Research and the Field of Adult Literacy Education

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The adult literacy education field draws on research from several disciplines to support the work of educating the 40-44 million U.S. adults who lack the skills to obtain and maintain family sustaining work opportunities (Kirsch et al., 1993). Adult literacy research that documents the prevalence of low literacy in the adult population is useful for increasing awareness, for advocacy, and for educating funders and community partners about the need for, and impact of, adult literacy education. Research from adult and K-12 education are useful for improving professional practice and implementing effective program initiatives and for developing new knowledge about effective instructional strategies, evolving learner needs, and improving learner outcomes. In adult literacy education, efforts are made to use research for each of these purposes at the national, program, and individual levels. This paper documents how Seeds of Literacy, an adult literacy program in Cleveland, Ohio, uses education research to support its work.

Awareness, Advocacy, Education

Seeds of Literacy (Seeds) provides free, one-to-one tutoring to adults who range beginning readers to those working on earning a high school equivalency credential. Research about the prevalence of low literacy helps Seeds increase public awareness about illiteracy and garner public support for adult literacy efforts. For example, the National Adult Literacy Survey (U.S. Department of Education, 1992) and the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003) helped Seeds provide the public with an understanding of how pervasive the problem of low literacy was in America at that time and how literacy rates have remained somewhat static over time. This helped point to the need to address (and prevent) illiteracy in the adult population, and the need for continued surveys of the adult population to track progress.

While information about illiteracy on the national scale provided valuable information, research that provided a more local perspective has been particularly effective in helping to craft a message that hits closer to home. Data that demonstrated high need in Cleveland generally and in specific neighborhoods helped Seeds tell a more compelling story to the local community and to educate funders about the need for increased funding for adult literacy programs in the Cleveland area. They also helped motivate residents of Greater Cleveland, the national community, and even the international community to do their part to decrease functional illiteracy rates by either becoming a Seeds tutor or donor.

In addition to using research to increase awareness, Seeds also uses data to support advocacy efforts, and to educate foundations, potential donors, and

community partners on the impact of adult literacy education on K-12 education, criminal justice, and the local economy. Research from Dubow et al. (2009) found that parental educational levels predict a child's educational level and educational aspirations through age 19. Given that 47% of Seeds' students are parents of dependent children, the work that Seeds does educating parents has a direct impact on outcomes in the K-12 arena. Mitra's work (2011) demonstrated the role of education in decreasing reliance on welfare assistance programs and the public health care system. At Seeds, 88% of students live below the federal poverty level, and receive some form of public assistance. Achieving a high school equivalency credential increases the likelihood that students will obtain employment that reduces their dependence on the social safety net Furthermore, it increases their ability to participate in postsecondary education and training, which in turn increases their career opportunities and earning potential. Research from the Educational Testing Service (1996) demonstrated that there is an inverse relationship between education and recidivism. This research undergirds the role of adult education as a support for K-12 education, as a strategy for reducing recidivism rates, and as a way to help adults achieve self-sufficiency and decrease dependence on the public health care and welfare systems. Seeds uses this information to help funders, donors, and partners see those investments in literacy impact education, criminal justice, and local economies.

Professional Practice and Program Initiatives

Federal and state agencies develop practitioner standards and shape program practices based on best practice research. Research on supporting learners with special needs and on understanding learning styles impacts professional development

requirements and assessment policies at the state level, and impacts program practices. For example, research on best practices for instruction informed the development of the Adult Education Teacher Competencies (American Institutes for Research, 2015) developed for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. These competencies inform state teaching standards by providing indicators and examples of what constitutes best practices. As a recipient of state funding, Seeds is held to these professional standards, which provide direction for our professional development efforts.

Seeds uses research to inform program initiatives. As an example, Seeds broadened its reading program based on findings of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) to address all five components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). Several factors encouraged us to make this change. First, many students were testing and retesting and not improving their high school equivalency exam scores by much. Seeds was looking for interventions to help those students. Second, tutors asked for help because they didn't feel effective in their work with struggling readers; they worried that students might become discouraged. Third, Seeds began to see an increase in the number of students in orientation who read below a third-grade level. Many of them had already sought help elsewhere, and Seeds was committed to finding solutions. It was clear that Seeds needed to do something different.

The findings from the National Reading Panel made clear that we needed to address all five components of reading to improve learner outcomes. This shift to focusing attention on foundational reading skills impacted everything from assessment to intervention. Seeds began

providing training on diagnostic measures to pinpoint student reading struggles, and to offer training on instructional strategies to address those reading skill deficits. Soon students who overheard newly trained tutors working with other students asked for the same type of help. These tutors were assessing student fluency and phonics and using a more systematic approach to help students develop their reading skills. Now during orientation students are assessed for particular skill deficits, and receive targeted intervention based on the assessment results. Anecdotally, Seeds has witnessed increases in students' confidence, enthusiasm, and skill levels. One student joined the program as a beginning reader with the goal of being able to read his Bible independently read the entire introduction to the Book of Genesis to a staff member within a year's time. Another beginning reader has not only used what she learned to begin writing, she has also used those skills to help other students. This demonstrates that using research to modify program practices can impact learning and instruction, and the experiences of adult learners.

Instructional Strategies and Learner Outcomes

Reading research also led Seeds to other effective instructional strategies. For example, Seeds staff members use research to better understand the needs of diverse learners. Applying Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (1983) and adult education research based on Gardner's theories, Seeds staff members are able to guide tutors to incorporate multimodal instruction to cater to a variety of student learning styles. This might involve encouraging tutors to incorporate the use of manipulatives in mathematics learning to help students develop a conceptual understanding of math concepts or encouraging tutors to draw

graphs or diagrams to help visual learners grasp a science or social studies concept.

In addition to using research to help tutors learn about learners and the ways that they learn, Seeds uses research to help learners learn about themselves as learners. Comings et al. (2000) found that it takes roughly 150 instructional hours to see a level gain in the adult literacy population. Seeds uses this research in its retention efforts with students to encourage them to reach 150 hours of instruction as quickly as possible— seeing progress early can encourage them on to greater progress. When discussing reassessment scores with students, Seeds staff members can use this research and student attendance data to encourage students who may be discouraged in their progress to put more consistent time and effort into their literacy work.

Barriers to Using Research in Adult Literacy

Given these examples of how Seeds uses research, one might be inclined to believe that there are no barriers to using research in adult literacy. However, barriers do exist. The main obstacles to using research in adult literacy education are lack of access to research, lack of understanding on how to implement the findings of research studies, and time constraints.

Professional organizations, professional development professionals, and program administrators have regular access to professional publications, communities of practice, listservs, and professional development activities which expose them to the most current research. Administrators can typically engage in these activities as a part of their paid work responsibilities. However, that access is not always available to instructors, most of whom are part-time employees. In their report evaluating the

Massachusetts adult education system, Johnson and Supel (2020) found that 71% of adult literacy instructors are part-time. This is lower than the national average as reported by the National Reporting System (2022) for fiscal year 2016-2017, where 82% of teaching personnel were employed part-time, and is consistent with Stewart's (2012) findings. Many part-time instructors also receive little or no paid "prep time," but are paid only for the hours that they are actively teaching (Stewart, 2012), which limits access to professional research and limits instructors' willingness to dedicate time to incorporating research-based practices:

> ...instructors are only paid for the hours that they are in class teaching. They are not paid for designing lessons, preparing materials, or grading papers outside of instructional time. Instructors discussed that while they would like to design creative lessons to introduce content, they didn't want to spend a lot of time working hours for which they won't be paid. To spend four hours outside of class designing lessons for a four-hour class, they explained, cuts instructor pay rates in half (Stewart, 2012, p. 149).

This lack of compensation for additional work also includes accessing research and presents a significant barrier to using research to inform instructional practices. At Seeds, 57% of the instructional staff are employed full-time; part-time staff are compensated for the time they invest in professional development.

Even when access is not a barrier, many instructors find it difficult to implement research or lessons learned from professional development activities in their instructional practices (Stewart, 2012). Simply providing information and training does not alter professional practice. Single-session workshops or individual conference sessions are the primary method of professional development for many adult literacy educators, but research has found these methods to be ineffective in impacting instructional practice (Smith & Gillespie, 2007). Instructors need supports and opportunities to figure out how to incorporate new learning into their instructional practice. Full-time instructors may find that the immediate needs of running a classroom preclude them from working to incorporate research.

At Seeds, in-house professional development is designed to provide strategies for incorporating research and often includes hands-on practice. This leads to tutors using strategies in their interactions with learners and sharing their experiences with other tutors as well.

Opportunities to Increase Research Use

There are a few important changes that can increase the use of research in the field. First, programs can adopt a learning organization culture that is committed to transferring new knowledge to full- and part-time staff. Program administrators who access research or research-based professional development can be more proactive about disseminating that research among staff. Administrators can share research findings in staff newsletters or during staff meetings and retreats where staff members are being compensated for their time. Administrative staff could sift through research to identify the most salient points and provide staff with practical examples of how research findings can be applied by staff members of varying roles within their particular program context. Adult literacy administrators who make professional development opportunities available to practitioners can seek out professional development providers with recent instructional experience who are able to distill research to actionable steps, and who can share their experiences with implementing those practices. As well, having more research related to instructional interventions with the adult literacy population that includes actionable strategies could increase research use. These small changes can make a big difference for adult literacy learners.

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