



Development of the SIT, an instrument to evaluate the transfer effects of adult education programs for social inclusion

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 December 2009

Received in revised form 16 June 2010

Accepted 21 June 2010

Keywords:

Educational evaluation

Learning-environment

Social inclusion

Adult education

Self-directed learning

Transfer

ABSTRACT

To date, hardly any evidence is available on the quality of adult education programs for vulnerable adults. Evaluation instruments or models mostly focussed on regular education and less on programs of adult education aiming to enhance social inclusion. This study presents a first exploration of the construct validity of a newly developed instrument, called the SIT-instrument (social inclusion after transfer) for the evaluation of educational programs for vulnerable adults and their impact on increasing social inclusion. The sample consisted of 308 respondents belonging to the target-group of vulnerable adults. The results of the validation study indicate a reliable instrument consisting of elements of a learning-environment for “vulnerable” adults influencing 4 specified categories of social inclusion.

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1. Background

Despite the significant attention for Life Long Learning in Europe, evaluation studies of educational programs aiming to enhance social inclusion of vulnerable adults are very scarce. However, given the socio-economic developments in Western countries, the group of vulnerable adults without job perspectives is growing (Nickell, Nunziata, & Ochel, 2005). The group of vulnerable adults consist of senior people, adults experiencing social or economical problems in daily life, physically or mentally handicapped persons or immigrants having language problems. For this group of vulnerable adults, educational programs are organised aiming at enhancing the social inclusion of the participants, this means increasing their socio-economic standard of daily life.

The target-group of vulnerable adults has specific features. First, they are not easily fitting in regular schooling-systems, as many of them have negative prior school experiences. The participants aim to reach personal goals to improve daily life instead of gaining a diploma as an entrance-ticket to the labour market. Most adult learners, defined as “vulnerable”, join training-courses, because they need assistance in daily life, for example in writing their own language, having a good conversation, using a

cell-phone or personal computer, solving problems or making important choices in their personal life or organising their financial administration. Regarding Jarvis and Griffin (2003) for “vulnerable adults” education is a lifelong process aiming at increasing quality of life. This implies that the outcomes of these programs are not defined in terms of cognitive learning gains or employment but in terms of social inclusion. Accordingly McClusky (1970) and Serrano-García and Bond (1994) learning aims to decrease the marginalization and furthermore to empower the vulnerable adults.

Second, the target group is very heterogeneous in learning needs with several backgrounds and levels of education (Labouvie & Baltes, 1973). Despite group-based programs, institutes of adult education have to fulfil the specific need of each individual learner, showing a wide diversity of goals per learner.

In order to capture the specific features of the target-group and the adult education programs they are participating in, it can be expected that the regular evaluation-instruments of educational programs, mostly developed for regular education programs in primary, secondary and higher education, are not adequate. Questions arise such as: how to measure outcomes of adult education programs when social inclusion is aimed for instead of cognitive performance and employment? Given the context of adult education for social inclusion, which aspects of the learning environment are relevant to evaluate?

To date, hardly any evidence is available on the quality of adult education programs for vulnerable adults. Regarding Partridge

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(1999) on the fifth international conference on adult education in Hamburg in 1997 it became clear that specified input for improvement of adult education programs is needed. According to Partridge (1999) a framework for evaluation is needed to get insights in the possibilities for diversification of useful adult education programs. By this Partridge (1999) meant insights in most important elements of learning-environments, which influence the increase of social inclusion by adult learners (as an effect of the learning-process).

In this study, we present the results of the development and validation of an evaluation instrument for education programs aiming for the enhancement of social inclusion of vulnerable adults. Because for this target-group, the application of the competencies learned during the programs in their daily life is of utmost importance, we take the theoretical perspective of transfer of training as developed and studies in Human Resource Development (HRD) literature.

2. The issue of transfer in adult education programs for social inclusion

During the past 20 years, a lot of studies have been conducted in the field of HRD in order to better understand how various variables influence the extent to which trainees transfer what they have learned during the training programs to their daily life, more specifically the workplace. Many studies on transfer of training are based upon the transfer model of Baldwin and Ford (1988) and discern mainly three groups of variables influencing transfer of training: the learner, the design of the training program and the work-environment where the newly acquired competencies have to be applied. These three groups of variables have been addressed in many studies and based on the results, refinements of the model have been proposed (e.g. Holton, Chen, & Naquin, 2003). Although a lot of research has been conducted, hardly any attention has been paid to programs for vulnerable adults instead of for high-skilled employees. Moreover, most programs under study aimed for professional development of the trainees and not for personal development in terms of social inclusion. Given the target-group of vulnerable adults participating in educational programs for social inclusion, the environment and more precisely the life-circumstances of the learner can either improve or block the transfer. In addition, given the vulnerability of the target group, it can be expected that the specific life-circumstances of the participants will influence the extent of transfer probably in a more significant way than in the programs traditionally measured in transfer-of-training studies. Moreover, the extent to which the learning-environment (design) matches the life-circumstances of the participants might play a significant role in the transfer process.

One interesting and relevant study is conducted by Nijman (2004). They studied the issue of transfer for vulnerable adults, in terms of low-skilled employees. Based on the aforementioned earlier models of transfer of training, Nijman (2004) include 6 factors influencing transfer of training among lower-educated adults. The factors involved are: personality characteristics (1), motivation (2), supervisor support (3), transfer-climate (4), transfer-design (5) general work environment (6) and elements of the learning-environment.

Although the Nijman study (2004) addresses low-skilled adults and is therefore of specific relevance, it is directed towards training for the workplace and does not examine the educational programs aiming to enhance social inclusion. Therefore, several modifications have to be made. Firstly Nijman (2004) studied the transfer of learning enhancing job-related skills and behaviour. Adult education programs enhancing social inclusion prepare learners on functioning in daily life. Consequently the factor general work environment as studied by Nijman (2004) refers in our context to

the daily life environment and barriers or support for transfer experienced there. In addition, especially in our target group, life-circumstances such as health, happiness and safety feelings influence social inclusion of the vulnerable adults participating in the programs under study (Andrews & Withey, 1974). Therefore the life-circumstances as discerned in the study of Andrews and Withey (1974) bridge the gap of Nijman's (2004) job-related model to programs aimed for enhancing social inclusion.

Secondly, Nijman (2004) stresses the importance of support by the supervisor at work. In the specific context of this study, the teachers of the program fulfil to a large extent the role of supervisor in terms of trainer or coach.

Thirdly, the design of the training program as defined by Nijman (2004) is mainly based upon the features of conventional professional training programs grounded in behaviourist and cognitivist learning theories. Current training programs and more specifically the educational programs addressed in this study are inspired by constructivist learning theories, stressing the importance of interaction, looking from multiple perspectives to a subject and relating theory to practice using authentic learning materials (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Holton et al., 2003; Nijhuis, Segers, & Gijssels, 2005; Simons & Bolhuis, 2004; Tenenbaum, Naidu, Jegede, & Austin, 2001; Thijssen, 2001; Van der Vlerk, 2005; Van Lakerveld, Van den Berg, De Brabander, & Kessels, 2000). Therefore, in order to measure the design of the learning environment in the educational programs we included these design characteristics.

Fourth, regarding the specific features of the target-group "vulnerable adults" the defined personality characteristics of Nijman (2004) seem to lack the aspect of self-direction. A study on low-educated employees of Raemdonck (2006) points out that self-direction in learning can have an impact on the outcome of learning of vulnerable adults (as a target-group of adult education). Therefore, given the target group, we address self-direction in learning as a relevant individual input variable of the participants.

3. Towards the evaluation of adult educational programs for social inclusion

Based upon prior research on transfer of training, more specifically the model of Nijman (2004) and taking into account the specific features of the target-group and educational programs in this study, we address the following variables: (1) as input measures: the background characteristics and motivation of the participants and the extent of self-directed learning; (2) as process measures we focus on the transfer design, including teacher support, learning-contents and -activities, transfer-climate and on the participants' life circumstances; (3) as output measures we include two social inclusion variables namely activation and internalisation on the one hand and participation and connection on the other hand.

3.1. Input measures: background characteristics and self-directed learning

3.1.1. Background characteristics and motivation of the participants

Researchers as Baldwin and Ford (1988) and Holton et al. (2003) describe the trainee as an independent personality with his or her own motivation during learning. Likewise Pugh and Bergin (2006) argue that motivational factors indeed seem to have a significant impact on transfer because of their influence on cognitive engagement relating transfer of training. Furthermore Noe and Schmitt (1986) discuss the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation influencing the training-results. Regarding the target-group vulnerable adults the intrinsic motivation can be seen as a voluntary participation in training differentiating the extrinsic motivation seen as mandatory participation. Besides the motiva-

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