Attrition Happens: Towards an Acknowledgement and Accommodation Perspective of Adult Literacy Student Dropout

ABSTRACT
The rate of student departure from adult literacy programs is as high as 80% within the first 12 months (Porter, Cuban, & Comings, 2005). An examination of the literature reveals two perspectives concerning learner persistence: a control perspective and an acknowledgement and accommodation perspective. The control perspective emphasizes the role of programmatic barriers and learners' dispositional attitudes as influences on learner persistence and seeks to remediate the 'problem' of low learner persistence. The acknowledgement and accommodation perspective views low learner persistence as the result of a complex web of factors that includes the lived experiences of individuals in cultural and community contexts, negative systemic social forces such as gender inequality and poverty, and values/goals disjunctures between students and programs.

INTRODUCTION
The rate of student departure from adult literacy programs is as high as 80% within the first 12 months (Porter, Cuban, & Comings, 2005). In seeking to understand this phenomenon,
researchers have focused variously on attrition, or the rate at which students leave programs, retention, or the rate at which students stay in programs/programs are able to keep students enrolled, and, more recently, persistence, or the ways students continue in one or more adult literacy programs or complete their goals. This paper presents a review of the literature on persistence and examines a shift in researchers' approaches to understanding and preventing low student persistence.

**The Importance of Persistence**

In an analysis of Massachusetts adult literacy students' hours of participation and test score achievement gains, Comings, Sum, Uvin, and Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth (2000) showed that about 2/3 of students who attended 100 hours of instruction achieved a one grade level improvement, suggesting that more hours of instruction equaled greater achievement. Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) suggested that most adult literacy learners come to programs with goals that may take hundreds or even thousands of hours to achieve. Nationally, most adult literacy students will participate for only about 70 hours in a year (Porter, et al., 2005). Therefore, increasing student persistence would seem to be of the utmost importance in helping students meet their learning goals.

However, two studies disputed the connection between persistence and academic achievement. Fitzgerald and Young's (1997) statistical analysis of the persistence and learning gains of a national sample of 614 adult literacy students concluded that persistence of the students in their sample had no impact on their level of achievement. Although the authors conceded that a problem of statistical power may have had an impact on their finding, they contended that analysis of sufficiently larger samples (from the same study, with acknowledged measurement errors) had never produced a statistically significant or even substantial effect of persistence. Surprisingly, the final report of a five-year learner persistence study led by Comings, an ardent advocate of the importance of persistence, drew the same conclusion as Fitzgerald and Young (Porter et al., 2005). After following two cohorts of students enrolled in one of nine library-based literacy programs for the years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002, the authors found no correlation between greater persistence and greater measured achievement. However, this finding may be explained by the generally low number of hours of participation in the program: students attended for an average of 58 hours, but more than half of the students exited after 28 hours or less. These averages are both substantially below the 100 hours demonstrated (Comings et al., 2000) to lead to measurable learning goals. Another possible explanation for the lack of connection between these students' persistence and achievement is the insensitivity of the programs' testing instruments and their inability to measure more incremental gains in literacy.

Of additional import is the reality that state and federal governments hold adult literacy programs accountable for the persistence of their students. Beliefs about student persistence shape program design and classroom interaction, inform policy discussions about accountability, and influence funding decisions governing adult education programs. The combination of policy imperatives, poor persistence rates, and the potential impact on learning gains continue to make learner persistence an important focus of adult literacy research.

Prins and Schaft (2009) argued that most scholarship on adult learner persistence focuses on factors described as institutional (related to the program) or dispositional (related to learners' attitudes and beliefs), as these dimensions of
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student persistence are considered more amenable to program influence than the life circumstances of learners. I refer to this approach to the improvement of learner persistence as the control perspective. Interventions to address low student persistence reported in the literature from this perspective included programmatic changes (e.g., Kefallinou, 2009; Patterson & Mellard, 2007; Porter et al., 2005) and constructing psychological profiles of learner attitudes in order to predict dropout (Beder, 1991; Beder et al., 2006; Quigley, 1997; Ziegler, Bain, Bell, McCallum, & Brian, 2006) and determine appropriate support services (Beder, 1991; Quigley, 1997; Quigley, 2000). Most of these interventions met with limited success.

However, in the 1990s and 2000s another discussion emerged in the literature that shifted the focus away from institutional and dispositional factors and began to emphasize two important aspects of attrition: 1) learners' beliefs about and experiences of persistence (Belzer, 1998; Prins & Schafft, 2009; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Wikelund, Reder & Hart-Landsberg, 1992) and 2) social forces affecting student persistence (e.g., Cuban, 2003; Horsman, 2006; Schafft & Prins, 2009). These later studies discussed the impact of culture, identity, gender roles, violence, and poverty on student attendance and suggested that neither programmatic improvements nor changes in individual dispositions may be sufficient to alter students' patterns of persistence. I refer to this trend in the literature as the acknowledgement and accommodation perspective.

**METHODOLOGY**

Potential sources for this literature review were identified by entering the search terms “adult literacy” and “persistence” in the EBSCO search engine, with Academic Premier and ERIC selected as databases. Sources from the results were considered eligible for inclusion if they focused on adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), or literacy level adult students' attendance in an adult education program and were published in 1990 or later. Two sources published before 1990, Cross (1981) and Darkenwald (1981), were included, as they were considered foundational to the scholarship on adult learner persistence. Qualitative and quantitative studies were both considered eligible for inclusion. Sources were excluded from the literature review if they focused on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students; were redundant reports of multi-part studies; were conducted in non-comparable international contexts, such as developing nations; or were purely descriptive in nature. Additional sources were gathered by examining the reference list of articles selected for inclusion.

**Methodological Considerations**

Many of the studies included in this review suffered from similar weaknesses: an insufficient theoretical base; an incomplete description of data, methods, or analysis; or a lack of peer review. “Gold standard” research—that is, the randomized trial, published in a peer-reviewed journal—is almost non-existent in the field of adult literacy. A literature review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials examining adult literacy and/or numeracy interventions published between 1980 and 2002 found only nine such trials (Torgerson, Porthouse & Brooks, 2003). One reason for this deficiency is the acknowledged difficulty of collecting quantitative data in this educational context (Bathmaker, 2007; Fitzgerald & Young, 1997; Porter et al., 2005; Young, Fitzgerald, and Morgan, 1994). Given the enormous attrition rates, it is often difficult to follow students longitudinally or to post-test students, a common outcome measure
for interventions. For example, in Fitzgerald and Young’s (1997) statistical analysis of persistence and achievement in 44 programs in 20 states, the original sample consisted of more than 22,000 potential participants. Lack of available post-tests reduced this number to 2,300; validity concerns due to lack of data and measurement error then whittled this number down to 614.

Additionally, many of the qualitative articles published in the primary journals of the field are practitioner-oriented descriptions that lack the rigor and specificity expected by an academic audience. Therefore, much of the substantial research produced in the field and included in this review was published by research centers such as the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), the Manpower Demonstration Resource Center (MDRC), and the New England Literacy & Resource Council (NELRC). While these organizations play an extremely important role in creating interventions, extending theory, and disseminating much of the contemporary learning in the field, they also have their limitations. Specifically, reports they issue are not subject to the same scrutiny as studies published in a peer-reviewed journal. However, as the field continues to develop, more rigorous qualitative and quantitative peer-reviewed studies are emerging. Later studies included in this review frequently incorporated significantly more theory, more information about data and analysis, and generally conformed to academic standards more consistently.

Lastly, although many studies of persistence included students of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in the sample population, this review focused on studies where ABE, GED, and adult literacy students were studied separately from ESOL students, as these populations have distinct histories, needs, and persistence patterns (Young et al., 1994). One exception, Skilton-Sylvester’s (2002) case study of persistence for Cambodian women in ESOL classes, is included because its analysis of the influence of contexts and identities on persistence is particularly relevant to the discussion of the acknowledgement and accommodation perspective.

**DISCUSSION**

**Definitions of Persistence**

How researchers conceptualize student participation in adult literacy programs has changed over time. Early research into adult learners’ attendance focused on separating students into participants and non-participants (Cross, 1981). Participants were assumed to be “motivated” and non-participants were assumed to be “unmotivated” (Beder, 1991). Over time, researchers began to differentiate among those students who participated in programs by examining the length of time students remained in a given program. Those who stayed in a program until they completed their goals “persisted;” those who left a program before meeting their goals were classified as dropouts (Comings et al., 1999; Darkenwald, 1981). However, Belzer (1998) suggested that many students who stopped coming to school eventually returned to the program (or enrolled in a different one) or continued self-directed study at home. Importantly, she contended that the students did not think of themselves as dropouts. She proposed that “stopping out” might better describe these students’ pattern of participation. Incorporating this concept, Comings et al. (1999) offered another definition of persistence, later used by many researchers: “Adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow” (p. 3).
However, even Comings admitted that this definition may make it difficult to measure persistence. How does one reliably calculate hours of self-directed study? How does one establish parameters for leaving and returning? As a result, many programs and studies have focused on the length of time a student remains in a given program and whether or not students achieve their goals before they leave (Prins & Schafft, 2009; Schafft & Prins, 2009). Comings et al. (2003) and Porter et al. (2005) later revised their definition of persistence to accommodate five “pathways” to persistence: the short-term pathway, in which students participate intensively for a short period of time and complete a specific learning goal; the tryout pathway, where students participate for a short period of time, but do not meet learning goals; the intermittent pathway, in which students move in and out of a program over months or years; the long-term pathway, wherein the student attends regularly for an extended amount of time; and the mandatory pathway, in which students are required to participate by an outside force, such as welfare or probation.

Gopalakrishnan (2008), however, took issue with Belzer’s (1998) and Comings et al.’s (1999) definitions of persistence, demonstrating that in Connecticut, for the fiscal year 2003–2004, 65% of GED students who left a program did not return to that or any other program in the state within three years. He suggested reforming the definition of persistence to include a longitudinal component that accounts for continued attendance, or the lack thereof. Although the study did not include ABE students who traditionally need much more time to achieve their goals, and who may or may not “stop out” and reengage more than GED students, Gopalakrishnan’s point is extremely important: there is little documentation of the long-term patterns of participation among adult literacy students, and more work should be done in this area. Both Comings et al. (1999) and Gopalakrishnan (2008) suggested that programs be held accountable for the patterns of their students’ persistence; their belief that programs can control the attrition of their students, if only they try hard enough, is an indication of their investment in the control perspective.

The Control Perspective

The control perspective attempts to remedy low learner persistence by addressing specific factors that programs and practitioners can have a direct influence on, namely those factors which Cross (1981) termed institutional and dispositional barriers. Institutional barriers include any aspect of program structure that might inhibit a student from coming to class, such as timing of classes, size of classes, type and intensity of orientation procedures or support services offered, or type and quality of teachers or classes. Dispositional barriers are internal, often psychological factors that can limit persistence, including beliefs and attitudes about one’s own capacity for learning. Several previous literature reviews on adult literacy student persistence have addressed mostly these types of interventions (Beder, 1991; Darkenwald, 1981; Tracy-Mumford, 1994).

Institutional barriers. Darkenwald’s (1981) review of existing adult persistence literature perfectly exemplifies the mentality of the control perspective. Darkenwald began the review by lamenting the lack of practical advice on how “adult educators can design and implement superior programs so that retention can be relegated to a minor concern” (p. 1). He concluded his review with an equally optimistic premise: “It is tempting to conclude with the injunction: Assess needs accurately and deliver a good program, and retention will take care of itself.” It is almost, but not quite, as simple—and as complicated—as that.”
Attrition Happens (p. 17). Within the quote is the implicit suggestion of an elusive program design that would meet learners’ educational needs and eliminate the issue of learner attrition. Darkenwald reviewed literature concerning psychological, external situational, program context, and teaching-learning factors that affect attrition, and concluded that learner dissatisfaction with teachers, courses, and programs—all controllable elements—may be the best predictors of why students leave programs.

Tracy-Mumford’s (1994) review acknowledged that, at times, leaving a program is an informed decision by students and therefore a desirable outcome. She further acknowledged the importance of situational barriers to learner persistence but concluded that “a significant proportion [of dropouts] can be prevented even when the precipitating conditions extend beyond the learning environment to personal problems” (p. 1, emphasis original). Overall, her review emphasized the importance of programs providing effective support, quality instruction, and suitable program structure and policies in order to minimize student attrition.

However, moderating institutional factors seems to have had little impact on improving persistence. In one of the largest-scale interventions reported in the literature, Porter et al.’s (2005) MDRC/NCSALL report of a four-year attempt to improve student persistence in literacy programs housed in nine public libraries across the country documented the failure of programmatic changes to improve student persistence. Changes in the study focused on improving instruction and expanding program accessibility. Even with interventions targeted directly towards perceived student needs, the study found that program exit rates ranged from 44 to 84 percent at 6 months after entry. The authors concluded that “personal and environmental factors” such as housing instability, lack of childcare or transportation, and lack of self-efficacy (p. 27), were most responsible for student departure from programs. Because programmatic changes did not affect these factors, student persistence rates were not improved. Despite the large rates of student departure, the authors remained optimistic that, “although such ‘programmatic’ strategies do not help students overcome their personal difficulties, they do help students persist despite their difficulties” (p. 31). A limitation of this report is that the causes of variation in departure rates from program to program were not explained, but the authors suggested it may have been due to environmental factors such as population served or variations in programming.

Other studies also examined the impact of program structure. Patterson and Mellard (2007) analyzed data from 31 Kansas adult literacy programs using correlational techniques, principal component analysis, and regression modeling in an attempt to statistically predict program characteristics that improved adult literacy learner outcomes. They found that characteristics predicting improved outcomes differed from year to year and were, therefore, difficult to utilize. They proposed that program characteristics might be better imagined as a system, rather than as individual factors. Gopalakrishnan (2008) proposed that the structure of GED programs, with its focus on a single long-term goal and inability to provide feedback about incremental progress, was responsible for low persistence rates in adult education programs in Connecticut. In his comparison of persistence and completion rates for Connecticut Adult High School Credit Diploma programs (AHSCD), GED programs, and National External Diploma Programs (NEDP—an individualized portfolio assessment program geared towards older adults), he found...
that the graduation rates for both AHSCD (27%) and NEDP (42%) programs were substantially higher than GED programs (17%). Furthermore, for students who did not graduate, much higher percentages of students returned to study in AHSCD (63%) and NEDP (67%) programs than in GED programs (35%). Gopalakrishnan (2008) recommended emphasizing program structures other than GED in order to maximize student retention and success. However, while intensive programs like AHSCD and NEDP may better serve some portions of the population, many working adults and adults with small children do not have time to participate in such intensive programs. Furthermore, those at very low reading levels may not qualify for such programs. Although the study controlled for age, gender, and ethnicity among participants in the GED programs and the other programs under study, many other factors influence student success rates and ability or desire to participate in a program. These differences and their potential impact on persistence cast doubt on his recommendations.

**Dispositional barriers.** Other control perspective studies have focused on locating the source of low learner persistence within the dispositional attitudes of the learner. Identifying dispositional barriers is thought to help programs create and time programmatic interventions in order to minimize the impact of potential barriers. Motivation, engagement, field dependence, negative school attitudes, goal-orientation, and beliefs about self-efficacy have all been described in the literature as possible dispositional barriers to learner persistence.

Several reviews (Beder, 1991; Comings, 1999; Darkenwald, 1981) have described the literature on adult learner motivation; a limitation of all of these models is that they drew from a sample of adult learners outside of an adult literacy context, and thus their findings may not be generalizable. However, Beder (1991) compared analysis of adult literacy learners with the general adult research on motivation and concluded that the two populations do not differ substantially in the kinds of motivation they demonstrate. As with the researchers who advocated addressing institutional barriers, Beder (1991) acknowledged the impact of situational barriers on learner persistence, but professed that, with the correct disposition, they could be overcome: “When motivation is strong, adults can be expected to overcome the barriers to participation that life imposes” (p. 39). Comings et al.’s (1999) NCSALL report identified having goals as a specific source of learner motivation that yields persistence. In their interviews of 150 adult learners from 19 Pre-GED classes situated in 15 programs across five states, 57.3% of respondents mentioned having a goal as an important support to persistence. The authors therefore recommended that the first support to persistence be the student’s establishment of a goal. Meader (2000) conducted a quasi-experimental practitioner investigation and described that students who persisted in her math class cited the addition of goal setting and goal revisiting as influential in their decision to remain in the class.

In a related study designed to evaluate external incentives rather than intrinsic motivation, Brooks et al. (2008) used a cluster-randomized controlled trial to evaluate attendance in 29 adult literacy classes in England. Learners were randomized by class into a control group and an “incentive-to-attend” group (p.497). The learners in the incentive class could receive up to £70 and the control group could receive £20. (All learners received monetary incentive to attend classes where pre- and post-tests were administered.) The study found that learner attendance in the incentive-to-attend group actually decreased. The authors concluded
that the money deprived learning of its intrinsic value, and students were thus less motivated to participate. Although this was the only randomized controlled trial included in this literature review, the study still had a limited description of data analysis, specifically whether individual learner characteristics other than race, sex, and age (such as entering educational level, difficulty level of class, socio-economic status, or number of dependents) were controlled for during analysis.

Quigley’s (1997) influential ideas about dispositional factors included two notable topics: past school experiences and early identification and support of students “at-risk” of dropping out. Quigley proposed that teachers and students arrive at adult literacy programs with vastly different experiences of school and suggested learners’ prior negative experiences with school diminished student retention. However, Comings et al.’s (1999) structured interviews with 150 adult literacy persisters and non-persisters about forces of support and obstacles to persistence concluded that past positive and negative experiences with school were equally distributed across both groups.

Quigley’s (1997) “at-risk” theory has also been highly influential. Quigley suggested that identification and support of at-risk students in the first three weeks of class could boost student persistence. He described a three-tiered model of identification used by one program: first, an intensive orientation for students; second, an evaluation of individual students by experienced counselors; and third, referrals and second evaluations for those identified as potentially at-risk. He recommended offering intensive support services and extra attention to those students classified as at-risk, although the nature of these services and attention were not described in detail. In a quasi-experiment conducted at his own site, at-risk students were also administered the Witkins’ Embedded Field Test and were found to be highly field-dependent (needing peer approval), with the male mean in the students (103.3) substantially higher than the norm male mean established by the Witkins test (45.5, SD = 28.5). A similar disparity was found among the female students (student female mean = 142.3, Witkins’ norm = 66.9, SD=33.6) (Quigley 2000).

In an additional component of the experiment, 20 students who were identified as being at-risk were randomly assigned to four different learning environments: individual tutoring, small group learning, regular class size (~15 students) with a counselor, and regular class size without a counselor. Small group learning was described as more successful than other environments for at-risk, highly field-dependent learners.

Attempts to reproduce parts of Quigley’s model have been described as successful, though documentation is primarily anecdotal. Nash and Kallenbach’s (2008) report from the New England Literacy Resource Center (NELRC) suggested that program improvements could make a substantial difference in learner persistence. This action research study implemented by 18 programs across 5 states focused on improving intake and orientation procedures, instruction, counseling and peer support, and reengagement of learners who had left the program. All efforts were described as successful with the exception of the attempt to re-engage learners and foster self-guided study outside of the program, echoing Gopalakrishnan’s (2008) previously stated concerns with a definition of persistence that assumes learner re-engagement or self-directed study. Kefallinou’s (2009) report on her agency’s participation in the NELRC project describes impressive successes perceived by the staff, specifically in learner gains, retention, and staff and student attitudes.

Ziegler et al. (2006) developed the Adult Education Persistence Scale to assess dispositional...
factors surrounding school beliefs, self-efficacy, and resilience, as well as the tendency to attribute failure to external forces. Their purpose was to determine if the presence of any of these factors might predict student persistence. They administered the validated instrument to 245 women involved in welfare-sponsored, voluntary family literacy programs across Tennessee. Predictor variables were analyzed using a stepwise multiple regression analysis, and the only significant predictors of persistence found were age and the overall instrument score. Their results support Patterson and Mallard’s (2007) suggestion about the need to imagine factors that determine success as systems, not independent characteristics, and expose the limits of the control perspectives’ emphasis on individual dispositional barriers.

Although many researchers who subscribe to the control perspective admit the significance of situational barriers (e.g. Beder, 1991; Comings et al., 1999; Comings et al., 2003; Cross, 1981; Porter et al., 2005; Quigley, 1997), the belief that nothing can be done about contextual variables in learners’ lives has directed energy and effort towards factors that can be controlled (Prins & Schafft, 2009). However, despite many years of research, numerous attempts to address persistence using a control perspective approach have demonstrated an inconsistent ability to reduce attrition rates or predict persistence patterns. One possible conclusion is that some situational barriers are substantially more influential than institutional or dispositional barriers, enough so that removal of even the most significant of institutional and dispositional barriers is not sufficient to permit interested learners to attend classes. Another possible conclusion is that what programs and policymakers perceive to be insufficient attendance is based on a value system not in accord with the lives, values, and contexts of learners. Researchers within the acknowledgement and accommodation perspective articulate similar conclusions.

The Acknowledgment and Accommodation Perspective

The acknowledgement and accommodation perspective shifts the discussion away from a focus on programs’ perspectives and abilities to “solve” the “problem” of low adult learner persistence and moves the conversation toward a deeper understanding of learners and barriers as situated in social contexts. The acknowledgement and accommodation perspective focuses not just on learners’ perceptions of obstacles but also on larger social patterns that influence “pathways to persistence” (Porter et al. 2005). It also seeks to understand learners’ ideas about persistence itself, questioning when persistence is appropriate or desired and what cultural and personal contexts influence those ideas.

Wikelund et al.’s (1992) review of the persistence literature is the first indication of the emergence of this perspective. The authors focused on the need to expand the theoretical and practical ideas of participation and, of relevance to this review, noted that modern ideas of literacy often confound literacy with schooling and remove literacy from the cultural contexts in which it exists: the lives of learners. They also discussed distinctions between the values and goals of programs and the values and goals of learners.

Belzer’s (1998) NCSALL report was the first in the literature to ask how students perceived leaving their program of study instead of what caused them to leave. She followed ten students from the time of their entry into a program for up to four months or until they dropped out. The ten students were interviewed 47 times, and five were still participating at the end of four months. None of the five learners who had
left the program reported feeling like failures, nor did they consider themselves dropouts, in contrast to how most programs and policies would characterize them. All reported a plan to return to education in the future. Belzer recommended that programs address the reality that “some students will always be coming and going” (Belzer, 1998, p. 5). Significant to the distinction of the acknowledgement and accommodation from the control perspective, most students attributed their leaving to circumstances beyond their control, such as jobs, health problems, and financial strain. From a control perspective, Ziegler et al. (2006) Adult Education Persistence Scale would score this attribution in negative terms, using it as evidence of a lack of self-efficacy or motivation that might predict attrition, but within the acknowledgement and accommodation perspective, it is simply a statement of reality.

In her ethnographic case study of four Cambodian women learners in ESOL programs, Skilton-Sylvester (2002) chose not to look at the women in her case study as definitively “motivated” or “non-motivated,” instead describing their interest in participation as shifting over time as their own identities and roles within their social context changed:

In this study, the central question is not, Why are some adult ESL learners motivated to participate while others are not? Instead, the question is, How do the multiple identities of students, the social contexts of their lives in the United States, and the classroom context shape their investment in participating in adult education programs? (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002, p. 10)

Becoming engaged, leaving a job, starting a new job, having children, or being childless were all shifting contexts in learners’ lives that affected their interest in participation and ability to attend. In turn, these contexts were informed by the historical culture of the community and the individual learner’s relation to that culture. Skilton-Sylvester proposed that curriculum that focuses on generalized adult roles such as parent or worker does not incorporate sufficient space for individual differences and may prevent learners from making a long-term investment in a class.

Cuban’s (2003) case study of the persistence of two women learners in a Hawaiian literacy program drew similar conclusions but emphasized the role of gender in the relationship between learner and persistence. She noted that the literacy program in which the learners were enrolled had specific expectations of what students would need to know as the economy of Hawai’i changed from a sugar economy to a service economy. However, using a narrative analysis technique to examine the women’s persistence over the course of their lifetimes, she discovered that these two learners were seeking a community for emotional support and opportunities for self-care, goals that impacted their investment in the learning opportunities provided by the program. Contrary to Beder’s assertion that, “literacy learning is clearly the most important payoff of adult literacy education,” (Beder et al., 2006, p. 119), Cuban (2003) demonstrated that, particularly for the female participants in her study, social and emotional payoffs were of equal or greater importance. Cuban (2003) critiqued literacy programs whose theoretical construct did not take into account women’s caregiving responsibilities or hidden obstacles connected to gender, suggesting that existing research of persistence and programming used an idealized male pattern of student social behavioral expectations. Like Skilton-Sylvester (2002), Cuban (2003) argued that adult learner persistence patterns were connected to students’ individual identities as well as their gendered role.
in their communities.

Horsman (2006) examined how gendered violence can negatively impact adult learner persistence. In her synthesis of three qualitative studies she conducted exploring women’s literacy practices, Horsman contended that violence or the threat of violence is a normal, but commonly overlooked, part of life for girls and women in Canada and offered the statistic that “51% of Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of sixteen” (pg. 181, emphasis original). She suggested that violence affects many students’ potential for successful learning, both by limiting their ability to attend classes and by restricting their capacity to stay “present” in the classroom. She proposed that policymakers and program administrators acknowledge the impact of social forces like violence and re-conceive of adult literacy programs as holistic centers of individual and community healing whose responsibility is to care for the body, emotion, and spirit of learners, in addition to their academic development.

Schafft and Prins (2009) and Prins and Schafft (2009) similarly called for recognition that systemic, structural social factors, including poverty and gender inequality, influence the persistence of adult students. The authors chafed at the dismissive treatment of situational barriers in previous literature and admonished researchers for not acknowledging the systemic nature of many deterrents to participation, saying, “When situational factors such as inflexible work schedules or health problems are discussed, they are often treated as randomly occurring personal problems rather than social problems that disproportionately affect poor families” (Schafft & Prins, 2009, p. 4). Contrary to Quigley’s (1997) assertion that in their lives, “most undergraduate and graduate students in college face similar problems” to those faced by adult literacy learners (p. 172), Schafft and Prins (2009) documented how residential instability, a condition particular to low-income learners, may adversely influence persistence. For example, in the five-year period preceding their interview, the 17 learner participants had made a total of 78 individual moves and had lived in an average of six different residences, experiences that likely undermined their ability to persist in classes. Echoing Horsman (2006), a number of women in the study moved to escape domestic violence. Additionally, the authors suggested that women have higher levels of poverty, lower wages, and more responsibility for childrearing than men do, all of which contribute to gender inequality in residential instability. In a separate report from the same study, Prins and Schafft (2009) examined practitioner discourse about learner persistence and reported that practitioners ascribed student departure from programs to a lack of individual learner motivation or values even when other serious obstacles were present. They compellingly argued that programs’ perspectives of student persistence may be shaped by a cultural narrative of individualism and directly influenced by state-sponsored professional development promoting individual responsibility for poverty and lack of education.

The acknowledgement and accommodation perspective presents a shift from a deficit- and control-based approach to student persistence to one which acknowledges that attrition will happen, because 1) existing social structures of poverty, inequality, and violence may make it more likely that some students will be unable to persist in a systematic fashion and 2) persistence as desired by accountability measures may not be meaningful or relevant to the goals and values of some students. Approaching student attrition exclusively from a perspective that seeks to control
and remediate low persistence has demonstrated limited success and tends to position someone, either the programs or the individuals themselves, as blameworthy—and thus potentially subject to punitive measures. Adopting an acknowledgement and accommodation perspective offers programs, researchers, and policymakers an opportunity to expand their understanding of, and reactions to, low student persistence.

**Practical Applications of an Acknowledgement and Accommodation Perspective Programs**

Programs should engage in ongoing self-assessment, program improvement efforts, and dialogue with students about their needs and desires but should do so with expectations that reflect and honor student social contexts. Instructors and administrators would do well to critically examine their beliefs about student persistence and cultivate an institutionalized sensitivity to the myriad social and cultural factors that can influence student persistence. However, even programs with a nuanced understanding of students' lives may feel, at times, caught in a tug of war between accommodating students' interests and needs and fulfilling policy and funding mandates, which are frequently at odds. Programs need to place a greater emphasis on advocacy and action towards changing policies that restrict their ability to meet students' needs; they know first-hand how some policies perpetuate barriers to student learning, and policymakers would benefit from hearing their voices. Forging partnerships with groups and organizations outside of adult literacy education that would also benefit from policy revisions could add weight to the call for change, as well as expanding the range of services to which programs are able to easily refer their students.

**Researchers and Policy Makers**

Lessons from the acknowledgement and accommodation perspective need to be heeded at the research and policy levels as well. Acknowledging the limitations of the control perspective is a good starting point. Researchers following an acknowledgement and accommodation perspective could investigate the relationship between violence, gender inequality, poverty, and persistence in adult literacy; such investigations would enhance our current understanding of the influence of social barriers on adult learners (Prins & Schafft, 2009). Additionally, ethnographic research exploring literacy as situated in social and cultural contexts (i.e., “new literacy” studies) would expand programs' and policymakers' understandings of the needs and experiences of adult literacy students and help debunk the prevalent deficit model of learners' interests and motivations. For their part, policymakers need to acknowledge that education does not exist in a policy vacuum but is connected to policies governing social welfare, economic development, and civil rights (Anyon, 2005). Policymakers should eschew the 'input-output' model of education that encourages research and program policies based in a control perspective and penalizes programs that experience attrition. Instead, policymakers should allow adult literacy educators the funding and flexibility to develop quality programs that serve the range of interests and needs presented by adult learners.

**CONCLUSION**

More rigorous research on the experiences of adult learners, whether from a control perspective or an acknowledgement and accommodation perspective, would help shed light on the ways individual, programmatic, and social forces intersect to shape the persistence of adult learners, both those who persist in a systematic, traditional
fashion and those who do not. The ongoing conversation about persistence in the adult literacy context offers the field an opportunity to explore the theoretical and ethical considerations of the kinds of literacy programs that are presently available. For now, an honest appraisal of adult literacy programs reveals that the issue of attrition is not going away.

REFERENCES


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