Retaining the Returning Adult in a Reading Program

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Education, as a life-long process, continuing regardless of a person's background or interests, is an idea that is gaining acceptance. The rapid changes in our increasingly complex society have made the need for adult reading programs acute. Many adults require increased reading skills for reasons that range from retraining for better employment to enrich-ment in personal lives (Jones, 1979; Knowles, 1978).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss open-entrance/open-exit programs to prevent attrition in adult reading programs that are designed for the student who has not completed high school. Often these students need to become better readers and to become test wise in order to take high school proficiency tests or some other test necessary for entrance into military service, trade schools, and/or various government-supported training programs. Suggestions for encouraging success within such a program are offered.

The Adult Student in a Reading Program

Adult students returning to school usually have had economic problems that have interfered with normal high school progress. Many, especially over fifty years of age, had to leave school in order to help support a family. Some middle-aged women students left in order to marry. These early marriages precluded further schooling because of social and financial considerations. Both types of students then return in order to be better employable or to be educated. Recently, young women in their late teens and early twenties have been returning after their babies are two or three years old. Divorced women of all ages return to school desperate to find an employable skill. Young men and young women return in order to obtain

their GED to qualify for military service. Adults from all age groups from various rehabilitation programs enter the adult reading classrooms as a first step to returning or beginning a productive lifestyle. The adult student also might be foreign-born and seeking literacy in their second language, or s/he may be interested in obtaining American equivalents to his/her native education. All have in common the need for further education.

Although these students have different backgrounds, experiences, and expectations, they react to adult reading instruction similarly. Each has taken a personal risk to return. S/he has decided it is worth the risk to expose any deficiencies s/he might have. Adult students with added emotional burdens of being unemployed, underemployed, or recently divorced, are apprehensive when classes begin. Often, they do not have a clear idea of what they want from further education. People sometimes enter an adult education program after being told by a social service agency or other agency to "go get your GED." Some students have unrealistic notions about what can be done in a short time. The student who has only completed seventh grade, and who has never finished reading an entire book is going to have difficulty passing a standardized test in three weeks by any other means than by guessing. This realization can lead to bitterness toward the recruiter who has told the student "take several weeks to study for your GED" as well as toward the school that is at a loss to prepare the student quickly.

Adult students often have pressing family obligations that take precedence over the demands of school. Babysitters, sick spouses, and transportation problems are common for an adult. With all these forces at work, the adult often is initially anxious in the classroom. These problems are intensified by the fact that the classroom is a foreign and uncomfortable place for one who has not been in a school setting for some years, and perhaps has never felt successful in that setting.

Lack of success, personal hardships, and pressing family obligations combine to give adult reading classes a notoriously high rate of attrition. Attrition occurs when one of the problems discussed above becomes greater than the willingness to go to school. Also, if students do not feel a sense of accomplishment soon after their re-entrance, they are confirmed in their initial apprehension about returning to school. Dropping out is a way to save face when the work is difficult.

Open-entrance/Open-exit Programs

An enrollment policy that allows for open-entrance and open-exit into a reading program is a boon to the adult student (Cline, 1972; Duboise, 1972). With this policy a student is allowed to enter the reading classroom any time during the semester and to finish when the prearranged work is completed. For example, students wishing to obtain the GED will enter a class and study until the objective is reached. This policy provides for the most service for the greatest number of students at the time when the students need the services. Further, this policy requires that the teacher individualize instruction.

It is obvious that such a policy could lead to chaos in the classroom without careful organization on the part of the teacher. If a student enters a classroom where chaos exists, s/he will not remain. Also, an open-entrance/open-exit program with individual instruction often does not meet the expectations of the returning student. To this student, school is a highly formalized situation where all students are quiet and attend to one task, generally assigned by the teacher. In order to lessen the initial shock that individualized instruction incurs, students are immediately made aware of what is happening and why it is occurring. Diagnostic material that is given soon after entrance should be presented to the students in as non-threatening a manner as possible. Students also need time to know the teachers, other students, and the aids they will be working with. They need to know what is expected of them. If they are not made to feel comfortable in a relatively short period of time, they will drop out.

Another significant cause for the high attrition rate in adult reading education is that after the students are settled into the routine of individualized work, they often are left with a sense that the work is not progressing toward a goal. This is due partially to the fact that many teachers, who believe in a high individualized classroom, are reticent about giving students specific times and deadlines for completing materials. It is common for a teacher to tell a student to take as long as is needed. This leads the student to believe that not much is being accomplished.

One way of combating this sense of stagnation is to have many materials organized in small units so that students are able to complete assignments in a period of not more than two weeks. There are several advantages to this small unit, open-entrance/open-exit system:

1. Students participate in a learning activity

have found it successful with adult reading students. Further, the content of instruction should be as concrete and as practical as possible. Adults, especially older adults, consider abstract material "fanciful" and/or a "waste of time" (Hulicka, 1967; Shmavonian and Busse, 1963). This does not mean that adults want learning materials that deal only with buying groceries and selling houses. They want materials that are conceptual in nature and have practical application.

Adults also desire feedback on their interaction with the material and also are prepared to give the teacher feedback on what is right or wrong with the material they are working with. Sometimes they are willing to sustain an effort to see if the activity will progress toward a goal. If it appears that their engagement in the activity is not progressing, they will leave or tell the teacher after it is too late to correct the problem.

The teacher's relationship with the adult student is one in which it is acknowledged that the teacher has something to offer. Adult students are aware of their deficiencies. The successful teacher of adults helps them become aware of their strengths. It is not uncommon to have women relate that they know nothing after taking care of children for twenty years; or for men to indicate that they know nothing, even though they have held hearth and home together and kept the proverbial wolf from the family's door.

Respect for the adult student is essential. Any hint of patronizing on the part of the teacher will cause the relationship between the adult student and the teacher to disintegrate rapidly. Most adults do not mind if the teacher is young, old, male, female, fat, or thin. They do mind if the teacher shows them a lack of respect.

Providing for Success

In addition to the Haase and Robinson (1978) suggestions for providing success for older readers, the following are offered. Teachers in an open-entrance/ open-exit reading program should be prepared to:

1. Recognize the life stresses which affect the returning adult reader.

2. Develop activities that are in harmony with the open-entrance/open-enrollment policies.

3. Individualize instruction to the needs of the adult student.

4. Keep instruction simple and direct.

5. Consider using short units of instruction

in order to insure a feeling of accomplishment.

6. Present conceptual materials that have practical application.

7. Integrate individualized instruction with group instruction.

8. Help adult reading students feel they are contributing members of the reading class.

9. Provide an atmosphere of success and support.

10. Respect and enjoy the adult reading student, even though the frustrations may be many and the rewards few.

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