



An investigation of perceptions of programme quality support of adult basic education programmes



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 September 2016

Received in revised form 21 November 2016

Accepted 23 November 2016

Available online 13 December 2016

Keywords:

Adult basic education

Self-assessment

Evaluation

Workforce development

Programme management

ABSTRACT

This study was designed to identify the degree to which the directors of adult basic education programs perceive they have program quality support, as evidenced by a well-defined mission and role in the community, a management system, human resources management, and a suitable learning environment. NSCALL's *Evidence-based program self-assessment* (2006) was modified and administered electronically to administrators of adult education programs in a mid-southern state. Findings indicated that most directors perceive they are implementing the indicators of program quality support in all of the areas surveyed. A research-based annual self-study that considers the quality indicators is recommended, leaving a need for an update to the NCSALL assessment for use as a program assessment instrument.

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1. Introduction

What does it take for a local adult education programme to operate successfully? Although state and national standards for adult basic education programmes in the United States exist, there is currently no established structure in place to help programmes meet these standards. In addition, while there are performance indicators that are measured and used by state and federal agencies to determine funding and services at the state and local levels, they do not indicate how programmes and practitioners of adult basic education might best achieve improved outcomes. These outcome-based accountability systems do not measure programme processes or the operations that define programme quality, as defined by Comings, Soricone, Santos, & National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (2006). Programmes should have a structure in place that supports continuous improvement, allowing them to identify areas of need, develop strategies to address the needs, pilot test the strategies, integrate solutions programme-wide, and evaluate the impact of the strategies (McLendon & Polis, 2009).

The accountability system in place for federally funded, state administered adult education programmes is The National

Reporting System (NRS). It addresses the accountability requirements of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), which is Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) (1998), and identifies three types of core measures: outcome measures, descriptive measures, and participation measures. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) updates and reauthorizes WIA, and includes six primary indicators of individual programme performance, including the percentage of programme participants in unsubsidized employment; median earnings of participants; percentage of participants who obtain a postsecondary credential or diploma; participants achieving skills gains; and effectiveness in serving employers (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). These shared performance measures will be used to gauge successes in the core WIOA programmes (Adult, Dislocated Worker and Youth formula programmes; Adult Education and Literacy Act programmes; Wagner-Peyser Act employment services; and Rehabilitation Act Title I programmes), and strengthen coordination between adult education, postsecondary institutions, and employers.

While these performance indicators are crucial to measuring student outcomes needed for success in postsecondary training and the workforce, they do not address the programme level systems needed to achieve these successes. To meet performance indicators, it is necessary to evaluate adult education programmes to ensure they are meeting the needs of their clientele. These evaluations can be formative or summative. Formative evaluations

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are conducted to find where programmes need to be improved and summative evaluations are conducted to measure the overall merit and value added of the programme. Studies suggest that adult education programmes should engage in a regular process of evaluation for programme development and accountability, assessing the effectiveness of recruitment, intake, orientation, instruction, counseling, transition, and support services (Comings et al., 2006). Along those lines, this study explored adult education programme directors' perceptions of best practices related to programme quality support in adult basic education programmes in a southern state in the U.S. Specifically, the study examined the degree to which directors perceive that their programmes have a well-defined role in the community, a quality management system, an adequate system to manage their human resources, and a suitable environment for learning for adult students. Data was gathered using a modified survey based on the practices identified by Comings et al. (2006) in their study *An Evidence-based Adult Education Model Appropriate for Research*.

2. Context of the study

To date, there has been limited research conducted on adult basic education in the area of programme quality indicators. The seminal work, *An Evidence-based Adult Education Model Appropriate for Research* (2006) is an extension of the 2003 National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) publication, *Establishing an Evidence-based Adult Education System*, which described the steps adult basic education programmes can take to improve their practice (Comings et al., 2006). Since the development of this model, no others have been introduced, leaving room for an update to the NCSALL piece to provide states with a programme assessment instrument.

Although the model was designed to help identify benchmark sites with similar quality practices for further research in adult education methods or practices, it is also to be used as an instrument for guiding programme improvement. It serves as the basis for NSCALL's Evidence-based Programme Self-Assessment survey instrument, which allows adult basic education programmes to identify the principles of best practice that they currently employ, and to identify which areas need improvement. In the Research Site Identification Protocol (RSIP) appendix, Comings et al. (2006) also allow for the principles to be addressed to the degree to which a programme quality or practice is evident, thus offering a more in-depth analysis of programme components and activities. When used as a self-assessment tool, respondents can rate the degree to which a certain principle, such as a well-defined role, an effective management system, human resource management, and a suitable environment for learning, is evident in their programme, allowing administrators and researchers to diagnose programme strengths and areas for improvement.

The research model designed by Comings et al. (2006) identifies the principles of best practice of four components: programme quality, entrance into a programme, participation in a programme, and reengagement in learning. *Programme quality* includes the local programme's role in the community, management and human resources systems, and environment for learning. *Entrance into a programme* includes a programme's approach to student recruitment, intake, and orientation. *Participating in a programme* includes a programme's approach to classroom management, instruction, and supporting student persistence. *Reengagement in learning* includes practices for supporting students who have returned from a break in study. These components explore the principles derived from empirical evidence and professional wisdom that support them, allowing researchers to more accurately seek, develop, or evaluate interventions by studying programmes that have the ability to deliver services.

2.1. Programme mission, goals, and role

A programme with a well-defined role will have both a clear organisational mission and an awareness of the programme environment (Comings et al., 2006). According to the Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages (TESOL), an adult education programme needs a mission statement, with goals developed with input from stakeholders (TESOL, 2003). The mission of adult education as a field is to reengage adults who do not have the knowledge and skills to hold living wage jobs (Jones & Kelly, 2007). Missions for adult education programmes vary by programme and state, but generally focus on improving adults' capacity to participate in society and improve their lives (Comings et al., 2006). An adult education programme should organise its instructional offerings to be consistent with the programme's mission and the goals of the learners being served by the programme (TESOL, 2003).

Adult education programmes are required to have a well-defined role under Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Local adult basic education programmes should be responsive to the regional and local needs of the community, serving individuals in the community who are identified as most in need of adult education and literacy services, including adults who have low literacy levels and adults who are English language learners. Adult education programmes should also demonstrate alignment between their proposed activities and services and the strategies and goals of the local WIOA plan, providing opportunities for cooperation between adult education, youth services, rehabilitation, and other workforce services (H.R. 803, 2014).

2.2. Components of an effective management system

The second main component of programme quality support identified by Comings et al. (2006) is an effective management system. An effective management system includes governance of a programme, data collection and use, a planning process, regular evaluation, and financial management. Governance of a programme must include a governing body that is representative of the local community and meets regularly to oversee programme activities. A programme should have an advisory group and bylaws or a board of directors that ensures accountability, administration of programme activities, and stakeholder participation (TESOL, 2003). An advisory board can advocate for the programme and provide programme allies, inform programme directors regarding potential funding sources, advise on industry trends, offer expertise regarding professional credentials, and provide ideas for programme improvement (Hicks, Hancher-Rauch, Vansickle, & Satterblom, 2011). A programme should also gather and use stakeholder data for programme improvement and accountability (Comings et al., 2006).

The final component of an effective management system identified by Comings et al. (2006) is financial management. A programme should have sound financial management procedures to collect and maintain fiscal information, guide programme budgeting, ensure continuity of funding, and meet reporting requirements (TESOL, 2003). Additionally, a programme should have sustainable funding and manage resources effectively by maintaining records, establishing and monitoring a budget, and engaging in fundraising (Comings et al., 2006).

The Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 requires states to implement fiscal management and accountability information systems based on guidelines to be established by the Secretary of Labor and Secretary of Education, in consultation with state governors, elected officials, and one-stop partners (H.R. 803, 2014). The guidelines promote "efficient collection and use of

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