interview coincided with the beginning of their participation at TLC; other students had been enrolled for months before the study began. Two learners were unable to complete the second interview due to scheduling constraints. The focal teacher participated in semi-structured interviews four times, spread across the study period. The other six program administrators and teachers participated in semi-structured interviews once or twice during the eight months. Interviews were conducted in a private room at the program or in learners' homes and ranged in length from 18 minutes to 141 minutes; most were in the 30-80 minute range. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed except for one, which was documented by extensive field notes.

Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing during the data collection period, and consisted of listening to recorded interviews and classroom interaction, reviewing field notes, and writing memos, in order to deepen understanding of context, focus the scope of future observations and interviews, and point to potential directions for analysis (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007; Maxwell, 1996). Once all data had been collected, I began open coding of the transcripts of particularly generative recordings and related field notes and memos in order to explore patterns, themes, and relationships within the data (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). Early codes were focused primarily on students' responses to specific instances of classroom instruction and interaction. Memos written during this time pointed out a contrast between the students' express desire to learn, my observations of the efforts they put forth, and the way the students were depicted as educational failures in the classroom and program. Coding then began to organize and explore specific examples of how students were perceived and treated by teachers and staff. Similar codes were collapsed into more abstract categories using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 in Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007), and the larger analytic categories of 'limits to educational access' and 'marginalizing program practices' emerged from the data. In separate, subsequent analyses, focused coding was undertaken for access, reported elsewhere (Pickard, 2017a), and marginalizing practices, reported in this article. Codes for marginalizing practices were then organized into multiple sub-categories. Examples of subcategories designating marginalizing practices included: minimization of learner contributions during classroom discussions, staff assumptions about learner needs, infantilization of learners, the tailoring of curriculum to standardized test preparation, and experiences of public humiliation based on reading ability. I coded, too, for teachers' and staff members' affective and intellectual reactions to marginalization, including reactions to personal marginalization as well as to marginalization of the field of adult literacy education in general. Throughout the analytic process, explicit attention was paid to understanding participants' experiences as contextualized and interrelated within this specific setting (Maxwell, 1996), and a critical lens was engaged to help conceptualize how individuals' experiences were interconnected with discourses about adult literacy learners at the institutional level and the state/societal level (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2003).

Findings

This ethnography was initially conceptualized as investigating the impact of the newly-heightened workforce-readiness emphasis in federal policy on the learning opportunities for struggling adult readers who participated in a public adult literacy program. However, in the field, it became apparent that, rather than the pressures of outcomes measures related to workforce readiness, two other forces were largely driving the educational marginalization of struggling adult readers at TLC: (1) high-stakes accountability policies related to standardized test performance and (2) practitioners' deficit perspectives of adult literacy participants. The processes of marginalization manifested most commonly as learners not having their educational goals respected and supported; lacking materials, resources, and instruction that could promote and support reading development; being subjected to ridicule or emotional distress regarding their reading ability; and, on a disturbing number of occasions, being removed from the program for "failure" to show progress. Each of these forms of marginalization, and its relationship to accountability and the deficit perspective, is explored in detail below.

Marginalization of Students' Goals

TLC's treatment of students' goals not only minimized students' "voice," it also detracted from their opportunity to participate in making decisions about their own learning and undermined their educational progress. The ability to set one's own educational goals is fundamental to the idea of being in the center of an educational enterprise, rather than in the margins (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2015/1973), yet the role students' educational goals should play in adult literacy programs has historically been contested, as programs must seek to accommodate various stakeholders (Fingeret, 1992; Freire, 2010/1970). Beder (1991) argued that responding to students' goals is critical to motivating and supporting learners' participation in adult literacy programs and suggested that programs must maintain a balance between working to meet federal expectations and working to meet student goals. However, goal setting at TLC was almost exclusively defined by government accountability policy, rather than by student interest or need. The types of goals discussed, the language used, and the validation offered to students were determined by alignment with the program outcomes set forth in federal and state funding contracts. These contracts required that a certain proportion of participants in the adult basic education program at TLC demonstrate a gain of one "Educational Functioning Level (EFL)," as assessed by the standardized Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), in order for the program to continue to receive government funding. Soon after I began fieldwork, the program was informed that it was failing to meet its contractual obligations for both number of students served in a year and for number who had demonstrated sufficient improvement on the TABE test. Therefore, they were in jeopardy of losing their funding. This situation created a crisis mentality among many program practitioners, who feared both the loss of services to students and the loss of their own jobs. It also positioned the accomplishment of program goals as a much greater priority than the accomplishment of students' goals; these sets of goals are sometimes in alignment but are often quite different or even at odds (Beder, 1991; Cuban, 2003; Gowen, 1992).

TLC administrators' approach to this problem and their communication with students about proposed solutions epitomize how accountability requirements activated practitioners' deficit perspectives of students and shaped the marginalizing practices enacted in this program. This was illustrated one morning, after about a month of data collection. On this day, I arrived at the center expecting to participate in the focal ABE reading class, but found that all of the adult basic education students in the program had been gathered into one classroom for a previously unannounced meeting. At that meeting, students were informed that their current schedule, in which they had class four days a week - two days of math and two days of reading - would be changed. Students were told they would now have class only two days a week, and that these classes would focus on only one subject, either reading or math. Students were not allowed to choose which class they preferred; instead they were placed in the class that corresponded to their lower TABE score. This change was intended to improve the program's chances of meeting its outcomes requirements, since the state only counted progress students made in their lower scoring subject.

In the following excerpt from the meeting transcript, when a student points out the mismatch between her educational goals and the new program structure, her question is re-framed by the administrator as an example of student deficiency, rather than as an earnest and accurate assessment of her own needs:

> Gina (student): Um, I would like to *know* because of everybody needs being different why they are *here*, if *you* feel as though I might need more help in math but *I* feel that for my future, my reading class would be more feasible for *me*, could I do *rea*ding instead of doing *math* because of my future needs, far as my job appointment is concerned?
>
> Ms. Toya (Assistant Director of Student Support Services): So, in order to pass the GED *test*, you need reading, math, social studies, and science, right? Um, you can *not pass* without having *all* of those subjects addressed. OK? So while we understand that some of you are maybe more comfortable? In doing the reading and might really feel like, you know, I'm a better reading student and I really don't feel like I want to tackle the math, from where *we* sit we know that you need to tackle that subject that might be a little bit more challenging for you and we *really hope* that you get the outcome in that because if you get the outcome in your lowest subject? The other subjects that you feel more comfortable in will probably be a breeze. You know, they will be a lot *ea*sier to make progress. One of the things that we really want to make sure that we *see* from our *stu*dents are you guys making progress. Right? And making progress in those areas that sometimes you might struggle with *more.* Right? Than others. I know as, for my*self*, sometimes I will always lean to the area that I'm more comfortable in and that I find easier because I just don't feel like the stress. Right?
>
> Students**:** Right.
>
> Ms. Toya: But when I'm *challenged* to address the area that I'm weaker in, when I make success and progress in that area, my self-esteem and my thinking that says that I can do this [clap] shooo! [sound] skyrockets. So you know we want to encourage you that although this might seem like, you know, I want to do reading and you guys are making me do math, that you know, hang in there, we *got* you, we'll support you through the whole process, we'll support you, but you need *all* the subject areas in order to attain your GED.
>
> Gina**:** What about those who don't need their GED?
>
> Ms. Toya: [4 second pause] Let's talk about it um a little later, but I'm pretty sure at this point the decision has been made to allow students to work in their lowest subject area because we need to show progress. We not only need to see progress? We need to *show* progress.

Rather than critique the way the state evaluated programs or explain the program's problems meeting its contract, the change is described as a response to deficiency located within the students. Although the administrator ultimately offered some limited acknowledgement of the role of state policy and the requirement to "show progress," the new arrangement was presented as a challenging learning opportunity, one which responded to students' innate tendencies to avoid difficult work. Furthermore, the limits imposed by the new schedule were framed as an intentional act of support by the program in response to students' insecurities. In this situation, the deficit perspective of adult literacy learners served as a convenient, reliable, and recognizable trope that made critical analysis of the program and state policy easily avoidable and relieved practitioners of the need to of find a more learner-centered solution. The idea that students were incapable of making their own decisions or of setting appropriate educational goals served as an integral part of the program's implementation of accountability policies and their efforts to encourage student compliance with the new program structure. However, this patronizing response to the student's question minimized the importance of students' own educational goals, diminishing their voice and potentially undermining their participation.

The lack of support for students' goals described in the meeting above was repeated in the ABE reading class where I served as a volunteer classroom assistant. Extensive class time was spent talking about students' one, five, and ten year "life" goals; these discussions focused primarily on housing, jobs, and family. In these conversations, students' goals were often corrected, or their needs were projected by the instructor. For example, when one student said he wanted to get an apartment, he was told that instead he should buy a house; another student was instructed that within five years he should have purchased the home in which he would live out “the rest of his life”; and despite another student’s repeatedly stated interest in construction, the classroom instructor told me that he needed to “stick in his lane” and become a cook. This kind of mostly unsolicited direction, offered by practitioners to students, has been documented in other adult literacy programs. While Fingeret (1985) characterized this type of treatment as reflecting a condescending attitude towards learners, Quigley (1997) called it “overprotective.” However, even the assumption that literacy students need “protecting” is condescending; it is deficit-based understandings of learners’ literacy status, educational level, race, and economic situation that lead practitioners to believe that this type of marginalizing treatment is not only acceptable, but just what students need.

Another example that illustrates the marginalization of students’ own educational goals was the classroom discourse around passing the GED. Having students successfully complete GED testing was a clear and widely-recognized program and policy goal; the more GED graduates the program had, the higher their profile with state and community funding partners. Additionally, many students do enroll in adult basic education classes with the goal of attaining a high school equivalency diploma. However, within this ABE reading class, the discourse of “passing the GED” served to obscure many other goals students discussed in our interviews, such as learning how to read; learning how to spell; learning how to sound words out; being able to complete real-life reading and writing tasks, such as medical forms, independently; reading the manual for the driver’s license test; and reading well enough to get deeply engaged with a story. Although the teachers and administrators at TLC acknowledged in interviews that many students in this class may never take the GED test, references to the GED were constantly invoked to incentivize students to undertake certain kinds of learning activities – particularly activities related to test preparation. For example, the teacher would describe a certain activity, such as summarizing the paragraphs in a text, as similar to an activity required by the GED test, or justify the inclusion of certain elements in the class curriculum, such as map reading or taking timed practice tests, by stating that students would encounter these items on the GED. Teachers' use of the GED as a "carrot" in this way was very common throughout my observations at TLC and throughout my own eight years of experience as an adult literacy practitioner; the test was clearly believed to lend legitimacy to and build engagement with educational tasks. However, on several occasions, students in interviews told me explicitly – and with some emphasis – that they didn't want their GEDs, as in this exchange:

> Amy: What are your goals for the class? What do you want to have happen?
>
> Belinda: I *did not come* [pounds table with each word] to this class to get my GED, I just *came* here to catch up on stuff.

The fact that she felt the need to be so clear is an indication both of the strength of her feelings and perhaps also how the constant allusions to the GED in this basic level reading class left her feeling unheard and her goals unacknowledged. Another student expressed resentment about the emphasis on the GED and the lack of support for reading development:

> David: Everybody on me, push me to get my GED. I wouldn't mind trying to get it, but I don't really want it. I just want to read. That's it. That's all I want to do.
>
> Amy: Yeah, but you feel like Ms. Birch and the tutor are, do they talk to you about the GED?
>
> David: No, no, they just telling everybody to get it, but it's like, I want to tell

them, I don't care about it. I just want to read, that's it.

Amy: Yeah. Do you feel like you're getting support for reading?

David: A little bit.

Even though in interviews and classroom conversations a number of students expressly named generally improving their reading and spelling skills as a goal and as the reason they enrolled in the class, little to no class time was spent talking about how to meet these goals. When reading goals were addressed, it was cursorily and correctively, and often tailored to the program's need to show standardized test score improvement. For example, when, in the course of a "life goals" discussion in class one day, several students identified "be a better reader" as their goal, the referral and transitions teacher responded that a better goal would be to improve on the TABE test, because it was measurable. Rather than focusing on setting specific, short-term educational goals that addressed the students' literacy interests, purposes, or specific skills which they deemed important, the teachers' thinking about educational goal setting was tailored to reflect the accountability policy. Again, this reframing was presented as being in the students' best interests and was expressed by the teachers as an improvement upon the students' own goals.

Instruction and Materials Did Not Support Reading Development

Even though TLC was explicitly advertised as a literacy program and this class was designated as a reading class, the dominant emphasis of classroom instructional time was test preparation. Very little class time, teacher energy, or program resources were dedicated to effective teaching related to reading skill development. One recent professional development workshop for TLC teachers had explored specialized instructional tools for supporting struggling readers or students with learning differences, but, according to an administrator who supervised instruction, the tools went mostly unused. Instead, “reading” instruction in this classroom focused primarily on decontextualized grammar skills or how to answer multiple choice questions following reading passages; these exercises mimicked the items found on the TABE and the GED tests. In addition, classroom activities were frequently timed as a way of simulating standardized test taking, sometimes with a loud, red, ticking timer situated at the front of the class.

In part, this emphasis on test-taking can be understood as reflecting the intense pressure the teacher and many program administrators felt to improve their students’ TABE scores, because they faced the loss of their jobs and the closure of their program if they did not. This pressure was frequently expressed to students through classroom conversation and sometimes extended to include the students, as in the following exchange during the first class meeting after the students’ schedule was abruptly changed. The reading teacher, Ms. Birch, begins by addressing the pressure she felt the state was putting on the program but ends by extending the pressure to include the need for students to improve their test scores:

> Ms. Birch: The chains are off. The chains are off. Unfortunately, I can’t save nobody else. I’m barely trying to save myself.
>
> Student: That’s right.
>
> Ms. Birch: And in November I think we’re going to see a lot of radical changes, regardless of who’s elected [governor]. You know, money is funny. And when money get funny, they go to poor people first. So I’m going to encourage everybody to take full advantage of this…And I’m hoping today, I want to see some radical changes in these reading

> scores. Radical changes. This is what we're looking for is radical changes.

Unfortunately, this request for "radical changes" was paired with very little direct reading instruction that might support students' score improvements on a reading assessment. This teacher's choice to focus on test preparation reflects what seems to be a growing belief in the contemporary field of adult literacy that explicit instruction in test-taking skills, rather than in reading and writing, is a useful way to accomplish program and policy goals of improvement on standardized tests. This trend is also suggested by the numerous text books now available that focus on preparation for the TABE test. I am not aware of any research conducted with adult literacy learners that supports this approach to practice, but it reflects the general trend in K-12 and post-secondary education to provide explicit instruction for high-stakes tests. However, in the case of this adult basic education class during the time period of this study, test preparation seemed to have completely replaced reading instruction, rather than being offered as a supplement to it.

Although adult literacy programs have always struggled to accommodate funders' goals and definitions of literacy, they have frequently created instruction that was a mixture of funder and student goals (Quigley, 1997). In contrast, discussions with teachers and administrators at TLC showed that improved TABE test scores had come to define the totality of learning or literacy growth in the minds of many teachers. There seemed to be an abiding faith in the TABE as an accurate and complete measure of a student's literacy abilities, and practitioners often referred to how the specific "breakdown of skills" offered as part of the TABE test package did or should inform their teaching. However, the TABE assesses only one particular type of reading in one particular context; in real life, reading practices vary greatly depending on the text and the setting (Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson & Soler, 2002). Good readers bring a variety of approaches to texts and "good" reading depends on the ability to flexibly deploy a range of reading skills and strategies depending on the text, task, purpose and audience (Pressley, 2002). Improved TABE scores represent very narrow skills improvement and do not necessarily help those whose educational goals do not require passing further gate-keeping tests. Furthermore, this teacher's focus on test preparation narrowed the type of texts to which these students were exposed, yet reading development is arguably more successful when learners are exposed to a broad range of materials (Purcell-Gates, 1995). Almost all of the texts made available in this class at TLC came from workbooks or photocopied worksheets, and the textbook used most commonly in class was called, "Achieving TABE Success in Reading." That the TABE had such influence over instruction and teachers' beliefs about literacy is an indication of the power accountability policy held to determine students' learning opportunities in this context.

Additionally, the dominant emphasis on test preparation in this class meant another missing link for struggling adult readers: the minimization of writing instruction and the loss of its potential contribution to students' reading development. There was no writing component on the TABE test, and therefore, not surprisingly, almost no time was spent devoted to writing or writing instruction. The only time I saw students write something the length of even a single sentence was when an administrator came to the class and guest taught for the day. Otherwise, "writing" instruction focused exclusively on discrete grammar or language arts concepts, such as 'what is an antonym?'; learning was then assessed through completion of worksheets. However, writing is an extremely important tool for supporting reading development, and can even be of particular benefit for struggling adult readers, as it supports their educational goal setting and engagement and can undermine negative practitioner perceptions about learners' intellectual capacity (Gillespie, 2007). Furthermore, many students had goals related to writing, and its clear absence from the curriculum resulted in frustration for some, like Arturo:

> I can't, I still don't know how to spell, I don't know how to write like, you know, that's important too. I don't know how to *spell* spell and it suck.

The lack of writing and writing instruction in this class failed to address the goals that many students brought with them and seriously undermined the quality and efficacy of the literacy services made available to these struggling adult readers.

Some efforts to improve instruction at TLC were made during my time there. For example, practitioners participated in teacher-to-teacher peer coaching and were sometimes observed by administrators. However, one administrator suggested that the type and quality of instruction undertaken in the basic-level reading class was considered relatively unimportant because these learners did not tend to show gains. Rather than acting as a motivator to improve instruction, in the context of high-stakes accountability, the failure to show gains served as a *dis*incentive to invest in quality instruction for struggling adult readers.

Public Shaming

The third prominent form of marginalization that struggling adult readers experienced at TLC was the frequency with which learners were subjected to ridicule or emotional distress about their reading ability, intelligence, or educational performance.

Despite Ms. Birch's regular insistence that students in the class not laugh at each other for asking questions, the assumption that adults who struggle with school literacy were "not smart" was evident multiple times during my observations and interactions at TLC. The following excerpt from field notes written during a program orientation session offers a clear illustration of this phenomenon:

> [Male teacher] stepped to the front of the classroom to talk about the TABE...He talked about why students should do their own work and keep their eyes on their own paper during the test. He wrote on the board:
> ABE
> INT
> GED
> He said that when people don't do their own work they can get put in the wrong class….he said he knew of times when people were coming back from community college, already having their degree or GED and not paying the test any mind, just putting in whatever answer, and ending up here (he puts his finger on INT) or he said, God forbid, you end up here (he puts his finger on ABE). 'I've seen some really, really smart people' end up in ABE or INT.

The implication of these remarks is that it is not possible for 'really, really smart people' to have difficulty reading; students assessed as reading at these levels were, by definition, not smart. Furthermore, placement in the basic level class was presented as a worst-case scenario – 'God forbid' you end up there. In multiple interviews, student participants told stories of having been similarly humiliated or described as unintelligent because of their reading difficulties. Some of those experiences took place in family or romantic relationships, some in educational settings as a young person, and some of them took place in adult basic education programs. In this exchange, Hakim tells me about a previous attempt to register for another local program:

> Hakim: I wind up going to [adult basic education program], then I had to take the test and I didn't do too good. But what they did was, they sent me to [another program], 'cause they said I need to be reprogrammed. That mean, come from scratch, all the way up, cause I was –

Amy: - Re*pro*grammed?

Hakim: That's what *they* said

Amy: What?

Hakim: I didn't do too good on the test. So they was like, you got to come from *scratch*. She was, the way she said it, I was like (makes face). You know, I may have forgot some things, but say *that*, don't say I got to come from *scratch*.

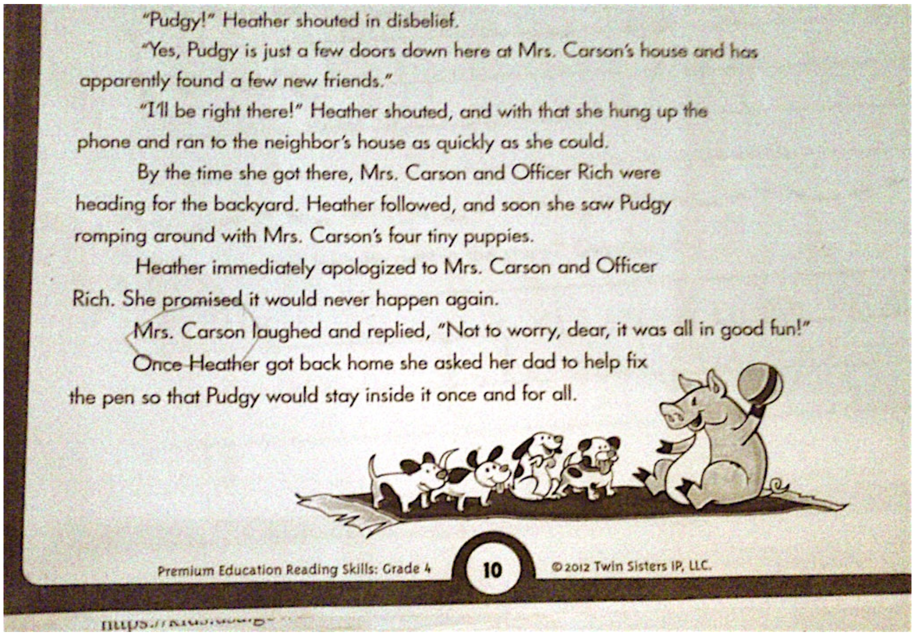
Hakim was assessed by this adult literacy program as utterly educationally flawed, a failure whose 'programming' needed to be erased and re-written. This framing presumes learners' existing skills and knowledge are worthless to the enterprise of adult literacy education, and experiences such as these encourage learners to view them in the same light. The strengths learners bring with them to adult literacy programs seem at times not only invisible but disposable, and the 'best' learners are imagined as Freire's (2010/1970) "empty vessels," just waiting to be filled up, or reprogrammed, with the proper knowledge.

At TLC, similar humiliations were not uncommon. The example of the program orientation, given above, meant that many struggling adult readers' first contact with the program included being shamed about their reading level and having their intellectual capacity questioned. In other instances, teachers and administrators were heard disparaging students' skills and capacity for success within earshot of program participants. These negative perceptions were also transmitted via the classroom materials used, sometimes subtly and sometimes explicitly. Some classroom materials used were intended for children, and their tone and simplistic content suggested to learners minimal expectations about their capacity for more sophisticated work. These materials also reinforced a power dynamic, common in adult literacy education, that frames adult learners as children who need guidance (Belzer & Pickard, 2015; Fingeret, 1985; Ilsley & Stahl, 1993). The following examples of texts used in the classroom offer clear illustrations of how materials intended for children can be infantilizing and demeaning when used as the basis of reading instruction for adults:

Example One: Greg Had a Birthday

> Arturo: Oh, the story? All right, it said, 'Greg had a birthday. He wanted to invite all of his friends to his house. He thought that it would be fun to have everyone bring their swimming suit...They could run through the sprinklers and swim in his neighbor's swimming pool. He planned on having a pizza and ice cream. Everyone came for the party. They ate and swam. They laughed and yelled. They played games and watched videos. Everyone had a super time. Greg almost forgot to open his presents because there was so much to do. He told his mom that maybe next year they could have his birthday party for two days instead of one.' (Classroom transcript)

Example Two: Pudgy's Surprise Visit



"Pudgy!" Heather shouted in disbelief.

"Yes, Pudgy is just a few doors down here at Mrs. Carson's house and has apparently found a few new friends."

"I'll be right there!" Heather shouted, and with that she hung up the phone and ran to the neighbor's house as quickly as she could.

By the time she got there, Mrs. Carson and Officer Rich were heading for the backyard. Heather followed, and soon she saw Pudgy romping around with Mrs. Carson's four tiny puppies.

Heather immediately apologized to Mrs. Carson and Officer Rich. She promised it would never happen again.

Mrs. Carson laughed and replied, "Not to worry, dear, it was all in good fun!"

Once Heather got back home she asked her dad to help fix the pen so that Pudgy would stay inside it once and for all.

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The main characters in these texts were children, the stories were told from a child's perspective or about a child, and the narratives focused on child-like concerns - the excitement of a birthday party and the problem of a lost pig. The labeling of the work as "Reading Skills: Grade 4" reinforced the sense of infantilization and reflected the unfortunate but very common practice in the adult literacy field of equating adult reading skills with those of children (see Footnote 3). These texts were likely chosen because of their perceived readability, and indeed some students were happy about the facility with which they were able to read these materials. However, classroom work based on this type of text presents a missed opportunity to engage with the skills and sophistication that even the most basic level adult literacy students possess, and which are in contrast to those of children.

Although some students didn't express being bothered by these texts, other students referred to this kind of work as "baby stuff." For one student in the class, Sister Hester, working with texts like Pudgy's Surprise Visit made her question her own capabilities:

> Sister Hester: We just getting baby stuff, [laughs] we really not getting what we need, but I guess we can't do no better.
>
> Amy: You think so?
>
> Sister Hester: [small laugh] Yeah, we not getting what, we getting baby stuff.
>
> Amy: What you mean when you say you guess you think "we can't do any better"?
>
> Sister Hester: I- I- I think I, yeah, I could do better myself, but why don't they put us up more?

Sister Hester's assessment of her own needs and abilities did not match the work she was being given in class, and this made her wonder if she and the other students in the class "can't do no better." The message sent by this type of text was that learners were low skilled, with the limited capacities of children; their treatment in other aspects of the program was consistent with this message.

Overwhelmingly, however, the most common demeaning criticism which students heard about themselves in this ABE reading class was that they were "not serious" – in other words, they were not trying hard, they were playing around too much, and they weren't taking the class work seriously. These claims seemed intended as motivational, but grew increasingly severe and centered around achievement on the TABE test as the teachers' and program administrators' sense of panic about not meeting their accountability outcomes grew to crisis level. Two quotes from a class that took place towards the beginning of the study, before the accountability crisis began, offer typical examples of how the teacher seemed to intend this message as general encouragement for students to take their work seriously:

> Ms. Birch: One of the things that I can tell you … I can tell who invests time in reading when they're in groups and who's playing because their reading tells the tale.
>
> ***
>
> Ms. Birch: I don't know if any of you have really noticed – but Michael's class is doing a practice GED test back there. That is something that at some point in time I would like for us to do is to do that practice GED, just so that you can see that this is not about play. This is serious.

However, as the semester went on and the program staff's anxiety grew, exhortations about students' lack of "seriousness" became more intense and more directly connected to outcomes on the TABE test. A month after the class referenced above, Ms. Birch pushed a bit harder:

> Ms. Birch: Remember the other day you talked about how I'm very serious about taking care of business?
>
> Students: Mm-hmm. Right.
>
> Ms. Birch: I'm even doubly serious. I cannot enter those scores from them TABE tests that you took into the computer. That's how devastating they are. I don't know whether to laugh, to cry, to scream, or just pass out.… One of the things that this class has to do is to show some gains in these reading scores. And it's not that I know people can't do it. I know you can do it. Because some of you slid down three or four places from where you were. And that just shows me that people are not taking this – what?
>
> Students: Seriously.
>
> Ms. Birch: Seriously.

Another month later, she warned the students again that they had to get more serious about improving their TABE tests. This time, however, the warning implied that she was being asked to report to supervisors which students in the program were 'not serious.'

> Ms. Birch: Let me just say this. I have something to say. You all need to get ready about being serious. Once again these post tests look terrible.
>
> Juan: Again?
>
> Harold: Aw, man.
>
> Ms. Birch: Again. And I mean people need to step the game up. Because I'm being asked the question, who's not serious, and who's not making gains? And really and truthfully, as hard as we work, we should see some turn around. We should see some turn around. We've got to see it.

In these messages, the clear assumption is that a lack of gains on the TABE test is purely a reflection of students' lack of effort, rather than a failure of instruction or any other causative factor. By the end of the term, the stakes had increased again. Now the threat was concrete. Ms. Birch had been informed by the administrators that they were going to start cutting students from the program who did not make progress on the TABE. Ms. Birch communicated this information to the students; however, she framed this change, once again, in terms of students' lack of effort to show progress on the test:

> Ms. Birch: Now, over the course of last week – I'm going to need everybody's attention – over the course of last week, a lot of things have changed, throughout TLC. The first thing that has changed is that I'm being asked the question: Who's serious about being here to learn? And what I'm using as my barometer for that is attendance, and I'm using your progress on the post test. That's the only thing that I'm going to say about it. I'm not speaking for or against anybody. Your attendance and your progress on the post test will be the ultimate speakers for how serious you are about being here.

Despite all of the policy, programmatic, and teaching shortcomings that undermined these learners' educational progress, the students themselves were held accountable for their "failure" to show improved scores on the TABE test, and their own lack of effort was consistently identified as the explanation for it.

Students' responses to these messages of shame and blame varied. As with Sister Hestor, several students' perceptions of their abilities and performance in class conflicted with what they were being told by the program staff. Some insisted that they *were* learning and were confused by their lack of progress on the TABE and the program's assertions that they weren't trying. Some, like Arturo, became increasingly hurt, confused, and frustrated, but pointed the finger back at the program as complicit in its failure to help him overcome his learning difficulties:

> I don't know if it's just me or, I don't know, maybe that I don't know how to get it? I don't get it? Or, I'm not learning fast enough for Ms. Birch. Because it did hurt when she said that, you know, she said that we need to (snaps twice) speed the process up, you know. Like, it made me, it made me *hurt*, because, you know, how you want me to speed the process when I don't know. You know? Like, you thinking that we sitting there, and we just sitting there just to *sit* there? You know, *no*. I'm *sitting* there cause I *want* to learn, but if I don't *get* it, how you want us to, you know, speed the process? Because what, for *me*, it felt that like, you know, they

> trying to get us up *out* of there, you know, so they can get the *other* people in there. But in order for you to get the people in there, we need to *learn*, you know, cause if we don't *get* it, that mean we got *problems,* we got *issues*, you know, that we need to *work* on, that, you know, that we need some *help* on, you know?... [W]e not *faking* it. I mean, I'm sure ain't *faking* it, I really need *help*, you know? I need help. If I'm not passing, it's because I don't know, you know?…[I]t's not our fault that we don't understand. Y'all make us feel *stupid,* you know what I'm saying, when y'all, you get upset, and I just *told* you all, *sorry* I don't *know*, it ain't like we *faking* it, you know.

Arturo had clearly been made to feel that he was not "getting it," and he was hurt and angry at the denial of his efforts and his struggles. However, "not getting it" was a questionable assessment of Arturo's progress. Arturo and I had been working together to find interesting and engaging reading material for him that was available at his local library. He enthusiastically read these books outside of class and improvements in his reading skills, increased enjoyment of reading, and extended time spent reading were apparent to me in the classroom and, at other times during our interviews, to him. However, Arturo's TABE scores fluctuated up and down, and the way practitioners at TLC positioned this as a failure of student effort and repeatedly shamed learners about their scores negatively informed how Arturo came to understand his own learning; he was made to feel 'stupid' and too slow. In the context of TLC, federal accountability policies that demanded specific TABE score increases served to motivate shaming and marginalizing practices within this classroom.

Being "Put Out" from the Program

In the first few months of the spring semester, students did indeed begin to get "put out" from this class, as they termed it, for not showing progress on the TABE. This same weeding-out process had reportedly taken place earlier in the year with other classes at

TLC. David was one of the first to go from this reading class. He was a very beginning reader, showed excellent persistence and demonstrated outstanding effort. He was repeatedly praised in class by Ms. Birch for the clarity of his desire to be a better reader and the amount of effort he put towards achieving this goal. However, because he did not demonstrate a gain on his TABE test, he was put out of the class. Furthermore, he was informed he could no longer participate in the TLC tutoring program, which he had been attending once a week in addition to the reading class. In interviews, Ms. Birch and the tutor coordinator told me that David's volunteer tutor didn't want to work with him any more; they said the tutor was accustomed to working with higher level students and he was uncertain how to help David. David, however, reported to me that his being told to leave the program was framed as a failure of *his:* he was told to leave because he wasn't keeping up with the class, he wasn't learning, and he might be better served elsewhere. He was given a list of other programs where he could try to enroll. Lamont, also a beginning reader who showed great interest and effort, was given a month to improve his TABE scores. However, he was given no suggestions for additional strategies he might utilize to make this improvement, other than to study what was being offered in class and try harder. When he was not successful, he, too, was put out of the program and offered a list of other programs where he might enroll. Martha, a senior citizen in her 70s, showed up one day to class and was informed that it would be her last day and she should not come back. Initially, she was not given a list of other programs where they could help her, but when she requested one, Ms. Birch agreed to provide her with one.

Critical to understanding the impact of being put out of an adult literacy program in this setting is recognizing the endless loop that learners who score too low on the

TABE test enter when they try to re-enroll elsewhere. Many of these learners are referred to one-on-one tutoring programs that are funded by churches or community organizations. There, the funding commitment and teacher or tutor training are even more unreliable than they are in state-funded programs. Others are referred to federally-funded programs that face constraints on serving struggling adult readers similar to those encountered at TLC. Many prospective adult learners who want to improve their reading skills in the city where TLC is located get referred to City-Wide, a municipal adult literacy program referral service, and they sometimes end up sent back to the same program they left. Students can find themselves bouncing from one program to the next, repeatedly told that they would be "better served elsewhere." As a result, the Referrals Coordinator at TLC, Lana, was hesitant to refer struggling adult readers to City-Wide:

> I've talked to other administrators from different organizations, that there are no places for really low level learners to go. So, sending them to City-Wide, they're only going to end up in another program like TLC.

Once there, a good chance exists that they will find themselves referred elsewhere once again. Programs' unwillingness to serve struggling adult readers is directly tied to federal and state accountability measures, as well as to expectations of local funding partners. Despite the large numbers of potential program participants who could be classified as struggling adult readers, enrolling them at TLC could have been detrimental to the very survival of the program. The Director of Education at TLC, Sarah, explained the difficult position she felt the program was in with regard to providing services to struggling adult readers:

> Sarah: They can get referred to organizations that are prepared to handle them. Um, I can tell you that the City-Wide people would love for me to say,

"I'll take them all." But, I can't take them all, because if those are all my students, I have no GEDs. It's a problem for me.

Amy: Yeah, can you say more about that?

Sarah: Sure, coming in below fourth grade level means it's going to be a really long time before you're ready to start preparing to take the test. And so, not having any GEDs impacts not only my state and federal outcomes, but anyone else that funds this organization. I have to say the number of graduates that we had, because that's always the big draw, how many graduates do you have? Because, if you have graduates, then you're doing a good job and we want to fund you. And so, if I don't have any graduates because I have all low level students, go try and explain that to various funders, corporate sponsors, United Way, whomever, Bank of [State], any place that we have funding, because they want to outcomes and impact.

Amy: Right.

Sarah: And you don't get the same type of outcomes and impact with people who are reading below fourth grade level than you do with higher level students.

Amy: Right.

Sarah: But we're, you know, we're not, that would encourage creaming and I don't think we're an organization that creams.

In this policy and funding setting, serving struggling adult readers was seen as untenable, because these learners were not on a quick track to the GED. Regardless of TLC's desire to not become an organization that engages in "creaming" – which essentially amounts to denial of public services to some learners - I am at a loss for what else to call the removal of students who attend regularly and participate fully but fail to show gains on the state outcomes assessment tests. Sarah was quick to point out her sense that other programs in the area already were creaming; as early as 2003, Belzer (2003) documented that local administrators felt an increase in pressure to do so as a result of new federal accountability measures. However understandable in the contemporary political context, the practice of creaming, together with the dispositional attitude that struggling adult readers are a burden, almost guarantees that these learners will continue to be underserved or poorly served in adult literacy programs.

Discussion

The pressures documented in this study are not unique to TLC and, from what I gleaned from my conversations with administrators about other publicly-funded organizations, nor are the practices it undertook to address these pressures. Ongoing state and federal policies of dramatic underfunding combined with rigid accountability requirements and outcome measures have produced a teaching and learning context in which students' goals, and programs' capacity to respond to them, are minimized. As a result, for the struggling adult readers at TLC, access to programs was limited and marginalization of learners was increased. Accountability policies exacerbated the existing, persistent deficit perspective of adult education participants as unmotivated or uneducable, and the data reported here clearly illuminate the type of paternalistic and infantilizing behaviors that can emerge in this context and the way these behaviors can undermine learners' abilities to achieve their educational goals.

One aspect of the deficit perspective that this paper has not yet addressed is the notion that struggling adult readers were beset by problems and "barriers." Over and over again, from the Executive Director, the Director of Education, and other administrative and teaching staff, I heard that all students, but particularly struggling adult readers, had multiple life barriers that they needed to overcome in order to come to class or show progress. This is a generally accepted truth within the field of adult literacy, and my experience as a practitioner was somewhat consistent with this perception: many students *do* have significant barriers to participation. However, for the particular students in this study, their life situations did not present barriers to effort and participation. One of the focal students had significant life barriers, namely housing insecurity, that interfered with his ability to persist. However, most of the other focal participants in the class had many of the characteristics that adult education researchers have argued would support the achievement of learning "gains," such as persistence beyond 100 hours, regular attendance, stable housing, and someone who supported their educational efforts (Comings, 2007; Comings & Cuban, 2002; Comings, Cuban, Bos & Porter, 2003; Schafft & Prins, 2009). Importantly, most of the students I interviewed demonstrated significant effort in the class: many students commuted at least an hour each way to reach the program site; students read outside of class, sought out supplemental materials, and were attentive to the instruction provided in class; and all the students I interviewed expressed a strong and clear desire to improve their reading skills. Elsewhere, I have described in detail the counterstories of accomplishment, skill and personal/cultural resources shared by the learners in this class (Pickard, 2017b). That their accomplishments and efforts were largely invisible is a testament to the power of the deficit perspective and a counter-productive accountability environment to narrow practitioners' views of students and obscure learner strengths.

Given the effort and interest I saw demonstrated by these learners, another important question to explore is, why didn't their TABE scores show consistent improvement? Some students, like Arturo, began to read whole books for the first time; others, like Lamont, improved their ability and willingness to try and read the many print words they encountered around them in their world – on signs, on TV. Why didn't their scores reflect these changes? Arturo seemed to suggest that it was because he had learning "problems" and "issues" and was not getting the help he needed. It seems likely that this constitutes at least a partial explanation for his test scores; the fact that the deficit-based, test preparation-oriented instructional practices I have outlined here did not substantially contribute to learners' progress on the TABE lends weight to the idea that a focus on test-preparation may not be a useful instructional approach for struggling adult readers. Of note, nine out of the eleven focal learners, including Arturo, reported having been in special education or as having been diagnosed as learning disabled during their K-12 experiences. All nine reported having had difficulty learning to read. Current thinking in adult literacy education is that teaching reading to adults who have learning difficulties or learning differences may or may not constitute a different set of practices than teaching reading to other adults who struggle to read (Belzer & Ross-Gordon, 2011); it does, however, require the actual, concerted teaching of reading, something which happened to a only very limited extent in this class at TLC.

Whether or not direct reading instruction would mean an increase in TABE scores for struggling adult readers is not clear. The focal students in this class are far from the only adult learners who don't show progress on the TABE. Sticht (1990) argued that most participants in adult literacy programs show very little increase in their standardized test scores, something he attributed to the assessments' focus on an idea of generalized "skills" that are perceived as unrelated to content, rather than assessing the content addressed in class. However, in this class, generalized skills that might appear on the TABE were largely the focus of instruction, and learners still struggled to show progress.

For some researchers, the appropriateness of using standardized tests like the TABE to assess struggling adult readers at all is contested. Beder (1999), commenting on findings from several qualitative studies of literacy (Fingeret, 1985; Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Heath, 1983), has suggested that limitations to test sensitivity could possibly explain why these learners don't always show gains, even when they report improvements in their literacy practices in real life. Fingeret and Drennon (1997) argued that, rather than merely being "too small" to register, as Beder suggested, the types of changes in literacy practices that learners experienced were socially contextualized in their lives and were not reflected in the specific types of literacy tasks and skills assessed on the TABE; they suggested that portfolio assessment would offer learners a better opportunity to reflect and deepen what they've learned and would better demonstrate their growth and development. A clearer understanding of meaningful ways to assess the learning of struggling adult readers in the current policy climate of accountability is an important concern for programs and learners and is a topic that would benefit from substantially more research and advocacy.

Another aspect of the deficit perspective that this article has yet to address is the way negative views of learners can limit the criticality with which adult literacy teachers and administrators view their practice; a view of learners as poor, troubled failures can support the mentality that literally *anything* is better than what the learners have now. Take, for instance, the following exchange with the Director of Education about the different kinds of value provided by participation in the program, even for learners who didn't show TABE gains:

> Sarah: You know, and if it means that because of your participation here you were able to get a minimum wage job and get some experience to put on a

> resume, even though you know, that's not a family sustaining wage or maybe you only have that job for a couple of months and you don't ending up counting on my employment outcomes, you now see it's possible. And as long as people are seeing it's possible, then I can continue to hope that they'll get there.

The learner envisioned in the scenario described by Sarah can't even imagine the possibility of acquiring a low-wage, non-permanent job. The acquisition of such a job is positioned as a symbol of hope and potential for the future; it produces a positive change in the learner's previously limited perspective on life's possibilities and is construed as an accomplishment for the program, even if it doesn't count towards their outcomes. Again, this sentiment echoes what Fingeret (1985) identified as practitioners' general sense that learners had been failures before they arrived at their literacy programs, and that enrolling in an adult literacy program represents some kind of a turning point, rather than a continuation of existing successes. As with the examination of "barriers," when we compare the imagined learner in the Director of Education's scenario to the focal learners in this study, we can see how the deficit perspective as a general operating principle glosses over the realities of the actual students enrolled in the program: of the eleven focal students in this study, only two had not previously had a job. Many had had multiple jobs, and some were very accomplished: one was a professional choreographer who had toured internationally, one had worked for years as a fleet manager at an autoparts store, another had worked her whole life as a housekeeper and had current ambitions of getting an associate's degree and working as a counselor, another had been a nursing assistant. The deficit-informed failure to see the positive experiences that learners bring with them can downgrade programs' expectations of the types of educational opportunities they can and should be providing to learners.

The freedom a program has to provide whatever educational opportunities it wants is, of course, extremely limited. The contemporary social and policy context in which publicly-funded adult literacy programs attempt to provide educational services is at best, trying and at worst, impossible. Programs are asked to provide an educational panacea for multiple social issues, using extremely limited funds and a relatively untrained workforce. They are required to demonstrate outcomes using standardized assessments that may or may not accurately reflect learners' progress, under constant threat of program defunding, and are expected to prepare learners to enter a job market that may or may not be able to accommodate them (Amstutz & Sheared, 2000; Lafer, 2002). However, these constraints do not serve as a pass on practitioners' need to examine, critique, and improve the quality of services and instruction they provide, nor is this need limited to the contemporary context. Fifteen years ago, Beder & Medina (2001) conducted a survey of the types of instructional practices and classroom relationships prevalent in federally funded adult basic education programs, and their depressing conclusion was that,

> If literacy also entails critical thinking, problem-solving ability, oral as well as writing proficiency, creativity, and an understanding of how society works, the norm we observed is substantially deficient. Will the current norm equip learners for success in higher education? Will it aid them in gaining good jobs with benefits and a future of increasing earnings? Will it help them be more effective parents and better citizens? Although a definitive answer to these fundamental questions is beyond the scope of this study, as researchers and literacy professionals we are concerned that the answer may be "probably not" (Beder & Medina, 2001, p. 9).

Fifteen years later, this study confirms that ineffective instructional and programmatic norms persist and explores how these norms are shaped by contemporary policies and practitioner beliefs. It also contributes a previously unstated concern that public adult literacy programs are actively complicit in the marginalization of struggling adult readers.

At TLC, struggling adult readers were set up for failure from the moment they stepped through the door, and it is possible that by entering, their educational marginalization was increased. Adults come to literacy programs with multiple assets that could form the basis of engaging, substantive learning opportunities in the classroom, but at TLC, that is not what took place. Instead, learners' knowledge and life experiences were rendered invisible as the program offered a curriculum informed by a deeply rooted deficit perspective of students and designed to comply with strict state and federal accountability policies that further limit the prospect of drawing on learner assets. It is likely that these policies could have a similar impact in other programs unless practitioners find ways to actively resist it. Many struggling adult readers who did not "show progress" on standardized tests left TLC discouraged about their potential and faced with the difficulty of trying to find effective support elsewhere in their ongoing quest to improve their reading skills.

Recommendations for Improvement

Given that funding constraints, deficit-informed instruction, and problematic accountability mandates from funders have endured in public adult literacy programs for many years, is the hope of improving these programs realistic? Although changes need to be made at every level of instruction, the scope of this article is limited to struggling adult readers who participate in public programs, and there are a number of fairly straightforward improvements that would support and improve these learners' experiences. Individually, these recommendations would have limited impact. Taken together, they could make a substantive contribution to improving adult literacy programs for struggling adult readers.

Funding for Reading Specialists

The obvious elephant in the room is the need for more funding. Public adult literacy programs are dramatically underfunded, and this means that teachers' pay is rarely competitive enough to attract certified reading specialists to the field. Money needs to be directed towards increasing the number of reading specialists engaged in adult literacy education, either by raising teachers' salaries enough to attract certified reading specialists from outside the field, or by paying for the kind of training necessary to certify teachers who are already in the field. There is a growing crop of online, graduate-level programs that offer classes in adult basic education, and there are many programs that offer online reading specialist certification. Professional development options should include opportunities to participate in these courses, or in the acquisition of reading specialist certification; however, given the extremely low salaries that most adult basic education teachers earn, this training should be paid for with government funds, or at least be part of a loan forgiveness program in exchange for years teaching adult literacy learners. Guaranteeing that each program or at least each region has access to reading specialists who could act as consultants and professional development leaders could substantially improve the knowledge base about reading instruction among contemporary adult literacy instructors and could play a part in decreasing the educational marginalization struggling readers currently experience in public adult literacy programs.

While Amstutz and Sheared (2000) have argued that it is adult literacy programs' *over*-focus on reading and writing and concomitant lack of attention to critical literacy addressing learners' social and economic oppression that perpetuate learner marginalization, I am arguing that for struggling adult readers, the availability of public programs that offer quality reading instruction by well-trained practitioners is an integral part of these learners' abilities to meet their own educational goals and, for those who are interested in doing so, to expand their critical capacities. Amstutz and Sheared's concerns about how reading is inaccurately framed in policy as the solution to social inequality are absolutely justified, and their criticisms about the lack of learner and community input in the content of adult literacy programs are equally valid and important; however, it is at least partly because of reading's relationship to power that policies, programs and practitioners need to invest more in better understanding how to teach it well.

Revision of Assessments and Outcomes Expectations

For programs to be willing to direct crucial funding towards struggling readers, assessment practices and government-expected outcomes for these learners need to be revised. Presently, enrollment of struggling adult readers is perceived as working against programs, as indicated in this study, because of the belief that these learners do not easily show progress on the TABE and other standardized assessments. Federal funds should be invested in the development of improved assessment strategies for struggling adult readers, or policies need to allow for alternative assessments for this group of learners. Additionally, community funding partners need to understand the large number of adults whose educational goals center around being a better reader and the way that an "outcomes and impacts" discourse focused on test score improvement or degree completion disincentivizes programs to serve these learners. These funders also need to be educated about the length of time it can take struggling adult readers to make progress. Policies and practices at the federal and local levels need to re-center literacy and literacy growth as contextualized in learners' lives – and not just as indicated on a standardized test - as part of the mission of adult basic education programs.

Addressing Practitioner Beliefs

Finally, the persistence of a deficit perspective of adult literacy learners and the negative impact of teachers' and administrators' stereotypes about learners must be addressed. Much recent research has been done regarding teachers' beliefs about marginalized learners and the effects of these beliefs on teaching and student performance (e.g., Brault, Janosz & Archambault, 2014; Howard, 2013; Michael, 2014; Prins & Schafft, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Adult basic educators need to take stock of these contemporary conversations and actively seek to problematize their perspectives about learners. Furthermore, practitioners need to be conscious of the negative impact of using deficit notions of learners as a bridge to helping those outside of the field understand the work we do. Quigley (1997) noted that retelling familiar, deficit-based "myths" about learners "has become about the only way we know" (p.5) to maintain relationships with funders and community partners. However, this way of communicating is reductive and damaging to the learners we serve; it perpetuates negative beliefs that infuse the policies and practice of adult literacy education. Ilsley & Stahl (1993) called for a new way to talk about adult literacy learners, one comprised of “language that educates, not simplifies,” and suggested that using this language will require “not just education for illiterate adults but for all the highly educated individuals who serve or want to serve the nonreaders” (p.26). Practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and funders need to strive to create this new language and achieve this more complex understanding; a good place to start is by asking critical questions about their own beliefs about adult literacy learners and the impacts these beliefs have on the shape of their practice.

Conclusion

The marginalization learners in this study experienced prompts many questions about what is happening in other publicly-funded programs, including: What is the scope of publicly-supported services to struggling adult readers, and what limitations exist to their success in these programs? How can we support practitioners’ and administrators’ efforts to eliminate the deficit perspective and move toward an assets-based approach in adult literacy programs? How can we promote the inclusion of learners’ goals and community desires for adult education as part of contemporary policies? The answers to these questions are urgently needed if we are to create an adult literacy system that does not marginalize or exclude adults *because* they are seeking reading support.

The opening sentence of this article proposes that participation in a publicly-funded, federally-regulated adult literacy program may worsen the educational marginalization of struggling adult readers. Working in the difficult policy and funding conditions that define the field of adult literacy education can sometimes result in a guiding value statement along the lines of, “It may not be perfect, but it’s better than nothing." This is a conclusion worth re-thinking. Is participation in a program characterized by learner marginalization better than nothing? If participating in an adult literacy program means another experience with educational "failure," more exposure to teachers and administrators who hold learners in low regard, more discouragement from authentic engagement with goals, and more contact with institutions that attempt to diminish learners' sense of authority over their own lives, then perhaps participation isn't better than nothing. And that is a state of affairs worth considerable re-thinking.

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ARTICLE 3:

Counterstorytelling:

Seeing ABE learners through a CRT lens

Introduction

A deficit perspective of students of color is prevalent throughout the field of education. Indeed, Yosso (2005) argues that deficit thinking is “one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in US schools” (p.75). This holds true within adult basic education[11] (ABE) programs as well. Within ABE programs, deficit stories about race, gender, class, and print literacy (dis)ability saturate policy and practice, often with negative consequences for the large numbers of low income adults and adults of color who populate the classrooms (Belzer & Pickard, 2015; D’Amico, 2004; Fingeret, 1983; Hull, 1993; Hull & Zacher, 2007). Critical race theorists have described these deficit stories as “majoritarian stories,” which conceal and promote White supremacy and attempt to rationalize the oppression of students of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race theory (CRT) posits that *counterstories* that represent the lived experiences and perspectives of students of color and document the culture-specific strengths and knowledge they bring to classrooms are an important antidote to the effect of these majoritarian stories in the field of education (Delgado-Bernal, 2002; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). The sharing of counterstories can reduce the isolation experienced by marginalized learners, document instances of institutional and personal racism to support legal remedies to discrimination, and support the transformation of belief systems that drive policy, research, and instructional practice (Parker & Lynn, 2002; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002).

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[11] “Adult basic education programs,” “ABE,” and “adult literacy programs” are used interchangeably in this article to indicate adult education programs designed to serve students seeking up to and including high school equivalency preparation. Statistics and analysis in this article do not include services to adult English Language Learners (ELL), which comprise a distinct branch of adult education programming.

This article offers critical race counterstories of three African American learners in one publicly-funded ABE class targeted to adults who have difficulty reading. Although under-researched and generally under-regarded, the work of publicly-funded ABE programs is intimately interwoven with other public education systems. Because students of color are consistently concentrated in under-resourced K-12 schools (Kozol, 1991; Darling-Hammond, 2010), where they are disproportionately subjected to more severe discipline (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002), disproportionately placed in special education (Blanchett, 2006; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006), consistently offered curriculum that is less challenging (Oakes, 2005), and ultimately separate from K-12 schools at substantially higher rates than White students (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004), the public ABE system serves many students of color as an opportunity to improve their literacy skills, as a source of K-12 completion, and as a starting point for pursuing higher education. However, within the public ABE system, majoritarian stories that position these learners as deficient often continue to negatively inform the educational opportunities provided. Imagining and creating alternatives to discriminatory educational systems depends in part on unearthing and acknowledging our deficit-based understandings of what it means to be an adult literacy learner and interrupting how these understandings shape policies, institutional processes, and instructional practices. The counterstories presented in this article are intended to push back against majoritarian stories of adult literacy learner deficit in two ways: first, by highlighting the individual and cultural strengths, knowledge, and experiences three African-American learners brought with them to their ABE reading class and second, by imagining examples of adult literacy learning opportunities that are guided by these learners' strengths, rather than by deficit-driven assumptions about them.

Majoritarian Stories in Adult Basic Education

The nature of majoritarian stories in educational research, policy and practice has evolved over time. Initially, these stories attributed low academic achievement of students of color to biological factors, including lower cognitive capacity or cognitive impairment (Menchaca, 1997; Valencia, 1997). More recently, cultural-deprivation theories have mostly (but not entirely) supplanted biological theories in popular and educational discourse. These theories attribute differences in achievement for racially minoritized and low-income students to membership in a "culture of poverty," which is characterized by a failure to value education and a lack of ability for long-term planning, and to race- and ethnicity-specific styles of parenting and community and family life (Ladson-Billings, 2007, Orellana, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997; Yosso, 2005). Although both biological deficit and cultural deprivation theories of students of color and low-income students have frequently been critiqued in the research, these beliefs still influence policies, teachers' professional development, and classroom instructional practices (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Prins & Schafft, 2009; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997).

Majoritarian stories that operate in adult basic education are rooted in these biological- and cultural-deficit theories and often emphasize learners' perceived lack of intelligence and failed morality. For adults in ABE who have substantial difficulty reading, the association between learners' print literacy/(dis)ability status and their perceived deficits is particularly acute. For example, Beder (1991) argued that the ‘traditional’ deficit model operating in adult literacy policy and programs positions the United States as a land of equal opportunity in which anyone’s failure to learn to read must be a result of their own lack of effort; therefore, “Illiterates are believed to be lazy, stupid, or both” (p.140). Many scholars have noted how programs characterize adults who struggle with reading as childlike, dysfunctional, unintelligent, or incapable of making good decisions (e.g., Beder, 1991; Fingeret, 1985; Martin, 2001; Pickard, 2017b). For instance, Fingeret’s (1985) qualitative study of six North Carolina adult literacy programs suggested that deficit-driven understandings of adults as childlike prompted condescending treatment of learners, whom one teacher described as “little lost sheep” (p. 82). Pickard (2017b), drawing from the same ethnographic data as this article, recounted a learner being told that his reading assessment scores were so low, he needed to be “reprogrammed.” His existing knowledge and experiences were considered irrelevant and possibly even damaging to his pursuit of his educational goals.

In addition to the perceived limitations to their intelligence and knowledge, adults who struggle with reading are often characterized as morally flawed. They are labeled variously as “lazy,” “unproductive,” or otherwise responsible for their failure to learn (Beder, 1991). Furthermore, their literacy status is seen as a drain on the economy and thus as a cost to taxpayers (Hull, 1993). My analysis of state policy guidelines for adult literacy programs in Pennsylvania (Pickard, 2014) demonstrated one example of how implicit suggestions of moral deficit were embedded in the wording of the legislation dedicated to funding programs for adults who had difficulty reading:

> Act 143 aims for...increased and expanded adult and family literacy education programs so that adults and their families will function more effectively in their

> personal lives and as citizens and be better prepared for workforce training and employment that they may become more responsible and productive members of society (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2010, p.5, in Pickard, 2014, p.387-388).

This wording suggests that, without the benefit of adult literacy programs, these adults may be *in*effective in their personal lives and as citizens, poorly prepared for work, and *ir*responsible and *un*productive "members of society." Specifically, the concern with encouraging responsibility among these adult learners suggests a connection between literacy and morality; it is as though, by not learning to read, these adults had broken some larger contract with society, rather than the other way around.

As a framework for viewing adults who have difficulty reading, the presumption of limited intellectual capacity or failed morality can inform the way policies and programs shape practice and can undermine learning opportunities that invite collaboration with adult learners (Beder, 1991; Belzer & Pickard, 2015). There are many factors that go into the creation of the top-down instructional style widely documented in adult literacy programs (Beder & Medina, 2001; Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2002), but it is highly likely that wide-spread deficit stories of learners contribute to the perpetuation of these largely unsuccessful instructional practices. Furthermore, just as deficit beliefs can drive practice, common practices in adult literacy programs can sustain and perpetuate deficit beliefs about adult learners. For example, many practitioners' use of grade level "equivalents" to describe adult literacy learners' reading levels invokes impressions of childishness, neediness and helplessness (Martin, 2001), reinforcing stereotypes about the limited capacity of adults who struggle with reading. In my own past experience as a practitioner, I have been complicit in using elementary grade level equivalents many times, even when the learner in question exhibited substantial engagement and facility with literacy practices in their community, because my program's assessment tests were structured around grade level equivalents and students wanted to know the results of the tests they had taken. I remember one particular student who was thirty years my senior and a pastor who regularly wrote a newsletter for her parishioners. However, her test scores were very low. For me, a twenty-something, White woman teacher, to tell a fifty-something African-American woman pastor that her reading was assessed as equivalent to a third grade level created a particular kind of racially-tinged power dynamic between us that echoed with generations of deeply inequitable social relations. Furthermore, because a majority of African-American adults who enroll in adult literacy programs are assessed as "basic" level learners (Pickard, 2016), they are likely disproportionately subjected to practitioners' use of demeaning, elementary school terminology to describe their reading skills and capacities.

Very often, these types of interactions and the racial power dynamics they reinforce go unnoticed or unexamined by practitioners, because they are such a "normal" part of adult literacy education. Counterstories that emphasize the cultural and intellectual strengths of adult literacy learners of color can shift the lens through which practitioners view learners and support efforts to identify and interrogate damaging but normal policies and practices that negatively influence teaching and learning. The counterstories presented here are intended as provocation for self-examination, as food for thought, and as springboards to the readers' own imaginings of instructional possibilities in adult literacy education.

Conceptual Framework

The counterstories in this article are conceptually grounded in critical race theory (CRT) as it applies to education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billlings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005), with a particular concern for how it relates to adult education (Closson, 2010). Although CRT began in the legal field, it has been used as a framework by educational researchers since the 1990s (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Ladson-Billings (2013) argues that the defining aspect of CRT that separates it from other educational research theories and methodologies that focus on race is its face value acceptance that racism is an everyday part of the fabric of life in the United States, rather than an aberration. Numerous scholars, within and outside of CRT, have established the ways that race has been socially constructed in the U.S. and how racism and racial hierarchies have been and continue to be used to maintain property and privilege for White people (Harris, 1993; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Massey & Denton, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1986; Spring, 2016). Accepting this reality means that CRT researchers can move away from having to 'prove' that racism is active in a setting – an ontological quest that often stymies research about racism - and move towards the goal of undoing racist systems, one of several foundational aspirations of CRT.

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) delineate five specific goals of critical race research that seeks to transform racist systems in education: 1) Foreground and acknowledge race and racism in intersection with other forms of oppression within education; 2) Challenge dominant, deficit-based stories of people of color; 3) Commit to social justice; 4) Acknowledge student strengths and the importance of student experience; and 5) Attend to the connection between historical and contemporary realities of race and racism and make use of transdisciplinary knowledge and methodologies to better understand the experiences of people of color. These purposes are distinct from the purposes of most traditional educational research. However, given the persistent ways even "well-meaning" social science research can inadvertently objectify and further marginalize learners (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Minow, 1991; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Varenne and McDermott, 1998), a shift away from traditional paradigms of social science research is warranted. CRT offers education researchers and practitioners a window to see outside of Eurocentric epistemological paradigms that continue to position communities of color as deficient culturally, educationally, or biologically, and instead proposes alternative methodologies that emphasize the knowledge and cultural capital that students of color bring with them to the classroom (Delgado-Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005).

Counterstorytelling is a central element of CRT and a complementary framework for qualitative research methodology dedicated to unveiling the impact of racism (Parker, 1998). Counterstories can take different forms: personal narratives, composite narratives, and third-person narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As a middle-class, White researcher and an outsider to the community where I conducted my research, I felt it possible only to write third-person narratives that were based on the stories that learners shared with me during the course of this study. Even when writing a third person narrative, my perspective will always be informed by my race and privilege (Bergerson, 2003); therefore it was important to attend to the potential impact my own socialization about the deficits of people of color could have on my presentation of learners' stories. This task was considerable and is an ongoing challenge; my internalization of White supremacy is such that sometimes seeing the deficit perspective elsewhere is easier than detecting and avoiding it in my own work. Even in conference presentations about the research described in this article, I have found myself framings “the facts” in ways that perpetuate majoritarian, deficit-based stories of African-American adult literacy learners. Additionally, due to time constraints, I did not conduct member checks with the study participants whose counterstories are included in this article. Doing so would have elevated the presence of learners’ voices and may have mitigated the impact of my race and class privilege in the telling of their stories. In future research endeavors, I plan to work more in partnership with study participants, both through member checking and by conducting participatory action research that involves study participants in the development of research questions, study design, and implementation. I mention these examples because of my belief that not only do White researchers need to learn how to better conduct research that is not marginalizing, we need to be better about being honest when we fail. As other scholars have offered examples of times when they have been less than successful at some aspect of qualitative research (e.g., Heath & Street, 2008; Peshkin, 2000), White scholars who are attempting to do anti-racist research need to engage in ongoing, open dialogue about our processes and own up to it when we fall short. Doing so supports our efforts to conduct non-marginalizing research and encourages learning and growth among researchers with similar aims.

Furthermore, I am aware that my use of critical race theory as a conceptual and methodological framework brings with it concerns about the colonization of the work of scholars of color; the debate about whether or not it is appropriate for White researchers to use CRT is ongoing (Bergerson, 2003; Closson, 2010). In spite of this, I have chosen to use CRT for two reasons. First, because, more than any other theory, CRT’s acknowledgement of the existence of racist systems in education and emphasis on pushing back against the ideology of deficit regarding students of color speaks to what I perceive as an urgent need for a perspectival shift in public adult literacy programs. Second, I believe that for White scholars not to engage with or learn from the theories of scholars of color is itself an act of marginalization. Furthermore, considering adult literacy learners through a CRT lens has been helpful in my own efforts as a White person in a White supremacist system to see and acknowledge the strengths students of color bring with them into adult literacy classrooms. Telling counterstories that focus on these strengths pushes me, along with other researchers and practitioners, to see beyond the prevalent ideology of the field and to extend our beliefs about what is possible in adult literacy instruction.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

The findings presented in this article were derived from an ethnographic study (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007; Maxwell, 1996) of the experiences of learners in one reading class for adults.[12] This class was offered by The Learning Center (TLC),[13] an urban, publicly-funded, adult literacy program in a mid-Atlantic state that had been in operation for almost 50 years. TLC offered a range of free classes for adults and out of school youth, including literacy, high school equivalency, English language acquisition, and family literacy. The class that was the focus of my research was a literacy or "basic" level class, meaning that the adults placed in the class had been identified, using a standardized assessment instrument, as struggling with basic reading skills. In reality, participants in this class had a range of reading skills; some struggled with letter/sound identification, sight word identification, decoding, and comprehension, while others read and understood with ease all of the texts available in class. The class met twice a week, for two and a half hours each time. The number of learners in attendance in the class on any given day ranged from 10-22 (mode and median were both 17). While new participants were regularly enrolled, particularly towards the latter half of the data collection period, and a few students left the program or moved to the next level class, there was a core group of about 13 learners who were present for most meetings of the class which I observed.

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[12] Other reports from this research can be found at Pickard (2017a) and Pickard (2017b).
[13] All names of people and places in this article are pseudonyms.

These 13 students were recruited to participate in interviews for the study; two declined. The 11 who agreed ranged in age from 26 to 72. Nine were African American (three women, six men) and two were Latinx (one woman, one man). This group of participants was loosely representative of the demographics of the class, which was, on average, primarily African-American (70%) and majority male (60%). While the racial disproportionality of the students compared with the demographics of the national population can be at least partially explained by the K-12 educational inequalities described earlier, the gender disproportionately in this class ran counter to the female dominance of the student population reported by both the TLC website and interviews with one administrator. Although data confirming the demographics of the entire TLC program population were not available at the time of the study, the gender distribution in the class speaks to the complex policy context in which public adult literacy classes are situated. Many women who are interested in literacy services have primary responsibility for childcare and receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) to help support them. TANF recipients often are not referred to public programs with an exclusive focus on education, such as TLC; instead, TANF recipients are frequently referred to so-called “One-Stop Centers” where participants take parenting classes, high school equivalency preparation classes, and job preparation classes, as a condition of receiving welfare assistance (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Consideration of the multiple ways welfare policy has impacted the adult educational services available to women with children is outside the scope of this article, but has been explored at length elsewhere (Hayes, 1999; Sheared, McCabe & Umeki, 2000; Sparks, 1999). In this class, the impact of these policies could be seen in that only one of the focal participants (a man) had young children for whom he was the primary caretaker, and he was not receiving TANF. Whether these demographics were consistent throughout TLC and whether there were factors other than the TANF requirements causing the enrollment of more men than women in this class are unclear.

The experiences of three of the focal students, Lamont (age 60), David (age 46), and Bobby (age 26), form the basis of the counterstories presented in this article. These three learners were selected because they were considered by the teacher and the program to be the weakest students in the class and thus very difficult to serve. Furthermore, Lamont and David had formerly been incarcerated and David and Bobby had been diagnosed as children with behavioral health disorders, both experiences which carry additional stigma. It seems particularly important to tell their counterstories; it is my hope that acknowledging and celebrating learners’ varied backgrounds and the range of different strengths and skills even these “difficult” learners bring with them to the classroom can help interrupt deficit-based understandings of adults who struggle with reading and can encourage practitioners to find ways to incorporate these strengths into instruction.

Data Collection

Data collection procedures included participant observation (Creswell, 2007; Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007) as a volunteer classroom aide twice a week for four months; follow-up visits to the classroom or program site took place once or twice a month for four more months. During these eight months, I also attended a new student orientation, a meeting for all students in the program, twice observed a different ABE reading class for comparison purposes, and visited the program site regularly to interview students. In all, I visited the program 23 times to participate as a classroom volunteer and 21 more times to conduct interviews or other classroom/program site observations. During 20 of the visits as a volunteer aide, classroom interactions during teacher-led instruction and small group work time were audio-recorded and transcribed. Descriptive field notes were written for all visits to the program site and phone conversations with students or staff (Creswell, 2007; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011; Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007). Artifacts such as instructional materials, informational pamphlets about work opportunities distributed to learners, and written examples of staff communication were also collected (Patton, 1987).

The three learners whose stories form the core of this article were each interviewed twice over the eight months. The first interview took place early in the observation period and the second took place three to six months later, in order to explore their experiences and outcomes over time. Interviews ranged in length from 33 minutes to 80 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Additionally, I met one-on-one several times before or after class with Lamont and David, to work on reading material I had provided in order to supplement the instruction they were receiving in class. These interactions were recorded in field notes.

Data Analysis

I arrived at the decision to write counterstories via qualitative analytical means, using CRT as an interpretive framework (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Early open coding of my data (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011; Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007) revealed the contrast between learners' wide variety of knowledge and experiences and their positioning as educational and personal failures in the classroom and program. The CRT methodology of telling these learners' counterstories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) seemed like a meaningful way to approach constructing narratives that pushed back against the deficit framing of adult literacy learners at TLC. I began more focused coding of the data, using Yosso's (2005) typology of the range of community cultural wealth that students of color possess as a 'sensitizing concept' (Blumer, 1954 in Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007). Yosso's (2005) framework identifies six types of cultural capital that learners of color bring with them to educational settings: *Aspirational capital* - the ability to maintain hope in the face of oppression; *Linguistic capital* – the ability to navigate social interaction in multiple languages or using multiple communicative repertoires; *Familial/community capital* – the dedication to the improvement and support of one's community and extended kin network; *Social capital* – connections to others within marginalized communities that lead to economic and social opportunities; *Navigational capital* – the ability to navigate oppressive spaces that were designed to exclude the participation of marginalized people; and *Resistant capital* – the capacity to push back against oppression and persevere. Focused coding of learner strengths was not limited to these concepts; rather, I was 'sensitized' by them as a way to heighten my awareness of strengths that were part of learners' stories, but which are nonetheless frequently invisible to instructors, policymakers, and researchers. Referring to this framework also helped deepen my thinking about how learners' experiences could become a part of instruction.

With a focus on strengths and resources, examples of codes included community engagement, aspiration, motivation, helping others, work history, family support, digital know-how, and humor/creativity. These coded data were then synthesized into two sets of counterstories. First, I wrote narratives that relay learners' background experiences and situate them in the context of their educational experiences at TLC. These narratives are structured much like accounts found in traditional qualitative research; however, they are positioned here as counterstories with the explicit purpose of challenging the racialized deficit narratives that typically operate in ABE. Second, after consideration of Closson's (2010) concern that CRT in general is more adept at articulating critique than at offering solutions, I composed instructional "vignettes" that are intended to suggest possibilities for meaningful, respectful, and socially just literacy instruction in ABE programs. Following Solórzano and Yosso's (2002) methodological suggestions for composing counterstories, these vignettes were created using a combination of learners' stories from the data, theories and scholarship in adult literacy research, and my eight years of experience as an adult literacy instructor. In addition to theorizing the centrality of racism, CRT posits that non-academic storytelling can be a crucial part of creating new systems that can sustain a better, more just world (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), and the instructional vignettes presented here are structured more like fictional, third person stories than academic narratives.

The importance of centering students' experiences is a constant throughout the literature regarding CRT in educational research (Delgado-Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). However, the presence of the stories is not enough; the reader must be willing to learn from the stories. Delgado-Bernal (2002) argued that,

> [C]ounterstorytelling can also serve as a pedagogical tool that allows one to better understand and appreciate the unique experiences and responses of students of color through a deliberate, conscious, and open type of listening. In other words, an important component of using counterstories includes not only telling nonmajoritarian stories but also learning how to listen and hear the messages in counterstories. (p.116)

My hope is that the writing and sharing of these stories will help move me, and my field, towards critical self-examination and increase our collective ability to hear learners' stories and incorporate them into our practice.

ABE Learners through a CRT Lens

Lamont: "That Little Boy Something Else Now"

Lamont was a 60 year old, African-American man. He was tall and soft-spoken, and he had come to TLC with the express intention of improving his reading and writing. He had always struggled with these skills and continued to do so in this reading class. He described his childhood educational experiences as less than positive; he said he’d had a hard time learning, would often get mad, and “would always be in the principal’s office.” He was placed in special education, but his reading skills still did not improve. Lamont reported to me that he had been unable to read his own name until he was in his 40s. When I met him at TLC, he could read short sentences and a number of simple sight words, but he had difficulty with decoding and he was unfamiliar with many letter sounds; for example, he did not know the distinction between short and long vowel sounds. Lamont reported to me that the pace of the reading class at TLC sometimes moved too quickly; he didn’t always have enough time to figure out things he didn’t understand. Additionally, his nervousness about giving a wrong answer often caused him to pause and think thoroughly before responding to questions. However, instead of interpreting these behaviors as related to his reading skills, the teacher sometimes reported to me that she felt that he was either not paying attention or not invested in the class.

However, in our interviews, Lamont displayed substantial motivation to learn and demonstrated what he described as the “habit” of trying to read everything around him – signs, commercials, posters, whatever came across his visual field. Twice during our interviews, Lamont spontaneously engaged in attempts to read text in our surroundings: once he spent a number of minutes critically analyzing both the text and meaning of a poster on the wall that showed a person climbing a stack of books underneath the slogan “Reading takes you higher;” another time he took my list of questions for our interview and began to try and make sense of everything on it, including the title and the IRB information in the header. Furthermore, he reported seeking access to texts, information, and tools for reading in his daily life. He went to dollar stores and flea markets in search of books that were interesting and at his level. He watched Sesame Street on his phone. He imitated other students in the class who used the Google microphone tool on their phones to spell words they were unsure about. In short, he was a motivated learner, but his reading difficulties had persisted throughout his life.

Lamont said that his reading had informed how he was able to work in the world and had limited the types of jobs he was able to get working for other people. He reported having had only one job, as the fleet manager of an autoparts store, a position he held for many years. However, Lamont's struggles with reading did not prevent him from being successfully self-employed. He had owned and operated several businesses, including his own tow truck and towing service, a limousine service with two limousines, and what he described as a horseback riding academy, including stables with 13 horses. In addition to being rented out to schools and carnivals, Lamont's horses were twice hired to be part of big-budget, major motion pictures that were filmed in the city where TLC was located.

Lamont's reading difficulties also did not prevent him from participating in his family's history of community engagement and political action. His mother had been involved in local politics as a ward leader, and for many years she ran a nonprofit organization centered around an enormous community garden that Lamont had helped her build. After a fire destroyed the lumberyard across the street from their family home, Lamont's mother bought the lot from the city for $1. Lamont built his stable on the back of the lot and worked to help his mother convert the rest of it into an award-winning urban garden. He used his connections to help get free construction equipment to clear the lot and fill dirt to create the beds, and he brought composted manure from his horses to enrich the soil.

At the stables, he worked with neighborhood children, many of whose families struggled with addiction issues and poverty. He would allow the children to help him groom the horses, clean the stables, and take the horses and ponies out to sell rides in local parks. When the children came back, he would share the profits with them and explain how the remaining money would be apportioned for care of the horses. Lamont reported that he was especially concerned with encouraging the children to do well in school:

> I would tell ‘em, “You don’t go to school, you don’t get no good marks, you know that pony over there? You not going to have that pony tomorrow, I’m going to give him to someone else and let *them* take care of him.” And that would keep the kids, make them do they stuff, do it right. I told them, “You hooky school, you can’t come here no more. Once your mother tell me, that’s it, you’re gone.”[14]

Lamont eventually lost the stables because one of the boys from the neighborhood burned them down. However, Lamont decided not to press charges against the young boy, because he felt that putting the child in the criminal justice system would eliminate the boy’s chances of a more positive future. As Lamont told it:

> [T]he kids *always* did the right things, but that one, but that one. But that one, come right now, he’s the best kid I ever seen…I had to go to court and everything. I told the judge, there’s no sense in putting him away. That’s not helping him. You know, every kid make a mistake, *I* made a mistake when I was young...I said, “Well, you put him away, what he’s gonna do? Gonna wind up being worse, *bad.* He’s gonna, cause he’s gotten it, he already pictured it in his mind. ‘Everybody don’t like me, they put me away because of this and that.’” But give him a good reason, you know. That boy, that little boy something else now.

By sparing the child the experience of prison, Lamont supported his opportunity to become “something else;” as a grown-up, he was “the best kid” Lamont had ever seen.

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[14] In excerpts from transcripts used throughout this article, italics are used to indicate speaker emphasis. Commas and periods in transcription reflect where speakers paused or completed a thought, not necessarily conventions of standard written English.

These stories from Lamont's life offer strong rejoinders to the deficit-driven majoritarian stories that position struggling adult readers as stupid, lazy, and irresponsible. Lamont was curious, enterprising, thoughtful, and committed to the well-being of his community. His motivation to seek out opportunities to improve his reading, as well as his experience with his many business ventures, are easily recognized as having the potential to support instructional opportunities in adult literacy programs. Furthermore, Lamont's actions and reactions in regard to his mother's community garden, his work with youth at his stables, and, ultimately, the destruction of his stables indicate that he also possessed what Yosso (2005) described as *familial capital,* an aspect of community cultural wealth common to students of color. Her description of familial capital includes a commitment to immediate and extended family and community members, the belief that one's well-being is tied to the well-being of others, and an understanding of the importance of relationships in the community as sources of learning, among other things, moral and emotional lessons. Lamont's commitment to others, his knowledge about organizing community resources, and his experiences mentoring youth also have much to offer in an adult literacy class.

Unfortunately, in Lamont's ABE class, instruction was largely structured around improving decontextualized skills, taught as test preparation. Because of federal accountability demands, the program was intently focused on learners showing progress on the standardized assessment test they used, the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). The instructional strategy used in this classroom was for learners to take practice tests or to complete tasks that mimicked test activities almost every day. The workbooks they used indicated this laser focus on the test; they were titled "Achieving

TABE Success." Lamont's wealth of experience and the contributions he had made to his community were never revealed in the classroom; I only know of these stories because he talked about them during our two interviews. During the sixth month of my fieldwork, the program was facing revocation of its federal funding if more students did not show progress on the TABE. Lamont was given one month to improve his test scores. Sadly, he was not able to do so, and he was dismissed from the program.

My instructional counterstory for Lamont attempts to create an educational opportunity in which Lamont is positioned as a source of knowledge and strength and in which other learners in the class benefit from Lamont's significant familial capital. Furthermore, the exercise is intended to support Lamont, a reluctant class participant, in the move "from silence to voice" (Campbell, 1994); in other words, supporting this struggling reader's oral and social connections to literacy practices. The operating presumption in the story is that the group of students in the class are mixed in level, with Lamont among those with the most limited reading skills, as was the case in his actual class. The project proposed in his instructional counterstory could support participation for a wide range of learners.

Instructional Vignette: Building the Garden

Ms. Birch bustles into the classroom, coffee in hand. She is holding a tall stack of files and papers, photocopies and test results, a sign-in sheet, welfare forms, all of it threatening to spill out of her arms onto the floor. Juan, a young man in the class who is always early, rushes over to help her before the papers come tumbling down. "Thank you, darlin'," she says to him, as he places the stack on the table at the front of the room.

“Good morning, *class*!” she shouts to the other twenty adults seated around the room. “This morning we will be reading a newspaper article about one of our own, a fine example of the type of contributions each and every one of you can make to our communities.” She hands around a photocopy of an article from the local paper. On the front page is a picture of Lamont standing next to his mother, the long face of a horse peering out from between their shoulders. They are surrounded by flowers and trees, smiling and squinting a little into the sun. “Oh, you a *cowboy*!” laughs Ronald. “A *farmer*!” laughs another. Lamont smiles and looks down at his paper.

Ms. Birch and the class spend some time going through different aspects of the genre, asking and answering questions – What is journalism? Is it fiction? What’s a fact? What’s an opinion? What’s a caption, a headline, who is the author? Who is the audience? What are the local papers in our city? What papers do you see people reading? Why do different people read different papers? At last they break into small groups to read the article. Ms. Birch circulates to offer comprehension and decoding support where needed.

Lamont is in a group with Hakim and Sister Hester. Hakim is a professional dancer and choreographer and often has to read the greeting to the audience from the stage before shows, so he feels comfortable reading aloud. He volunteers to read the first paragraph, while the other two follow along. At the top of the page, Ms. Birch has written an easily understandable guide for pronunciation and the definition of several vocabulary words from the text that might be tricky; even so, Hakim gets stuck on several words - the name of the street where the garden was located, Lamont’s mother’s name, the words *developed* and *lumberyard*. Each time Hakim gets stuck, Lamont and Sister Hester are able to offer corrections and all three members of the group underline the problem word, so they remember to add it later to the class "dictionary" that hangs on the wall, where tricky words the group has encountered are recorded and reviewed. Sister Hester, whose extensive experience with group Bible study meant she was also very comfortable reading aloud, takes the second paragraph, and she does not get stuck anywhere. When she is almost finished, she looks up to see Ms. Birch standing next to the group, listening. "Very good, Sister Hester. Very, very good. Lamont, how about you try the first sentence of the next paragraph?" Lamont reads the words slowly and cautiously. Because of how frequently they practice it in class, Sister Hester and Hakim know to give Lamont plenty of time and not to immediately jump in with a word correction, even if they see him hesitating. Lamont is, of course, familiar with the story, and although he reads slowly, he makes it to the end of the sentence without getting stuck. "Excellent, Lamont," says Ms. Birch. "How about you read that sentence aloud one more time, and then you try the next sentence?" And she moves on to check in with the next group.

When everyone is done, the group comes back together to report what they found out and to offer their reactions.

"I can't believe this was right here in the city!"

"You had *how* many horses?"

"*Damn*!"

At the next class, Ms. Birch returns with coffee and a smaller stack of papers. "Today, class, *you* are going to be the journalists. At our next class meeting you will have the chance to conduct an interview with Lamont and his mother. As you decide what to ask, think about what wasn't included in the piece we read yesterday. What questions do you wish the original author had asked? What do you want to know more about?" She writes a list of question words on the board: Who, what, how, when, where, and why. They revisit the Question Formulation Technique,[15] and they discuss how to brainstorm questions, what are the differences between open- and closed-ended questions, how to change questions from one type to the other, and how to choose your most important questions.

All that day, the class works on crafting their questions. First they work in small groups, and each group is charged with coming up with three questions. Even though Lamont will be the subject of the interview, he rejoins Sister Hester and Hakim for the question creation session. They begin by silently re-reading the article, helping each other out with any words that are difficult or forgotten from the last class meeting, and then they are ready to brainstorm possible questions. Sister Hester volunteers to be the scribe. The three learners brainstorm a list of seven questions; one question they decide to re-write so that it is open-ended, and after some discussion, they select it and two others as their final questions. Sister Hester writes their three final questions on the newsprint provided and sticks it to the board as Ms. Birch has requested. Lamont and Hakim also write down the final questions in their own notebooks so they can refer to them easily during the group discussion.

When the class re-convenes as a large group, Ms. Birch asks each group to read their final questions aloud. Some groups pick just one person to read; some groups decide their members will take turns, with each person reading a different question. Lamont's group chooses choral reading, and he, Sister Hester and Hakim all read all of their questions aloud together. After a lengthy group discussion, in which they eliminate duplicates, rewrite another two questions as open-ended, and decide which ones are most important, the class whittles their list down to ten questions. Bianca, whose reading and writing are quick and clear, volunteers to write the questions down neatly for Lamont to take home so he and his mother can prepare for the interview.

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[15] More information on the Question Formulation Technique can be found at The Right Question Institute's website, www.rightquestion.org.

When Lamont and his mother arrive at the next class, the room is buzzing with excitement. Lamont sits nervously next to his mother at the front of the class. He and his mother have read over the questions several times, so he knows what's coming, but still he has butterflies in his stomach. One student, Arturo, asks if they can record the interview with their phones, so that it is easier to remember everything that is said. Everyone agrees that this is a great idea, and the interview begins. The students take turns asking the questions on the group's final list - How hard was it to get the lot from the city? How did you learn how to *do* all that? The last questions are about the present - What happened to the garden? What happened to the stables, do you still have them?

When Lamont tells the story of the boy burning down the stables and why he decided not to press charges, a silence descends over the learners, many of whom have been in prison themselves. His mother follows up with what's happening at the garden now. They are working on a memorials project as a way to remember neighbors who have passed on. Portraits of them are being made in partnership with local artists and installed around the garden.

The discussion afterward is rich. Some students struggle with the idea of not prosecuting the boy, others are inspired by it. They ask Ms. Birch for her thoughts. She suggests that the class can do a project investigating alternative models of justice, and she writes down a note to herself to look up some introductory resources.

All of the students are inspired by the idea of paying tribute to community members who have passed on. “What if we did something like that here,” says Sister Hester, “for the people who come through here?” The group decides that they would like to do a memorials project, like the one at Lamont’s garden, for TLC. They decide their memorials can be for anyone who has contributed to the TLC community, even if they’re still alive.

As the students walk out of the center that day, they keep their eyes out for a good place to put up the memorials. “It should be somewhere everybody can see it,” says Bianca, “like right up front.” “We’ll need a lot of space,” says Lamont. “Projects like this have a tendency to grow.”

David: “I Want to Be *In*”

David was a 46 year old African American man. He was stocky and strong, with a shaved head and thick, square glasses with a slight greenish tint. He, too, came to TLC because of a strong desire to improve his reading; David was unable to identify most letter sounds and recognized very few sight words. The stories David told about his educational background were particularly distressing. He described having been repeatedly kicked out of school and then diagnosed as emotionally disturbed (ED) and institutionalized for anger management problems as a young teenager. When I asked what kind of reading support he’d had during this period, he described spending much of his adolescence sedated, with little attention being paid to his education:

> I was on a lot of medication, and it's just like, to hell with school, sleep the medicine off, and then they dope me back up again…I was in mental health since I was 12 years old, you know what I mean?… They have school and stuff where I was at but, I was drugged up so, I ain't gonna go….I used to wake up every morning like, "I ain't *going* to school," and go right back to sleep…[W]e couldn't stay in our room so they had like a seclusion room for me. They used to lock me in the seclusion room, but I ain't care. Yeah, I was coming right back out, I just was in there to sleep the medicine off.

However, despite his reading struggles and his potentially devastating experiences with institutionalization, David was a highly motivated student and was eager to participate at TLC. He was usually early and missed very few classes; indeed his daily schedule was comprised mostly of working to improve his reading skills. When I began the observation period, he was attending class at TLC four mornings a week,[16] he attended a separate tutoring session at TLC one afternoon a week, and he attended tutoring sessions two afternoons a week at a faith-based program on the other side of the city. He repeatedly expressed his desire to learn to read and had a number of very clear goals related to improved reading, including getting his driver's license and being able to complete medical forms and job applications independently. He was also eager to escape the stigma associated with not knowing how to read:

> *I want to read.* I want to throw it up in people's face that doubted me. You know what I mean? I want to feel good for a change. I don't want to feel bad like, "David can't read." I just want to feel good for a change. You know what I mean?

Unfortunately, David's participation in his reading class and his tutoring sessions did little to improve his reading skills. As articulated in Lamont's story, above, class time was mostly spent on decontextualized grammar skills embedded in workbooks tailored to TABE test preparation. According to the tutor coordinator at TLC, David’s tutor had been unsure of what to work on, so the texts and worksheets from class also formed the basis of David’s tutoring sessions. However, in addition to being unrelated to his goals, these materials were too complex, with too many unfamiliar words, and David struggled to complete most of the work.

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[16] This was later cut down to two classes a week; in an attempt to comply with funding and accountability agreements with the state, current participants were limited to two days a week so additional participants could be enrolled to increase the program's numbers.

Furthermore, because of David’s difficulty completing some of the activities the class undertook, the teacher sometimes told David she would provide him with something different to work on. However, on several of these occasions, David was left to sit and wait with nothing to do. A few times I saw him wait for a half hour, and I once saw him wait for an hour. Although in class he initially made no protest about this, David told me he had gone to the teacher privately to request that she include him in class activities. The teacher, Ms. Birch, was older, strict, and somewhat authoritarian; even other staff members were hesitant to confront her. David reported having been afraid to ask her for something, too; nonetheless, he persevered and advocated for his inclusion in class activities. Here, he describes his conversation with Ms. Birch about a state capitals activity from which he had been excluded:

> David: I just told Ms. Birch today… I want to do stuff with the class too. If I can’t do five, give me one of ‘em to do. Just push me to do one, I want to push myself to do one. So I asked her, “When I go home this weekend, I’m a do something on the map. I want to do a state on the map. I want to look it up on the computer, I’m going to do everything and write it down.” …I want to show her, “Look, don’t push me out. I want to be *in*. I want to learn.”
>
> Amy: How did she respond?
>
> David: She said that, she told me it was great. She said, go ahead. She said she proud of me for asking her that. I don’t want her to push me out, be like, “Yo David, you just work on *this,*” and everybody [else] working on

> *this*…like, *no*. Give *me* a chance. I *deserve* it.

In these stories we can see that David was a highly motivated learner with specific educational goals. This is especially important, given that both motivation and clarity of goals are documented in adult literacy research as supporting the success of ABE program participants (Beder, 1991; Comings, 2007). We can also see that David possessed *resistant capital*, which Yosso (2005) describes as "knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (p.80). In addition to taking external action to oppose inequality, resistant capital describes students of color's ability to maintain a sense of self-worth and value within oppressive contexts, to not internalize negative messages. David's background diagnosis of emotional disturbance (ED) and subsequent institutionalization as a child makes him part of a pattern of disproportional representation of students of color among those receiving special education services, and specifically part of the pattern of the disproportionate labeling of African American students as having ED (Blanchett, 2009). However, even in the context of the negative messages he had received as a child and the ongoing stigma of having difficulty reading as an adult, David was able to resist the internalization of these ideas and assert that he deserved to have educational opportunities.

Unfortunately, as was the case with Lamont, David was eventually dismissed from Ms. Birch's class for failing to demonstrate progress on the TABE test. At the same time, he was dismissed from his tutoring sessions at TLC because, according to the coordinator in the program, David's tutor was getting frustrated; he considered David to be so basic that he was unsure of how to work with him. According to the coordinator, this tutor was much beloved and respected within TLC, and they were willing to do pretty much whatever he asked. It is unclear from the data whether David was offered another tutor at TLC; as these events were unfolding, David told me that he wouldn't stay in a one-day-a-week tutoring session at TLC if he were dismissed from his reading class. It is possible TLC offered David this arrangement and he declined. In the end, David was offered a referral to another program.

David needed direct, skilled reading instruction that was not available to him either in his class or in his tutoring session. In considering alternative types of instruction that might have better supported David's learning, I imagined a scenario in which the institutional systems that organize, regulate, and fund the training of adult literacy practitioners were structured to facilitate a match between David's motivation and clarity of purpose and the expertise of his instructors.

Instructional Vignette: Tutoring, Redux

Roger sighs as he gathers up his materials from that morning's tutoring session. He is a middle-aged White man, a former engineer who retired early and has really been enjoying tutoring at TLC - until now. After six tutoring sessions, it seems like David *still* isn't making any progress. Roger doesn't understand what he is doing wrong, or why it is that David just can't learn. They have gone over the content from David's class again and again, but he just doesn't seem to get any better at it. Roger thinks to himself that if nothing changes, he is going to stop working with David. It's too frustrating. He walks over to see Sam, the tutor coordinator, and knocks on the office door.

"Come on in, Roger," Sam says, smiling. "What can I do for you?

“Hi Sam, I hope this isn’t awkward, but…listen, I think maybe I need to stop working with David. I just don't know how much I can really do for him.”

“Roger, you’re doing a great job! Everyone around here loves you, me included,” Sam offers with another reassuring smile.

Roger looks up at the ceiling uncomfortably. “It’s just, he needs so much and it’s going sooo slowly. I think, maybe he would be better off just in class? Or working with a different tutor? I don’t know that he’s getting much from me.”

Sam sits silent for a moment or two, thinking. “Well, Roger, we really value what you have to offer the learners at TLC. Before we make any changes, can we talk a little bit about a new program the state just approved? It’s a certificate program for teachers and tutors of struggling adult readers, and the focus is to add to the number of tools and strategies that can be used to help learners. It’s online, so you can complete it on your own schedule, and if you are already a tutor or teacher, the state will pay for the cost of the class. There’s a new cohort starting next week…would you be interested in trying it out to see if it helps before you make a decision?” He pulls a pamphlet out of his desk drawer as he talks and holds it out to Roger.

Roger takes the pamphlet and studies it for a moment. “I’ll think about it,” he agrees.

***

It is six weeks later, and David and Roger are meeting again. It’s a gray, rainy morning, and they both arrive a little bit wet around the edges. As they settle in to their chairs, Roger pulls out a book he has been reading as part of his certificate program. “David,” he says, “As you know, I’ve been taking this course on how to be a better reading tutor. One of the things they keep saying over and over again is that the work we do needs to be *interesting* to students. I know we've been working on assignments from your class, but is there something else you would like to work on?"

David demurs. He shrugs and says, "I'll work on whatever you and Ms. Birch want me to."

Roger answers, "Sure, but…what do *you* want to work on? You know, this is your tutoring session, let's make it about what you want."

David looks at Roger, a little wary. He sits silently for a few seconds and then says, "I want my license." He digs around in his bag and brings up the battered driver's license manual that he has carried around with him for the past year.

Roger's eyes widen for a moment, and then he smiles uncertainly. "Umm…" he replies, "We can work with that."

That night, Roger brings up this exchange in the online discussion group in his class. The instructor and the other students offer him suggestions for engaging a beginning reader with a difficult text like the driver's license manual. They talk about how to support decoding and how to tackle small chunks, rather than taking on the whole book. They talk about how to use language experience stories about driving to develop the vocabulary and word recognition David would need in order to read and understand the manual. They suggest Roger record himself reading a portion of the text so David can listen and follow along at the same time. By the end of the discussion, Roger has a list of strategies he is excited to try, and he promises to report back to the group about how it goes.

Bobby: “I Can Read That, No Problem”

Bobby was a youthful 26-year old African American man. He frequently referred to himself playfully as the Reverend Doctor Bobby Houser, because of his love of church and because he liked thinking of himself as a teacher. Bobby came to TLC because his grandmother, a former science teacher, urged him to do so. He had recently moved to the area from the South, and although he had a high school diploma, he and his grandmother thought his skills could use refreshing to help him find a better job. Like Lamont and David, Bobby had been placed in special education and diagnosed with ADHD when he was in school. He described himself as “slow learning.” At the time of the study, he was being provided services through a local behavioral health support organization, where he worked part-time as a receptionist. In classroom interaction, he often had difficulty following along or reading out loud; as a result, he was treated as a learner who lacked the reading skills needed to work independently. He, like David, was sometimes given less or less difficult work than the rest of the class, and it was suggested that he work with David and his TLC tutor, Roger, in separate tutoring sessions. Bobby agreed to participate but didn’t really care for these sessions.

Although Bobby was framed as unable to read well independently, and sometimes in class behaved as if that were the case, Bobby told me several stories that demonstrated how well he was able to read and understand complicated texts, particularly when they were relevant to his interests. Here, Bobby tells a story that demonstrates the nuances of what he learned by reading about financing the purchase of a car:

> I read what happened on our loan term, on my brother and my mom's loan term. I was reading the documents one night, I was sitting at home bored…. And I had read that if you don't have enough insurance that they feel [is adequate] for the car, they can put their own company, insurance company on that car at the owner’s

> expense. I read that in the document and I went to my mom and I showed her and my brother. I said, "Did y'all know if we don't have the certain amount of limits, if the lien company find that they don't, if it's not to their likings, we will have to pay for them to put [on the] insurance of their choice? It won't cover us, but it will cover the car. But we're paying for it." And I learned that just by reading the document.

Financial documents like the one Bobby described are complex at best and can contain technical vocabulary that make them impenetrable to even highly skilled readers. Bobby's ability to grapple with and understand this text suggests that, in fact, his reading skills were not an issue. In fact, Bobby read quite a lot. During our interview, Bobby talked about how much of this reading was online and how much he preferred it to reading classroom texts:

> Bobby: I read things on the internet, you know, because I'm always on email. And what helped me with my reading was actually email and Facebook….Like, I can get into Facebook or something on the internet more than I can reading short papers in class.
>
> Amy: Why do you think that is?
>
> Bobby: I don't know, it's weird. I think because young persons, we're always into these technologies. I can read that, no problem, but when it, certain [things, I] be like, what is that, you know? [laughs]
>
> Amy: Yeah…do you think it's like, does it have anything to do with your interest level? Like, are you more interested in Facebook?
>
> Bobby: It could be interest, too. I'm interested in Facebook, different things, articles there. You know, Internet, different things I read online, I'm more interested in.
>
> Amy: Like what? What do you like to read online?
>
> Bobby: Cars, I like to read car reviews, *all* the time.

Bobby's preference for online reading aligned with his thorough facility with technology. In addition to his regular use of Facebook and emails and his skills conducting research on the internet, he also described using the GPS on his cell phone to navigate walking downtown to find a store, how to "tether" phones to provide mobile hotspots, how to tell if a cell phone has been water damaged, and how to use a variety of different apps and devices. In short, Bobby was substantially more fluent in technology than I am. As he put it, "I bring my tablet with me everywhere, [even] at church."

The fluency of Bobby's reading and the extent of his technological expertise points to something other than reading skills as influencing his ability to follow along and participate in class. It is possible his behavioral health issues were related to his classroom behavior, but from the observations and interviews I conducted it impossible to know for sure. However, it is clear that Bobby was positioned in class as someone who didn't read well. As a result, he largely sat as a passive consumer of test preparation content, most of which he was not particularly interested in and, given that he was not prepping for future gate-keeping tests like the GED, he didn't particularly need. Nor would improvements in standardized test performance necessarily enhance his employability, which was his stated goal in attending classes. However, re-framing Bobby as the skilled reader and user of technology that he was could have been used to create instructional practices that would help Bobby develop his employability.

Bobby articulated several times during our interviews that he liked teaching and was interested in teaching. Therefore, my instructional counterstory revolves around him having an opportunity to teach other program participants, and incorporates lesson planning, promoting engagement, group facilitation, and technology skills that might have been useful to him in a search for employment.

Instructional Vignette: Use that App Like a Diva

Bobby stands at the front of the room, looking out at the group of attentive students. “Welcome everyone,” he says, almost too quietly to hear, and then laughs nervously and trails off. He shoots a quick glance at his tutor from TLC, Roger, who is seated with the others. Roger smiles and gives him a little nod. Bobby takes a breath and starts again, louder: “Welcome! Did everyone bring their phones with them today?”

The students nod or say yes, a few dig in their bag to get their phones out. It is Saturday, and TLC has opened its doors for Bobby to run a special hour-long session called “Use That App Like a Diva.” Bobby had worked for eight weeks with Roger and with his therapist from his behavioral health program, Sheila, to decide on a topic and to put together the agenda for the session. First, Bobby and Roger had brainstormed a list of topics that might be useful to TLC students and that Bobby might be interested in teaching as a workshop. Then, Ms. Birch and several other teachers had allowed Bobby to do a short presentation about the possible workshops, after which students had voted for the ones they would be most interested in attending. The most popular by far had been finding and using apps on their phones, and Bobby and Ms. Birch had noticed how many women, especially, seemed interested in the topic.

So Bobby had worked with Roger and Sheila to plan the workshop; they discussed how best to explain the step-by-step processes involved, and they researched and evaluated a variety of free apps that might be interesting or useful to TLC students. Bobby taught himself how to use Google Docs to make a flyer for the session, and he and Roger talked through what kinds of information needed to be included in order for it to be clear. Bobby practiced writing a two to three sentence description of the workshop several times before he arrived at one that Roger and Sheila both agreed was clear. On the final flyer, Bobby included this description, along with the name, time and place of the class, underneath a picture of Beyoncé using an app on her phone. In the week before the session, he went from classroom to classroom at TLC, handing out flyers and talking to students about what the session would be like. He conducted a practice run with Shelia, and again with Roger. And now, six people have shown up today, and they sit watching Bobby expectantly, phones in hand.

Bobby smiles. He says, "Today we're going to talk about apps. What they are and how you get them and how to use them. And at the end, I'll tell you about our next session, Finding Your Next Car Online." He laughs nervously again, and begins the workshop.

Conclusion

The counterstories of Lamont, David, and Bobby were presented in this article in an attempt to offer perspectives of three African-American adult literacy learners that push back against the deficit thinking which has historically operated in policy discourse and instructional practice in adult literacy programs (Beder, 1991). Countering this deficit thinking is important in challenging educational racism against African Americans, both because the pushout of African Americans from the K-12 system means many go on to use the adult literacy system, and because once enrolled in adult literacy programs, they often face stereotypes that echo some of the most offensive race-based arguments about biological lack of educability and cultural deprivation (Beder, 1991; Pickard, 2016; Pickard, 2017b).

These majoritarian stories of learner deficit influenced the instruction provided to Lamont, David and Bobby in their reading class at TLC. Although these three adult learners were certainly complex, as are all students, and they presented challenging instructional issues, they also possessed a wide range of skills, strengths, and cultural capital that could have formed the basis of meaningful literacy instruction, but did not, much to their learning detriment. Instead, instruction focused mostly on test-preparation as a way to meet the test score improvement goals required in federal accountability policy and did little to acknowledge or incorporate positive aspects of learners' previous experiences. The failure to include learners' assets in instruction can be understood as a reflection of practitioners' beliefs that adult literacy learners have few competencies or positive experiences on which to build (Beder, 1991; Fingeret, 1985).

The counterstories and instructional vignettes in this article intentionally view learners through a CRT lens and imagine teaching practices that celebrate and utilize the assets learners brought to class in order to help them meet the educational goals they articulated for themselves. In Lamont's and Bobby's instructional counterstories, the learners are positioned as "holders of knowledge" (Delgado-Bernal, 2002) and the literacy instruction they receive is built around supporting the sharing of that knowledge with others in the program; in Lamont's case, his substantial familial capital and in Bobby's case, his technological expertise. In David's story, learners are imagined as being socially valued enough for the political systems which sustain and regulate adult literacy education to prioritize building sufficient teacher and tutor capacity to successfully serve the many adults whose goal is learning to read. The lack of ABE teacher and tutor expertise in reading instruction is largely an issue of funding. Adult literacy is critically and chronically underfunded, and therefore teachers' pay is rarely competitive enough to attract highly skilled reading instructors or special education experts to the field. The fact that adult literacy serves so many people of color may part of why the system suffers such critical underfunding (Peterson, 1996; Sheared, McCabe, & Umeki, 2000). In any case, the fact that it is so underfunded means that many students of color learn very little in the public adult literacy system, continuing the pattern of racial inequality that characterizes American K-12 schools.

If the racial inequalities produced in K-12 educational systems are to be redressed for adult learners rather than perpetuated, adult literacy policy, institutional processes, and instructional practices need to honor and reflect learners' goals and interests and create substantive opportunities for participation that lead to learning. Even with the many policy and funding conditions that can constrain instruction in adult literacy, practitioners should do as much as they can to acknowledge and incorporate the numerous positive assets that learners bring with them to programs. As David argued, he and all the adults who participate in ABE deserve that.

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