

Chapter 4

THE ADULT LITERACY  
EDUCATION SYSTEM  
IN UNITED STATES

# Introduction

How do we understand the phenomenon of literacy in America? And how does adult literacy education respond to this phenomenon

somewhere between one in five and one in three adult Americans with sufficient difficulty in reading or computation to be challenged by the ordinary tasks of everyday life and work. To the casual observer these figures may seem surprising – even shocking.

In turn, this increased demand for literacy proficiency in adult life has led to an increased focus on the need for higher literacy skills.

adult literacy education occurs in many arenas of American society including schools and colleges, social service agencies, community organizations, libraries, museums, companies, union halls, churches, and in homes.

It is in this sense that I employ the phrase “adult literacy education system” to refer to the policies, programs, agencies, participants, and personnel that "hang together" under a common, though multiple and sometimes conflicting, set of purposes

In the United States there are a number of terms and acronyms which refer broadly to adult literacy education and which can have overlapping meanings, often in ways that are confusing to those outside the field. Federally funded adult literacy programs encompass a range of educational levels such as Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE), and English as a Second Language (ESL). ASE programs lead to the high school credential or its equivalent – the General Education Diploma or GED. Practitioners may employ any of these terms to refer to educational activities that, broadly speaking, may be grouped together under the heading of adult literacy activities. Common usages among practitioners include ABE, which may refer to grade levels 1-8, or adult low-level literacy, which can refer to grade levels 1-4. Some curricula focus on life skills as opposed to mastery of coding/de-coding skills and also may be identified as ABE.

## 2. Theoretical Perspectives on Literacy:

Education is fundamentally both cultural and ideological. It is cultural in the sense that it must be meaningful and mesh with the values, norms, traditions that are meaningful within the social system of the society. It is ideological in that any given policy or program is constituted within a nexus of conflicting interests relating to purpose, goals, needs, and outcomes.

## 2.1 School-based literacy

- ▣ Following the passage of the 1965 Adult Education Act, federally funded adult programs generally followed a school-based model. Literacy was understood primarily in terms of school grade levels. Grade levels one through eight constituted adult basic education. Adult basic education programs in turn were subdivided into low-level literacy (grade levels one through four) and midrange literacy (grade levels five through eight). Grade levels nine through twelve constituted adult secondary or GED. Assessment instruments used to evaluate literacy levels such as the widely used Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) were designed to yield grade level equivalents. The standardized tests used in adult literacy have been predominantly adult versions of standardized achievement tests used for children (Askov, 2000).

## 2.2 Competency-based or Functionalist Model:

In this model, literacy is understood as the basic language skills required to meet the responsibilities of adult life. This concept of literacy is closely associated with the idea that adults have specific functions or roles to fulfill (Sparks and Peterson, 2000).

- ▣ Competency-based literacy is "the possession of, or access to, the competencies and information required to accomplish transactions entailing reading and writing" (Levine, 1986, p. 43). In any particular context, then, literacy is for the purpose of performing some accepted social role. Most importantly, it is not assumed that literacy skills transfer automatically across contexts.



## 2.3 Socio-Cultural / Ideological Literacies Model:

In this third perspective on literacy, the importance of the social, political, and ideological context is central to understanding how literacy is practiced. As an example of this approach, and the learners come to the educational setting with different experiences, perspectives, values, and beliefs

## 2.4 Measuring Proficiency:

Merrifield (1998) cited five factors contributing to the increased call for accountability.

- ❑ First, research into the meaning of literacy has produced changing conceptualizations of literacy. What it means to be literate may differ across contexts. In addition, different racial, ethnic, or cultural groups within complex societies may hold different understandings of literacy.
- ❑ Second, stakeholders are not accountable to each other.
- ❑ Third, a lack of clear objectives, at the individual level and for programs, makes accountability more difficult to develop.
- ❑ Fourth, there exists a fragmented and incomplete system of adult literacy education with multiple funding sources that have different reporting requirements.
- ❑ Fifth, available tools for measuring literacy proficiency are not up to the task of providing needed data for program improvement.

### **3.0 Adult Literacy Policy and Federal Legislation**

Current adult literacy legislation, Title II of the Workforce Incentive Act otherwise known as the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), is administered by the U.S. Department of Education through the Department of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL). AEFLA provides funding to states to support adult literacy and basic education programs. The legislation defines “adult education” as education below the post secondary level for individuals age sixteen and older. It is estimated that approximately 51 million American adults fall within this target population.

Over the 30 year period between 1966 and the mid 1990s, changes to federal policy involved relatively minor adjustments such as: lowering the eligibility age from eighteen to sixteen (1970); approving funding to non-profit organizations (1984); and encouraging partnerships among Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), labor unions and businesses to provide workplace literacy programs. In 1991 the passage of the National Literacy Act (NLA) replaced the Adult Education Act of 1966 and expanded access to federal funds for nonprofit education providers (Sticht, 2002). In 1998 Congress passed AEFLA as Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (United Department Employment and Training Administration, 1998). As indicated in Section 202 of the Act, this new legislation represented a major redirection in federal policy with regard to adult literacy. Its purpose is:

to create a partnership among the Federal Government, States, and localities to provide, on a voluntary basis, adult education and literacy services, in order to —

- (1) assist adults to become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency;
- (2) assist adults who are parents to obtain the educational skills necessary to become full partners in the educational development of their children;
- (3) assist adults in the completion of a secondary school education.

With the primary emphasis on literacy for employment, the AEFLA mandated new performance measures for all federally funded adult education programs and services. Another significant provision of the Act provided for the creation of the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) whose mission is to provide national leadership for coordinating literacy services and policy and to serve as a national resource for adult education and literacy programs by disseminating information on literacy to the field (Tracy-Mumford, 2000).

The AEFLA provides states with a base allotment of \$250,000. Additional funds are distributed on the basis of each state's relative proportion of adults between the ages of 16 and 60 and who lack a high school diploma or equivalent, who are not also enrolled in secondary school, and who are beyond the age of compulsory school attendance. State plans must address how they intend to reach hard to serve populations such as low-income persons, individuals with disabilities, single parents, displaced homemakers, and individuals with multiple barriers to educational enhancement such as limited English proficiency. State plans must also provide for coordination of services with other appropriate agencies.



## 3.1 The Policy Shift towards Workforce Development:

A second development was the emergence of legislative efforts to define acceptable research models for supporting federally funded reading programs for elementary and secondary schools (Eisenhart and Towne, 2003). The Reading Excellence Act of 1999 defined acceptable research as:

- ▣ A. the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge relevant to reading development, reading instruction, and reading difficulties; and
- ▣ B. shall include research that —
  - i. employs systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation or experiment
  - ii. involves rigorous data analyses that are adequate to test the stated hypotheses and justify the general conclusions drawn;
  - iii. relies on measurements or observational methods that provide valid data across evaluators and observers and across multiple measurements and observations; and has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review.

### 3.2 Impact on States and Local Programs:

it is important to clarify that the states—not the federal government—have primary responsibility for education funding and policy. In fact, state and local governments provide the lion's share of funding and regulation of public education. I called a source at the Literacy Office in Georgia and learned that the Georgia legislature provides \$11 million for adult literacy programming; neighboring Alabama provides just over \$6 million, and Florida provides more than \$300 million—a very large sum indeed, approaching the federal allocation for all of the United States.



In the state of Georgia, for example, the 32 technical colleges have primary responsibility to provide adult literacy services. They are the designated local educational agency (LEA) to receive state and federal adult education funds. Local adult education administrators may also seek supplementary grants from foundations, the business community, or other source to support targeted adult education services such as family literacy or welfare to work training. At the LEA level, then, adult literacy services may involve a range of funding sources and services depending on local needs and the enterprise of adult education staff

Local public school districts may also provide adult literacy services. Often these services to adults support the primary mission of schools to teach children. Family literacy or life skills programs that serve adults with the idea of supporting youth education are the primary aims of such programs. The organization and structure of these services can dramatically vary from school to school or from community to community.

### 3.3 Research on the Social Impact of Adult Literacy Education

Quigley (1997) identified four purposes for literacy education: to combat poverty, to promote morality, to reduce crime and to promote economic growth.

the outcomes and impacts of adult literacy programs in the United States. Eleven conclusions were drawn based on a review of these 23 studies.



- ❑ In general, it is likely that participants in adult literacy receive gains in employment.
- ❑ In general, participants in adult literacy education believe their jobs improve over time. However, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that participation in adult literacy education causes job improvement.
- ❑ In general, it is likely that participation in adult literacy education results in earnings gains.
- ❑ In general, adult literacy education has a positive influence on participants continued education.
- ❑ Although the evidence suggests that participants in welfare sponsored (JOBS Program) adult literacy education do experience a reduction in welfare dependence, the evidence is inconclusive as to whether adult literacy education in general reduces welfare dependence for participants.
- ❑ Learners perceive that participation in adult literacy education improves their skills in reading, writing, and mathematics.

- ▣ As measured by tests, the evidence is insufficient to determine whether or not participants in adult literacy education gain in basic skills.
- ▣ In general, adult literacy education provides gains in GED acquisition for participants entering out the adult secondary education (ASE) level.
- ▣ Participation in adult literacy education has a positive impact on learners self-image.
- ▣ According to learners self-reports, participation in adult literacy education has a positive impact on parents' involvement in their children's education.
- ▣ Learners perceive that their personal goals are achieved through participation in adult literacy education.