

## IN GED WE TRUST? A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE RHETORIC AND REALITY OF THE GENERAL EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT DIPLOMA

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### Abstract

*This article explores the ways in which the General Education Development diploma (or GED) is presented by the formal and informal curriculum, teachers, and learners in two basic educational programs serving welfare recipients. I examine the rhetoric surrounding the GED, focusing on the GED's ability to achieve positive impacts in learners' lives. Findings from the two programs show that the taken-for-granted assumptions about the GED as presented in these two classrooms promote the message that getting a GED is the way to a better life. The two outcomes stressed most frequently were that getting the GED opens up "new possibilities" and that getting the GED can solve economic problems. The almost magical power of the GED to transform lives was highlighted in these classrooms, and there was very little day-to-day questioning of this rhetoric. After a presentation of the rhetoric of the GED, I discuss how this rhetoric matches what we know about the impact of the GED from various outcome studies. I conclude that the rhetoric of the GED and the findings from outcome studies present a mismatch that should be problematized by adult education researchers and teachers.*

### Résumé

*Dans cet article, nous abordons la façon dont le diplôme d'équivalences d'études secondaires (ou GED) est présenté par le programme d'études formel et informel, les professeurs et les apprenants de deux centres d'éducation des adultes desservant des bénéficiaires de l'aide sociale. Nous analysons le discours entourant le GED, qui insiste son impact positif dans la vie des apprenants. Les résultats de la recherche montrent que les prétentions sur le GED de ces deux centres répandent l'idée que le diplôme d'équivalences d'études secondaires mène à une vie meilleure. Les deux avantages les plus fréquemment mentionnés sont*

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*qu'avoir son GED ouvre des portes et élimine les problèmes d'ordre financier. Les deux centres insistaient sur le pouvoir quasi magique du GED de transformer une vie, et cette idée n'a presque jamais été remise en question par les apprenants. Après une présentation du discours entourant le GED, nous analyserons comment ce discours correspond aux résultats de diverses études sur l'impact du GED dans la vie des apprenants. En conclusion, le discours entourant le GED et les résultats de la recherche sur son impact divergent et il serait souhaitable que des chercheurs et des professeurs en andragogie s'y attendent.*

If you ask learners participating in adult literacy programs throughout North America what their goals are for being in the program, many will most likely include "getting the GED." Indeed, a majority of adult learners in basic education programs, especially in the United States, focus their energy on preparing for the GED (Smith, 2003). The GED, or tests of General Educational Development, is considered by many policy makers, program administrators, teachers, and learners in the field of adult literacy to be a "given"—that is, it is a taken-for-granted assumption among many in adult literacy that the GED is something learners should strive to attain, and that obtaining the GED will contribute positively to a learner's life (Smith, 2003; Hayes, 1993).

Although the GED is not yet as widespread in Canada as it is in the United States, and does not yet "drive the ABE sector" in Canada as it does in the United States (Shohet, 2001, p. 198), its influence is growing, as evidenced by the increasing numbers of Canadian provinces and territories offering the GED tests (currently the tests are offered in all provinces and territories). The growing number of Canadians taking the GED tests is also evidence of an increased interest in the GED tests across Canada. For instance, in 1998, 15,328 Canadians took the GED tests (American Council on Education, 1999), a number that grew in each subsequent year, to an all time high of 18,599 in 2001, the most recent figures available from GED testing services (American Council on Education, 2002). The GED is already marketing itself in Canada as a way to help adults "pursue higher education, obtain jobs or job promotions, and achieve personal goals" (General Educational Development Testing Service, n.d., p. 2). This rhetoric fits nicely with the discursive shifts in Canada calling for more individual responsibility on the part of workers to re-tool, continuously upgrade skills, and remain flexible in the job market (Sandlin & St. Clair, 2003). The GED will most likely continue to grow in importance in Canada, given the continuing erosion of Canada's historically strong social safety net (Shohet, 2001), increasing concerns over accountability in education and testing, and

more vocal rhetoric promoting the “myth of educational amelioration,” which links economic security (both national and individual) with workforce and basic educational skills and focuses on individual factors such as effort and hard work (Sandlin, 2003-2004; Sandlin, 2004; Sandlin & St. Clair, 2003). Thus, while this study is situated in the United States, the changing nature of Canadian society and its adult literacy programming make the findings here quite relevant to the Canadian context.

One major issue in adult literacy research in the United States, and a smaller but growing issue in Canada (Boothby, 2002) concerns what impact the GED has on a learner’s future success, however “success” is defined—whether in terms of further education, employment (new or better), increased wages, or a more positive self-image. Just how much getting a GED contributes to a person’s life, and in what ways, is, however, still a matter of some controversy (Georges, 2001). Research has examined the impact of the GED on such aspects of life as getting further education, obtaining a job, and getting off welfare (Georges, 2001; Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Cao, Stromsdorfer, & Weeks, 1996). Some GED-outcome research has shown that, indeed, the GED *does* benefit some recipients, both economically and in terms of self-concept (Murnane, Willett, & Boudett, 1995; Cao et al., 1996; Georges, 2001; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986). Research has also shown, however, that the economic gains tend to be small and are not nearly sufficient to pull poor people out of poverty (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Maloney, 1991; Murnane et al, 1995; Cao et al, 1996).

While GED outcome studies are certainly important and relevant, what has been missing from most analyses of the GED is an exploration of how the GED is promoted and talked about in adult literacy programs. Several authors focusing on GED impacts and outcomes do make passing reference to the way the GED is presented in the popular press (Murnane et al., 1995; Smith, 2003), but typically this issue is not explored in GED-related literature. As a critical educator I am interested in general in how curricular ideology is transmitted and contested through educational practices, and in this study I was particularly concerned with the ideology surrounding the GED. McLaren (1998) describes ideology as “a way of viewing the world, a complex of ideas, various types of social practices, rituals and representations that we tend to accept as natural and as common sense. It is the result of the intersection of meaning and power in the social world” (p. 180). Viewing the GED through this lens, I was interested in what kinds of assumptions literacy programs hold about the GED and how they view the connection between attaining the GED and having a “better life.” Applying

this concept of ideology to the GED means asking questions about common sense or taken-for-granted beliefs about the GED diploma. It also means examining the "discourse" (Gee, 1996) of the GED to understand how it is portrayed or presented in these classrooms. In this study I specifically sought to examine how the GED is represented by three different stakeholders: 1) the program itself (as expressed in formal documents and curriculum materials), 2) the teachers, and 3) the learners in basic education programs for adults. Following this conception of ideology, I was guided in this research by such questions as, "What assumptions does the curriculum make about the GED and its ability to change learners' lives?" "What assumptions do teachers and learners make about these same issues?" and "What are the common sense or taken-for-granted beliefs about the GED expressed in the curriculum, by the teachers, and by learners?"

### Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

This study is informed by the critical sociology of education, especially the literature that examines the roles educational programs play in the reproduction of inequality and the potential of education to help engender social change. This body of theory has shown us how education is always a political enterprise, and reveals that classrooms are always sites of ideological struggle (Apple, 1995; Gore, 1993). Critical sociologists of education have revealed that "schools are political sites involved in the construction and control of discourse, meaning, and subjectivities" (Giroux, 1983, p. 46). This critical research has also taught us that education always operates in someone's interests. Giroux (1983) states that "the commonsense values and beliefs that guide and structure classroom practice are not *a priori* universals, but social constructions based on specific normative and political assumptions" (p. 46).

Surprisingly little research has been conducted on the ideological impact of curriculum in adult basic education programs serving unemployed adults. An integral part of this problem is that researchers in basic skills contexts have traditionally not sought to connect what happens in the classroom with wider society (Dirkx & Spurgin, 1992; Quigley & Holsinger, 1993). In addition, with the exception of a few studies (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985; Coles, 1977; Lankshear, 1993; Quigley, 1997; Quigley & Holsinger, 1993), researchers have not taken a critical sociological look at the mechanisms through which power operates at the micro level of the ABE classroom.

While a few studies have examined the "hidden curriculum" (Apple, 1990; Giroux & Penna, 1979) of adult literacy education (Auerbach &

Burgess, 1985; Coles, 1977; Lankshear, 1987, 1993; Mezirow, Darkenwald & Knox, 1975; Nesbit, 1998; Peterson, 1988; Pruyne, 1999; Quigley & Holsinger, 1993; Sandlin, 2000), I could find no research examining with this critical lens the rhetoric surrounding the GED. Given the overwhelming unquestioning support for the GED among adult literacy policy, programs, adult learners, and society in general (Smith, 2003), it is important to examine more carefully just how the GED is presented to learners, and how learners themselves view the GED. Learners' expectations about what the GED can "do for them" are in large part shaped by the dominant discourses concerning the GED presented by the programs they attend, the teachers in their classrooms, and the media and larger society. If the GED is presented as a panacea to all of life's problems, and if getting a GED fails to deliver on these promises, the message is that there is something fundamentally wrong with the learner that even getting a GED could not fix. In this research project, therefore, I sought to understand the ideological messages about the GED that educational programs for unemployed people are transmitting to learners, and in this paper I examine how teachers and the formal curricula used in these programs construct the GED, as well as how the learners themselves view the GED.

In this article I first explore the ways in which the GED is discussed in GED promotional materials and other official documents by teachers in two basic educational programs serving welfare recipients, and by the learners in those programs. That is, I will examine the rhetoric surrounding the GED's ability to achieve positive impacts in learners' lives. While I use two specific case studies (see methods, below) to create this ideological picture, my own broader experience with adult literacy programs throughout North America has shown me that the ways the GED is promoted in these two programs are not unusual.

After a presentation of the rhetoric of the GED, I will discuss how the rhetoric of the GED matches what we know about the impact of the GED from various outcome studies. The literature review of outcome studies is not meant to be exhaustive (for a more detailed review, please see Smith, 2003). Instead, I am using this literature as a way to critically examine the ideology of the GED. I will end with some recommendations for adult literacy practice.

### **Methods**

In order to describe how the GED is portrayed, I use data gathered for a larger qualitative case study (see Sandlin & Cervero, 2003 and Sandlin, 2004 for an

overview) that I conducted over an eight-month period in two basic skills educational programs serving welfare recipients. At these sites I conducted interviews with teachers and learners, collected classroom and administrative materials and documents, and conducted classroom observations over an extended period of time. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. For this particular GED study, I focused on searching for themes in the data addressing ideological assumptions about the GED and beliefs about the efficacy and outcomes of the GED. After initial coding was complete, I grouped initial codes into larger categories and then reflected on how these categories fit together. Next I examined GED outcome data and compared it with the findings concerning beliefs about the GED. It was during this latter phase of analysis that I started seeing contradictions between how the GED is portrayed by programs and the findings of GED outcomes research.

The adult literacy class was a state-funded adult literacy program administered by and housed at a large regional technical school in a Southeastern state of the United States. It was located in a mostly urban (82.4 percent in 1990) county with a population of over 90,000 in 1999 (Boatright & Bachtel, 2000). This program served both TANF and non-TANF clients, and instruction centered on academic skills, ranging from very basic skills through the GED. The program had two full-time teachers, one of whom was specifically assigned to TANF recipients, two part-time teachers and one full-time secretary who also served in the capacity of teacher. All the staff in the program were female. Every teacher was White, and the secretary was African American. The TANF portion of the program resulted from a collaboration between the state Department of Human Resources' Division of Family and Children Services (DFACS) and the state Office of Adult Literacy. During the time of this research (December 1999 to May 2000), the program was still relatively new and the TANF teacher was still learning her job, which included regular contact with learners' case workers and the county DFACS office. During these months, the average number of learners on any given day varied from five to 15, and there were approximately 30 on the official rolls at any given time. Most TANF learners were required to attend the program 30 hours a week in order to receive their TANF checks, and were required to provide legitimate excuses when they were absent. If they missed many days repeatedly, they could be dropped from the rolls, and could be sanctioned by TANF, which meant that any or all of their assistance could be cut off. Every TANF learner observed in the classroom was African American, with the exception of one White learner. Most TANF learners were young—under the age of 20—although they ranged in age up to approximately 45.

The job training program was a state-funded employment preparation program administered by the same technical school as the adult literacy program. It was, however, located off-campus in a nearby, highly rural (56.2 percent in 1990) county with a population of 10,500 in 1999 (Boatright & Bachtel, 2000). This program was a collaborative effort between the state's Technical and Adult Education Department, the Department of Human Resources' Department of Family and Children Services, the Department of Labor and a group of private business owners from several surrounding counties whose goal was, according to a program brochure, 'to prepare eligible participants to learn work ethics through modeling that allows them to enter and maintain employment'. The program—consisting of a series of job preparation and life-skills workshops and a 'work simulation' segment where women were taught sewing skills—was ten weeks long. The class had four full-time teachers, all of whom were female. One White teacher specialized in job retention counseling and thus hardly ever taught in the classroom. Another White teacher taught mostly job skills, an African American teacher taught life skills and another African American teacher taught the sewing portion of the program. At the beginning of the program, there were approximately 15 participants, all of whom were African American, but after a few weeks most of the learners were hired by the local chicken plant and the class dwindled to four. In this program, women attended 35 hours a week and were paid minimum wage bi-weekly for the number of hours they spent in the sewing portion of the class. If they missed too many classes they could be dropped from the program. They could still receive their TANF checks, however, if they enrolled in another educational program or some other job search activity.

### **The View from Two Classrooms: The GED as Savior?**

In the two programs I examined, attainment of the GED was emphasized by the curriculum, teachers, and also by the learners as a mechanism to bring about favorable personal, work-related, and economic outcomes. Typically, the GED's credentialing aspect was highlighted much more so than the importance of the academic skills learned in preparation for the GED.

The GED was one of the main unifying points of the literacy classroom. This was seen in the fact that most of the TANF learners in the class were actively working on getting their GED, and spent most of their hours in the program doing GED-related work. In this classroom, the GED's importance was reflected not only in the everyday formal curriculum (GED preparation workbooks) used by learners, but also in the physical space of the classroom. The GED was highlighted in numerous posters, pamphlets, and bulletin

boards in the classroom. For instance, one prominent bulletin board in this classroom contained a sign that stated, "Success starts with you," along with a pennant that read "GED" beside a picture of a mock diploma. The board contained information about GED test schedules, costs of testing, locations of testing centers, and dates for the tests.

Unlike in the literacy program, day-to-day activities in the job-training course centered much less around preparing for the GED. Instead, learners in this course were taught life skills, job readiness skills, and sewing. Even though the GED was only a small part of the day-to-day activities of the job training program, it was still emphasized in the formal curriculum of that program. Oftentimes the GED was used as an example of a worthy goal that learners should have, or as a goal that was being pursued by fictional characters in the curriculum materials. In doing so, the job training program certainly advocated for the GED and promoted the idea that the GED would lead to a better job and a more satisfying life.

To give a sense of the way the GED was presented in these classrooms, I will now provide a more detailed analysis of how official documents and formal curriculum (including GED promotional materials), physical classroom space (including posters on the walls), teachers (in both interviews and in the classroom), and learners in these classrooms constructed the GED.

### **The GED Opens up "New Possibilities"**

The overarching sense of the GED as portrayed in these classes was that the GED was key to achieving both a better personal life as well as obtaining a job or moving up into a better job. In most of the official documents, the GED takes on almost mythic qualities, and is promoted as a panacea to many of a person's problems, including lack of money, lack of a job, a low standard of living, and low self-esteem. In addition to these more concrete results (which I will discuss more fully below), the GED is also linked to more abstract ideas; it is presented as a way to get a "a better life," to "explore new worlds," to "meet new people," to "expand the boundaries" of life, and to "discover who you are and what you can do." One brochure stated that the GED program offers "all these opportunities and more." These more abstract outcomes contributed to the sense that the GED was a sort of magical ticket to a new world.

For instance, one poster on the wall in the literacy classroom showed a picture of a GED diploma, with the following text: "This piece of paper can open doors, tear down walls, and put \$500 in your pocket. Getting your GED



high school equivalency diploma can open doors to a better job and a better life." A second poster in this classroom stated:

"IF" is a very big word. If we could, we would. We can't. You're not qualified. If you'd only finished high school we could give you a better starting salary. If you had a little more education, we could make you a manager. If you had a GED diploma, it COULD make a world of difference in your life: a promotion, a better job, more money, and a higher standard of living to name a few. Even a \$500 grant to continue your education... If is a very big word. GED is bigger. GED: A world of opportunities.

Another brochure on a bulletin board in the literacy classroom stated,

Open the door to your future. Get your GED diploma. Getting your GED diploma means opening doors to new possibilities: the opportunity to go to college, the chance for financial security, a better life for you and those around you, explore new worlds, meet new people and expand the boundaries of your life, discover who you are and what you can do. Did you know, all these opportunities, and more, become possible when you earn your high school diploma through the GED program? The benefits: get a better job, continue your education, feel better about yourself, increase your income, invest in the future.

This brochure expressed a similar sentiment to the State's Office of Adult Literacy's new GED campaign that stated the GED "looks like a diploma but works like a passport."

The teachers in both programs also placed a great deal of emphasis on the power of the GED in helping to bring about the expectations discussed above. In many instances the GED was discussed as a "panacea," just as in the official discourse presented above. For instance, Miss Murray, the sewing teacher in the job training class stated of one learner,

Wilma, you know, she'll probably end up, um, working in a factory, but she could go on and get her, you know, if she'd get her GED, she could really go on to be anything she wants to be, I, I believe. I know she's probably in her 30s, but that doesn't stop you. You know, and she can become whatever she set out, once she gets that GED. So, you know, once she gets her GED, it's no limit to her.

Finally, Sandra, a job training teacher, stated that she tries to convince the learners in her program to get their GED because she believes "that their quality of life would increase, the more you can do and the more you know, obviously, the more your mind opens up, and they will be more open to other avenues."

Many learners in both programs talked about the "better life" they were anticipating having after completing the programs and getting their GEDs. A "better life" was sometimes defined as having a better job, a nice house, and being able to provide better for one's children. When talking about this "better life" they hoped for, learners often seemed to place a great deal of faith in the programs to make huge and sweeping changes in their lives; often, the GED represented the main mechanism for creating these changes. For instance, Amy, an adult literacy learner, stated,

I hope it [getting the GED] changes my life a whoooooole lot. Cause, um, I want to get me a REAL good job. And right now I'm living in a housing authority apartment? And I want to get me a house, and a good paying job for my baby, and put him in daycare.

Many learners were much more vague about what they meant by a "better life." Many learners stated that they hoped to "go far" as a result of attending the programs and getting their GEDs, although oftentimes they were vague and unspecific about what they meant by "going far." Often it seemed that learners held on to the hope that their lives would change in a meaningful positive way after they got their GED, but they could not or would not state the specifics of these changes. For instance, Wendy, a job training learner, stated in her graduation speech, "I would like to just say with the help of all my teachers, I think I can go, you know, far. And I want to thank each and everyone of them." Pamela, an adult literacy learner, stated, "Basically, well, like my mama told me, only how I'm gonna get to where I'm going is if I get this, my GED. Bam, I'm in there. I'm home free then." She went on to say that by getting her GED, she hoped to "be somebody," and that in the future she hoped to "be on the top." And Amy, another adult literacy learner, describing her expectations, stated, "I think I'll get pretty far. I'm striving to go really far. It's a real big help." When asked how the class or getting the GED would help, she stated, "I don't know how to describe it, but it's a help, it's a help." Learners, then, seemed to have a sense that the GED would help them, or they at least had the hope that the GED would help them achieve a "better life," but were often unable or unwilling to articulate exactly how this would happen or what this meant to them.

### **The GED Solves Economic Problems**

Another popular way the GED was portrayed in these classrooms was as a way to solve economic problems such as getting a better job, increasing one's

income, and getting off welfare. For instance, one GED brochure included the following in its list of benefits of obtaining a GED:

*Get a better job.* The overwhelming majority of jobs in this country require a high school diploma. A GED diploma is accepted by employers—just like a high school diploma.

*Increase your income.* Incomes increase with your level of education. A better job usually means better pay.

Among teachers, the GED was mostly frequently linked to economic or job-related outcomes. Barbara, an adult literacy teacher, when asked how her class would help learners in the future, stated, “Well, I think it will help them get a job, if they get their GED for sure. They need the GED to get into the workforce.” And Julia, a job-training teacher, stated, “I really push the GED. Because I want them to be able to get a job. I want them to be able to learn to read and write. Uh, I think it’s important. Um, I just think that you need it.”

Once again, the credential power of the GED was most commonly stressed by teachers. Julia, a job-training teacher, makes this point, as captured in my fieldnotes:

Julia is teaching class today and is talking about how to get your foot in the door. She talks about how it’s important to have that piece of paper (the GED), because it makes you legitimate. She says that the more diplomas and certificates you have, the more you’ll stand out to an employer. And that you might be able to do the job, but you won’t get it because there’s going to be somebody next to you that has their piece of paper. She says, “A little piece of paper can be a big barrier.”

Elizabeth, an adult literacy teacher, too, stressed the idea of the GED being a necessary credential for employment. She gave an example of several companies that require the GED for employees. She said, “Like, at Reliable, you can work there as a temporary, but to get on then full time, you have to get the GED. And McKay requires even existing employees to get the GED or they lose their job, you know. So I mean, there, in many cases, there are very direct links.” Barbara, an adult literacy teacher, explained that a few of her TANF learners had gotten jobs without taking the GED first. She said that they “should go ahead and take the GED” because “they’ll certainly get better jobs....I mean, without a GED you’re not gonna...it’s usually you’ll be a waitress or um, just something that’s...they’re not going to want to do all their lives.” And Julia, a job-training teacher, stated that she really “pushes the GED” to her learners. She explained, “Because I want them to be able to get a

job. I want them to be able to learn to read and write. Uh, I think it's important. Um, I just think that you need it."

By far the most often discussed expected outcome held by learners was getting a job when they had finished the programs and gotten their GED. This was discussed by learners in both programs, although the learners in the GED program seemed more convinced that this would actually happen for them. Pamela, an adult literacy learner, stated, "I've been going here for a while, trying to get my GED. And after that I hope to find me a job." In general, learners in both programs stressed the expectation of employment. Amy, an adult literacy learner, had similar ideas about the GED:

I mean, GED, it will get you far. I mean, just without having my high school diploma, or not GED, you can't get nowhere. Because everywhere requires a GED or high school diploma. So, hopefully it will get me a good job.

### **The GED Provides a "Second Chance" to Fix Past Mistakes**

Another outcome of getting a GED that was stressed in these programs, but not as frequently as the "new opportunities" or economic outcomes, is that a GED gives the recipient "a second chance" to do something different with their lives. This idea was particularly stressed in the GED promotional materials available in the classes. On one bulletin board in the literacy program, for instance, was a GED pamphlet that read:

People like you! Every year, hundreds of thousands of people get their GED (general educational development) diploma. People like you. Maybe you had to leave high school to help take care of your family. Maybe you just didn't like school, or didn't think a high school diploma would mean anything—and now you know what it means to have it. It's not too late. The GED program provides an opportunity to earn your high school diploma outside of school. It could be one of the best things you ever do for yourself.

This pamphlet also contained quotations from successful people who had received GED diplomas, and were able to remedy the fact that they had not gotten an education earlier in life:

"When I was a teenager I dropped out of high school to join the Navy, but I began to see that I couldn't go anywhere without a diploma. So, I...earned my high school equivalency diploma. It was my second chance." (Quote from Jim Florio, Governor of New Jersey)

"I left high school at 16 to get married. When my husband died, I had three young sons to support, so I got my high school diploma by passing

the GED tests. Now, I have a rewarding career...if you didn't finish high school, get a GED diploma. You owe it to yourself." (Quote from Ruth Ann Minner, State Senator, Delaware)

### **The GED Provides Access to Further Education**

Another way the GED was presented to learners was as a way to gain access to further education. While this was discussed by both teachers, learners, and in promotional materials, this outcome, again, was stressed far less than the "new opportunities" and economic outcomes. In one classroom discussion, for instance, Julia, a job-training teacher, stressed the importance of further education, captured here in this fieldnotes excerpt:

Julia is talking with learners about how "you never stop learning and training." She states that "You start with your GED and then you can go on and get a job or more education." She shares her own situation as an example and explains that she wanted to go on to get her Master's degree, and not stop after college. She says to the class, "Start out with your GED. Then we might decide to do a C.N.A. You might like customer service, so you can go to a tech school and get a certificate in that. But always remember that your goals must be combined with action."

Other examples of the GED being promoted as a way to access further education come from the GED promotional materials. For instance, one brochure listed the following two likely outcomes of getting the GED:

*Invest in the future.* Educated parents have better educated children. Earning a GED diploma isn't only an investment in yourself, it is also an investment in the future of your children.

*Continue your education.* A GED diploma is accepted at most colleges and universities across the country as proof that you have completed your high school education. Some colleges even have special scholarship programs for GED graduates.

After employment, the second most commonly mentioned outcome expected by learners was the ability to pursue further education. This was especially true of learners in the adult literacy program, who frequently discussed how they were planning to enter the local technical school and take up a trade after completing the GED. For instance, Ashley, an adult literacy learner, stated that after the program ended, she hoped to go to the technical school and "get some degree in something I choose to do later."

### The GED Increases Self-esteem

A final way the GED was presented was as a way to help learners increase their self-esteem. While this is one outcome that is typically discussed in the literature as being almost universally supported by learners and teachers (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986) teachers discussed this issue far less than the "new opportunities" or economic outcomes, and learners did not discuss this outcome at all. Nevertheless, it was mentioned several times by teachers. Elizabeth, for example, stated,

For someone who's passed the GED, I DO think that opens doors up, I've said that. I think it makes them feel a sense of accomplishment, you know, all the talk about self esteem. I think that's true, and I think they show their children something, and they set an example for their children that education is important. And that even the, the parent can do it.

In another interview Elizabeth stressed this point again:

I think the GED is very important. I, I've just seen how, even if it didn't lead to a job, I have seen over and over how happy and confident it has made someone who has worked hard for it. And normally these are the people who, you know, are a little further along. Uh, in years, experience, um.

The GED promotional materials also stressed this outcome, although, again, much less frequently than the "new opportunities" or economic outcomes. For instance, in one brochure, the following outcome was presented:

*Feel better about yourself.* By earning their diploma, many GED graduates experience a remarkable improvement in how they feel about themselves and their lives. It makes a difference!

### But the GED is not a Panacea!

While the GED promotional materials and classroom curricula presented the "GED-as-panacea" viewpoint seamlessly, in interviews teachers and learners sometimes questioned the efficacy of the GED. While teachers much of the time seemed to be in agreement with the formal curricula, they did raise issues in interviews that showed they were at times struggling with accepting this rhetoric. Learner interviews revealed even more struggles. While all of the teachers and learners believed that the GED would bring about positive changes in personal and economic lives, some also expressed concerns.

When raising doubts about the outcomes of the GED, teachers most often discussed how learners have many personal problems that cannot be

automatically erased by receiving a GED. Teachers sometimes stated that even with a GED, a person might not be able to overcome these other problems and go on to be a success in the job world. Elizabeth, for instance, suggested that, given the personal problems that TANF learners must deal with on a daily basis, the GED's impact might be limited. Elizabeth, although an enthusiastic supporter of the GED and a believer in its positive impact also expressed doubts about its efficacy. She emphasized that if a learner is dealing with many personal problems, the GED might be a step in the right direction, but would not be a panacea. She shared the story of one TANF learner who was an alcoholic who had also suffered from domestic violence, but who "was sweet and she tried and she came and would do." She eventually got her GED, and Elizabeth describes her at the graduation ceremony:

It was heartbreaking. She was so nervous that day. She came to graduation in the cap and gown. And she was as white as a sheet, scared to death, and really, probably about three sheets to the wind. You know, but she made it through and I don't know what her potential for employment or success, but she was proud of that GED.

Having many learners who fit into these categories causes some teachers to question the way that education in general and the GED in particular have been promoted as the answers to everything. Elizabeth states:

It really can't help someone change their life unless there are other agencies who can help with the other problems. The people who are out there making all these policies, you know, just are not building anything in to take care of that. They just don't understand! They don't understand that you can't fix one tiny little part. And the GED would be the same thing. It's one part, it is *not* gonna be the answer.

She also stated that the GED is "probably promoted, maybe, to a greater extent, you know, that it should be. Cause yes, I mean, those signs that we've had up out there, make it seem like it IS the answer. And it does take you to another step, but it doesn't blot out everything else on your plate."

Kim, another adult literacy teacher, too, expressed doubts about how much getting a GED can help a person with problems, which caused her to question the education delivered at the literacy program. She stated,

You really wonder [about the efficacy of the GED]. You really say to yourself, is it? Or, can it? Is it worth these girls' time, spending that much time here, in this environment, all day, in the situation that they're in? Is it, will they EVER be able to do what they want to accomplish?

Yeah, you have questions like that. Because you see these circumstance, and see these situations.

In general, learners were more skeptical than both the formal curriculum and teachers about how receiving a GED would help them in the future. This skepticism showed up in several different ways. Oftentimes expectations were expressed in terms of what they "hoped for" rather than what they expected, and often learners qualified expectations with terms such as "I guess" and "probably." Learners appeared to view the GED as a necessary but not sufficient credential that *could*, but would not *necessarily*, lead to a better life. In interviews, learners brought up structural issues of plant closing, layoffs, and the general high levels of unemployment in their areas, especially the rural area where the job training program was located. There was a great deal of awareness of the local job situation that, even if they obtained GEDs, would severely limit their ability to get jobs.

Another factor that adult learners brought up in interviews that seemed to temper their expectations of the GED was the issue of race. One factor structuring the ability of the learners in these programs to get jobs, even if they had a GED, is racial discrimination in hiring. Research has shown that race—along with stereotypical beliefs about single mothers and women on welfare—affects the ways employers make decisions, regardless of whether or not one has a GED. In fact, employment decisions are

Heavily influenced by stereotypic beliefs that can signal the degree to which a worker is perceived as having the attitude and interpersonal skills necessary for a job. Being African American, coming from the inner city, and being poor puts a prospective employee at a distinct disadvantage in the hiring process. (Henley, 1999, p. 61)

Both of these classrooms were structured by race, and often the issue of race was the "elephant in the middle of the room"—always present but rarely acknowledged. During my months of observation, I saw racial tension between White teachers and African American learners, and at times saw racist actions and heard racist remarks coming from teachers, but discovered there was little discussion of race in the classroom. I found that while the formal curriculum is to a large extent silent on these issues, teachers and learners do think about them but rarely talk to each other about them. I also found that issues of race often tempered the expectations learners had of the GED, and is thus an essential ingredient in examining GED outcomes among learners.

While most learners chose to be silent on issues of race, or expressed the opinion that racial discrimination in hiring does not really exist, some



learners were quite aware of and critical of issues of race that emerged in both the classroom and in the larger world of employment. When learners tried to raise issues of race in class, however, they were silenced by teachers who either did not know how or did not want to talk about it. In the job-training program, for instance, two of the instructors were White and from middle-class backgrounds, while the other two were African-American and from working-class families. The White instructors were silent on the issue of race as a factor in employment, and did not acknowledge their White privilege, while the African American instructors actively denied that racism is a factor in the job market, illustrating this belief with stories of how they worked their way up from the bottom. An excerpt from my field notes illustrates this point:

Penny and Lavette [African-American job-training learners] are having a conversation about racism and color. Penny expresses the idea that "White folks have it in for her." Denise [African-American job-training teacher], who is sitting at the same table, says, "I get respect and ain't I the same color as you?" She's basically saying that color does not play a role in how someone is treated. Denise says, "I'm Black, I'm respected, and so what?" Then she laughs. She continues, "That's what I'm saying. We're the same color, aren't we? We got to get to the bottom of this thing. Y'all need to stop this, now. Or you'll never get anywhere. You'll never get anywhere. You say people got it in for you, and that's not true." The learners don't say anything else, and they keep working on their Easter baskets.

Referring to an instance where she tried to talk about race in class one day, Pat, a job-training learner said, "She [a White teacher] said we shouldn't worry about that. That's what she told us. *We* shouldn't worry about that. She said to hush our mouths." Another time a different learner tried to ask a question about race and the welfare system, a similar response occurred. Pat explained,

Every other class I've been to, it only has just African Americans. The learners. And the teachers be White. And I want to say something, you know what I mean, cause I wonder why? Are we the only ones on welfare? That's what I want to know. And somebody asked that question, and they said it ain't our business. No one talks about it. But everybody want to know the same thing. I do!

It is important to note that even when teachers critiqued the programs and questioned the efficacy of the GED, they were quick to assert that in the end they really did believe in the power of the GED to help learners achieve

their expectations. For instance, after expressing her frustration with the way the GED is portrayed, Elizabeth made sure that she reiterated to me that she really does see the GED as important. In cases where learners are perceived to have too many personal problems to reap job-related benefits from education or from the GED, teachers focus instead on the self-esteem outcomes of education and of the GED, and downplay the job outcomes. Elizabeth stated, "I think the GED is very important. I've just seen how, even if it didn't lead to a job, I have seen over and over how happy and confident it has made someone who has worked hard for it." She went on to say, "If it, you know, gives someone the confidence to call, or to seek out things that maybe they didn't have before, by taking one step to maybe be able to face some of the others."

Another important point is that while teachers expressed concerns about the GED, they focused their concerns on the personal problems learners had that would mitigate the positive effects of the GED, and failed to mention structural problems that shape educational and economic opportunities. Explanations that focus on structure "stress that the inequality found in social institutions such as the labor market, families, and government affect our economic positions" (Seccombe, 1999, p. 40). The message promoted by these teachers is that the GED has the power to change an individual's life, unless that life is rife with too many personal problems. The rhetoric here promotes the idea that if one does not realize all of the changes promoted, it is because she suffers from problems, and not because of the way society is structured.

A final point to make here is that while teachers expressed concerns about the GED, they *only did this in our interviews*. They did not share these concerns with learners in classroom discussions, but kept these concerns to themselves.

It is clear from these examples that openly and critically talking about the GED and issues such as race that structure job opportunities in the classroom was discouraged. Teachers left critical comments out of the classroom, even though they raised them in interviews, and when learners raised critical issues in classroom discussions their concerns were downplayed. Teachers often tried to shut the discussion down altogether and to tell learners not to talk about such issues. Here we see that while there ARE different ideologies about the GED circulating through these classrooms, only the "official" discourses are deemed legitimate and worthy of classroom time. Thus, resistance and critical awareness are squelched in favor of the official discourse of the programs.

### Examining the Rhetoric and Reality of the GED

While teachers recognized in interviews that the GED was not a panacea for all of life's problems, the ways they discussed it in class and the way it was promoted by the programs failed to acknowledge these caveats. And although learners also had critiques, their questioning was silenced in the classroom. The taken-for-granted assumptions about the GED as presented in these two classrooms promote the message that getting a GED is the way to a better life. The two outcomes stressed most frequently were that getting the GED opens up "new possibilities" and that getting the GED can solve economic problems. The almost magical power of the GED to transform lives was highlighted in these classrooms, and there was very little day-to-day questioning of this rhetoric. While teachers at times expressed some doubt about the GED, they only did this in interviews and chose not to share these doubts or concerns with learners in day-to-day classroom practices.

How does the rhetoric of the GED compare with the findings of GED outcomes studies? In general, it is difficult to measure the ability of the GED to create the more abstract outcomes such as opening up "*new opportunities*" or offering a "*second-chance*" to fix past mistakes. Typically, (other than a few studies, including Hayes, 1993 and Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986, discussed below) outcome studies of the GED have focused on other outcomes, such as economics, further schooling, and self-esteem.

*Economic outcomes* of the GED have been studied the most frequently, and researchers have found mixed results. While some researchers such as Cameron and Heckman (1993) and Cao, et al. (1996) deny any economic advantage to receiving a GED, other researchers do find a statistically significant difference between the salaries of GED recipients versus high school dropouts. Tyler (2001), for example, found there was about a "15 percent gain in earnings for a successful GED candidate" over a high school dropout (p. 1). Murnane et al. (1995) also found that the wages of male GED graduates grow more rapidly than they would have without the diploma. And Tyler, Murnane and Willett (2003) found similar results among female GED graduates.

All of these studies, however, found that increases in wages do not happen immediately, but rather take some time to develop. Many of these outcome studies also stress that while GED graduates might receive some labor-market benefits as a result of acquiring the GED, the gains are not sufficient to greatly reduce poverty. Murnane et al. (1995) conclude that "acquisition of the GED credential is not a powerful strategy for escaping poverty" (p. 144). Tyler (2001) also explains,

Earning a GED is not a path out of poverty. Obtaining a GED is not a quick fix for low earnings; it takes some time for substantial GED-related differences to accrue. Second, the mean earnings of all the high school dropouts in the study—including the GED holders—are very low. Although in the fifth year after attempting the tests, GED holders are predicted to have about a 15 percent earnings gain, a male high school dropout who obtained a GED at age 21 would be 26 when he realized this gain, and his predicted annual earnings at that time would be about \$12,931. This is only about \$3000 above the poverty line for a single person and almost \$1000 below the poverty line for a married couple with one child. This underscores how individuals lacking a regular high school diploma generally have very low earnings and how the GED credential can only partially temper the harsh economic realities for high school dropouts. (p. 2)

Does the GED provide access to *further education*? While holding a GED does theoretically allow access to postsecondary schooling of many types (including college, technical schools, community colleges), as well as access to federal financial aid, few GED holders go on to postsecondary education and even fewer graduate (Smith, 2003). Smith (2003) concludes after reviewing the literature that "while the GED provides access to postsecondary education, it is associated with a relatively low probability of completing a postsecondary degree....While this is the objective of a large percentage of GED test takers, only a small proportion actually complete higher level degrees and qualifications" (p. 386). He concludes that "while widely advertised access to postsecondary institutions and accompanying federal financial aid may motivate high school dropouts to take the GED test, low completion rates should raise concerns about the adequacy of their preparation for postsecondary studies" (p. 386).

One outcome that has been found to occur among many GED graduates is *increased self-esteem or self image* (Hayes, 1993; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986). Hayes (1993) explains that the reports of increased self-confidence and better self-perceptions among respondents in her study "demonstrate the intrinsic value of the GED as an accomplishment for most graduates" (p. 21). While this outcome was discussed in these two classrooms, it did not receive nearly as much attention by teachers and program materials as the "new opportunities" or economic outcomes.

### Discussion and Implications

Three ideas emerge from this examination of the rhetoric and reality of the GED. First, many of the claims made about the GED are very broad and difficult to define, (“it opens new opportunities,” “it expands horizons”) much less to operationalize or test empirically, and so are difficult to “prove” or “disprove.” We really do not know whether or not the GED “opens new opportunities” or provides “second chances,” despite overwhelming support for these vague ideas among the programs in this study. We do, however, know from some research (Hayes, 1993) that GED graduates report increases in “intangible” factors such as life satisfaction, enhanced parental roles, better relationships with others, improved self-image, higher aspirations, and greater community involvement. These findings lead to support for the idea that the GED opens up new opportunities, although this rhetoric is not clearly defined and thus hard to investigate.

Second, when examining the claims that are more easily tested empirically, findings show that receiving a GED might help some graduates, both through increasing economic power and through increasing more personal factors like self-esteem, but in general it does not work in magical ways as the rhetoric maintains. It seems clear that the rhetoric surrounding the GED ascribes much more power to the GED than research would suggest.

So what purpose does the rhetoric of the GED serve? McLaren (1998), citing Hall and Donald, argues that at any given time, ideology works in both positive and negative ways. The positive function of ideology is to “provide the concepts, categories, images, and ideas by means of which people make sense of their social and political world, form projects, come to a certain consciousness of their place in the world, and act in it” (Hall & Donald, cited in McLaren, p. 180). At the same time, we must remember that “all such perspectives are inevitably selective. Thus a perspective positively organizes the ‘facts of the case’ in *this* and makes sense because it inevitably excludes *that* way of putting things” (Hall & Donald, cited in McLaren, p. 180). In these two classrooms, the ideology of the GED is providing one view of the GED: one in which the hard work that leads to receiving a GED is rewarded because the recipient is assured of a better life, a better job, and greater self-esteem. This view of the GED is adopted by teachers and programs presumably to help inspire learners to continue studying and striving to get their diploma. Even though teachers sometimes find fault with this ideology themselves, they do not engage in discussion when learners themselves want to explore this issue in the classroom. What is missing from the official

discourse of the GED is the more complicated reality of the structural limitations, including race and class issues that shape just how successful people can be, whether or not they have GED. Also absent from these discussions is a realistic look at the ways the GED affects economic outcomes, further schooling, and self-esteem, as well as critical discussion of the more ethereal expectations of the GED and how the GED could affect those.

Finally, the results of this study show that the rhetoric and reality of the GED do not always match. Teachers definitely see contradictions here, as do learners, and should be encouraged not to simply hide this information from their learners and silence learners, and thus perpetuate the overly simplified rhetoric surrounding the GED, but, instead, to explore these contradictions in classroom discussions. Exploring this mismatch does not have to lead, as some teachers might fear, to removing hope or inspiration for learners. Teachers should build upon their own and learners' questions, and seek to create classroom discourses that avoid the simple dichotomy of either promoting false expectations or dooming learners to failure. Through a process of group inquiry, learners can be challenged to think critically about issues affecting their lives, and can work together to realize alternative points of view. Learners in adult basic education programs, as shown in this study, are fully capable of learning about and discussing the kinds of contradictions presented here and in GED research—and would in fact probably relish the chance to move past platitudes about the GED and engage in challenging discussions about it.

One new resource that can help teachers facilitate such discussions has recently been made available through the National Center for the Study of Adult Literacy and Language (NCSALL). This resource, called "Beyond the GED: Making Conscious Choices and the GED and Your Future" is a set of lessons plans and materials designed for use in GED and adult literacy classrooms. The premise of these materials is very similar to the idea just argued above—that "GED learners deserve an opportunity to understand just what the GED may or may not do for them in tangible, economic terms" (Cain, 2003, p. 6). The content of these materials covers such topics as examining the labor market, looking at higher education, and examining the impact of the GED on a variety of aspects of life. In examining this content, learners practice skills such as graph reading, math, data analysis, and writing. After engaging in discussions of these materials, "GED learners are better prepared to make decisions about their work lives as well as being better prepared to pass the GED" (Cain, 2003, p. 6). These materials are also

promoted by NCSALL as a staff development tool for adult literacy teachers to increase their own knowledge about GED outcomes, in order that they may be able to give better educational and career advice to their learners.<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion, there is clearly a wide gulf between what the rhetoric of the GED claims the GED can accomplish in a learner's life, and what GED outcome research claims, however contradictory. A cautious statement might say that the GED may be necessary but not sufficient to achieve some of the outcomes claimed in GED rhetoric. Following Hayes (1993) and Valentine and Darkenwald (1986), I believe the GED does offer some intangible benefits to graduates, as well as some more tangible ones, but these benefits should not be discussed in isolation without regard to the social contexts of adult literacy learners nor promoted as if they will occur universally and unproblematically. The rhetoric of the GED should continue to be questioned, both by researchers and also by teachers and learners in adult basic education classrooms. These discussions should move beyond personal characteristics and problems and into serious critique of the way the GED fits into wider social, economic, and political contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> These materials are available online at [http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/beyond\\_ged.pdf](http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/beyond_ged.pdf)

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