

ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES AND THE ROLE OF SELF-DETERMINATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR LITERACY PROGRAMS

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Abstract

This article links the research on the status of adults with learning disabilities in the United States with the growing movement of self-determination for individuals with disabilities. From this knowledge base, practical implications are extracted for literacy providers on strategies for encouraging the development of self-determination in learners and for making program services more responsive to the needs of persons with learning disabilities. These implications include modifications in professional staff development, curriculum development, and mentoring and modeling, as well as increased learner involvement in planning.

Résumé

Cet article fait le lien entre la recherche sur les adultes éprouvant des difficultés d'apprentissage aux Etats-Unis et le mouvement en pleine expansion de l'affirmation de ces individus ayant des difficultés. Dans cette banque d'information, les intervenants en alphabétisation trouveront des applications pratiques sur les stratégies pour promouvoir l'affirmation des apprenants et pour mettre sur pied des programmes qui répondent mieux aux besoins de ces apprenants éprouvant des difficultés d'apprentissage. Ces applications incluent des modifications sur le plan du personnel professionnel, du développement du curriculum, du mentorat et du modelage de même que l'implication accrue de l'apprenant dans la planification.

The quest for literacy can be elusive for many adults with learning disabilities. Research indicates that learning disabilities are persistent and lifelong. Furthermore, longitudinal studies indicate that adults with learning disabilities can experience success. Nonetheless, many persons with disabilities may enter adult literacy programs seeking to improve their

learning and earning potential, where they face significant challenges. These challenges may be compounded by a lack of understanding of the nature of their disability, which for many may have gone undiagnosed. Adult literacy providers similarly often have only a cursory knowledge of learning disabilities and may find it difficult to meet the educational needs of adults with learning disabilities. In this article, we review the emerging research on the status of adults with learning disabilities in the United States and link this research to the growing movement of self-determination for individuals with all types of disabilities. From these two knowledge bases, we extract practical considerations for making literacy programs more responsive to the needs of adults with learning disabilities.

The Status of Adults with Learning Disabilities

Numerous studies in the past 15 years were designed to determine the adjustment to adulthood of individuals with learning disabilities. In a recent review of the literature, we (Corley & Taymans, in press) identified seven major studies as representing significant and consistent research findings that define the current knowledge base on this topic. Five are longitudinal studies, following cohorts of individuals into adulthood (Blackorby & Wagner, 1997; Edgar, 1995; Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Herman, 1999; Spekman, Goldberg, & Herman, 1992; Werner, 1993). One is a survey of adults throughout the United States, including persons with self-reported learning disabilities, designed to determine literacy levels and related factors (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993). The seventh, a retrospective examination of successful adults with learning disabilities, identifies factors that discriminate between highly successful and moderately successful individuals (Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsberg, 1997).

Indicators of success for persons with learning disabilities are identified by various researchers (e.g., Edgar, 1995; Raskind et al., 1999; Reiff et al., 1997; Shessel & Reiff, 1999; Sitlington & Frank, 1990; Vogel & Reder, 1998; Werner, 1993). Variables related to success occur across multiple dimensions: educational achievements (e.g., tested academic levels, degrees); career and employment status (e.g., income, employment stability, job status); independent living (e.g., living with parents, living with others, living alone); personal/social relationships (e.g., friendships, romantic relationships, types of recreation); and social-emotional adjustment issues (e.g., lack of hospitalizations and substance abuse). Other variables of success for one cohort studied over a period of time included movement toward acceptable adult behaviour, achievement in relation to society's norms, and

developmental state; consequently, success for adolescents and young adults looked different from success for older adults. Another success indicator was participants' self-reflections upon what they had achieved and their satisfaction with their achievements. Some researchers (Edgar, 1995; Blackorby & Wagner, 1997; Kirsch et al., 1993; Werner, 1993) used non-disabled comparison or control groups to help determine whether there were differences between individuals with learning disabilities and their non-disabled peers. These major research endeavours yield some consistent findings that have important implications for adult literacy programs.

Enduring Academic Difficulties

Schoolchildren with learning disabilities face academic difficulties that persist throughout their adult years. Raskind et al. (1999), in tracing the academic profile of a group of individuals with learning disabilities from elementary school into late adolescence or early adulthood, found a consistent pattern of lower-than-expected academic achievement. They concluded that learning disabilities do not go away, regardless of the nature of the learning disability, the type and duration of the intervention, family factors, or current socio-economic status.

Persistent academic difficulties can have a significant effect on participation and success in all types of educational programs. Many individuals with learning disabilities never graduate from high school. Vogel and Reder (1998), in their review of follow-up studies, found that the high school graduation rate ranged between 32% and 66%. When individuals with learning disabilities attend post-secondary education programs, the evidence indicates they tend to gravitate toward less academic forms of education. They attend vocational and other non-college post-secondary programs at a higher rate and college or university programs at a lower rate than their non-disabled counterparts (Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, & Edgar, 2000). Furthermore, they successfully complete post-secondary educational programs at a low rate (Murray et al., 2000; Sitlington & Frank, 1990, Wagner, D'Amico, Marder, Newman, & Blackorby, 1992).

Employment

Numerous studies over the past 15 years have reported the employment status of persons with learning disabilities. Peraino (1992), in reviewing 11 follow-up studies of persons with learning disabilities, found an average employment rate of 70%. Most persons with learning disabilities seek employment upon exiting high school, but those who obtain employment often find themselves in low-wage jobs with little opportunity for

advancement and often without health insurance and other benefits (Blackorby & Wagner, 1997; Edgar, 1995).

The National Adult Literacy Study (NALS) captured an employment picture for self-identified individuals with learning disabilities, aged 16 to 64 (see Kirsch et al., 1993). Reder and Vogel (1997) conducted a secondary analysis of the NALS data, comparing responses of subjects with self-reported learning disabilities (SRLD) with those of subjects who did not report having learning disabilities. They found that persons with SRLD were less likely to be employed full-time than their non-disabled peers (39% versus 51%) and more likely to be unemployed (16% versus 6%). They also found that the population with SRLD worked substantially fewer weeks per year (24.7 versus 31.5) and for lower wages and in lower status jobs than those in the non-disabled group (45% versus 28%). The mean annual earnings of persons with SRLD compared with those without learning disabilities were \$14,958 and \$23,131, respectively. Reder (1995) also reported that 42.2% of families of adults with SRLD were living in or near poverty, compared with only 16.2% of the families of their non-disabled peers.

Positive outcomes also have been reported. The evidence indicates that employment opportunities improve over time and that the longer persons with learning disabilities are out of school, the higher the employment rates (Blackorby & Wagner, 1997; Edgar, 1995). Highly successful adults with learning disabilities were studied by Reiff et al. (1997), who found that 43 of 46 had an annual income of more than \$50,000, with 21 making \$100,000 or more.

Stress and Social-Emotional Issues

Living with a learning disability is a major life stressor that, for many, far outweighs other events or conditions (Raskind et al., 1999). Difficulties with memory, with sequencing and organizational skills, and with social skills can cause many inconvenient, frustrating, even embarrassing moments for persons with learning disabilities. We can provide the following examples. Imagine having to ask someone to find a co-worker's telephone number from a phone directory because you are still not certain about alphabetical order. Imagine being able to carry on a sophisticated conversation about a current event but not being able to read or write simple office memos. Many adults report the stress of hiding their problems with reading, writing, or math and of trying to "fake it."

Even successes can provoke high anxiety. Some successful individuals feel that they are making false positive impressions and have a fear of failure. Shessel and Reiff (1999) refer to this as the impostor phenomenon. Such feelings of inadequacy can lead adults with learning disabilities to distance themselves from others to avoid being exposed (Spekman et al., 1992). In their review of literature on social and affective adjustment of adults with learning disabilities, Hoy and Manglitz (1996) found that adults with learning disabilities reported fewer social contacts and a higher incidence of emotional adjustment difficulties than their non-disabled peers.

The psychological toll of living with a learning disability can begin early. Many adults have reported unhappy childhood, citing school as an especially frustrating experience (Gerber, Reiff, & Ginsberg, 1996; Raskind et al., 1999). Persons who were not diagnosed until they were adults (who therefore did not originally understand the reasons for their difficulties) report persistent feelings of stupidity and inadequacy. On the flip side, some individuals with early diagnosis of learning disabilities report feeling resentful of being stigmatized by special education. The commonality for all is hurt, pain, and frustration of trying to fit into schooling that did not match the way they learned.

Personal Support

The key to successful adult adjustment, and one that is reported consistently across studies of adults with learning disabilities, is support from a significant other. Spekman et al. (1992) found that parental and family support allowed young people with learning disabilities to access specialized services and to take longer in becoming independent. They also found that mentors played a critical role by accepting persons with learning disabilities as they were, by making them feel special, and by helping them gain needed confidence. Adults often find support in either intimate or work relationships, or both (Gerber & Reiff, 1991).

Toll of Multiple Risk Factors

Sometimes a learning disability is accompanied by one or more additional risk factors. In their study of young adults, Spekman et al. (1992) found that the least successful individuals had required hospitalization or residential placement one or more times. When Raskind et al. (1999) studied this group 10 years later, they found a small cluster of individuals who possessed characteristics that should predict success but who had failed to develop an independent adult life. Closer examination revealed that these individuals had all developed an additional disability (e.g., brain tumor,

hearing loss, epilepsy, motor dysfunction) and that the additional challenges had affected their ability to become independent.

Gender

Another consistent finding from follow-up studies of persons with learning disabilities during the initial years after school exit is that males have a higher employment rate than females (Edgar, 1995; Sitlington & Frank, 1990; Wagner et al., 1992). In a 10-year study of two cohorts of graduates from Washington state schools, Edgar found that males with learning disabilities were employed at approximately the same rates and with comparable pay as non-disabled males, whereas females with learning disabilities were employed at a lower rate than both males with learning disabilities *and* non-disabled females. This gender discrepancy in employment may be explained, in part, by the phenomena of early parenthood: females with learning disabilities bore children at a younger age and at twice the rate than did non-disabled females in the study. The demands of young, single parenthood may be a factor in their reduced rate of employment. These findings point toward an apparent double jeopardy of both societal and disability factors that come into play for females with learning disabilities. Although great strides have been made, females in general are still striving for career and income equity with males.

The Washington state study (Edgar, 1995) suggests that females with learning disabilities may have difficulty finding supportive individuals to stand by them in adulthood, especially when they become mothers. They may not have a support system to provide childcare or leads into the job market. Another possible factor is that learning disabilities are identified at a lower rate in females than in males within the K-12 school system; thus, females with diagnosed learning disabilities who participate in follow-up studies may represent a lower-functioning group of individuals than their male counterparts (Lyon, 1998). They may enroll in adult literacy programs with significantly more family life issues and fewer supports than males with learning disabilities.

These empirically based factors that affect the adult adjustment of individuals with learning disabilities provide important background information for adult literacy programs that seek to provide appropriate services. In addition to understanding and employing appropriate instructional interventions, literacy service providers need to understand that their interactions with learners who are either diagnosed or suspected of

having a learning disability can have an important effect on the development of self-determination.

Self-Determination

The historical roots of self-determination in disability services can be traced to the early 1970s when Nirje (cited in Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998) linked the concept of self-determination to the normalization movement that promoted integration of individuals with disabilities into all facets of community living. In 1988, the U.S. Department of Education launched an initiative on self-determination that has yielded both conceptual and practical information for working with persons with learning disabilities. Although there is no single, universally accepted definition of self-determination, researchers (Field & Hoffman, 1994; Reiff et al., 1997; Serna, 1995; Shessel & Reiff, 1999; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998) agree on some general concepts that support the development of self-determination. Self-determined individuals have positive attitudes about themselves; they are goal-directed and believe they can succeed. A self-determined individual demonstrates social skills, decision-making skills, and goal setting or future planning skills. Persons who are self-determined make an effort to learn about their home and family, school and work, and social and community environments, and they make personal choices based on this knowledge. Self-determined individuals are not totally independent of other people; rather, they tend to consider how their decisions might affect the lives of others. They also have developed a range of competencies that are both valued by society and that can be used to offset their specific challenges, including learning disabilities.

Self-determination is important for *all* adults, but for persons with learning disabilities, the development of self-determination can mean the difference between self-reliance and dependence on others throughout life. Guiding persons with learning disabilities to become more self-determined helps to break the cycle of dependence that often can be fostered by education, employment, home, and community environments. Federally funded projects (see Ward, 1999) have demonstrated that self-determination skills and attitudes can be explicitly taught to individuals with a variety of disabilities both in traditional classrooms and in community-based settings. Field and Hoffman (1994) describe five steps in the development of self-determination: (a) The foundation of self-determination is knowing and valuing oneself, including one's strengths and challenges; (b) this foundation supports an individual's ability to set goals and make plans; (c) taking

actions to meet one's goals are deliberate, invite self-reflection, and help individuals to learn from the outcomes of their actions—both their successes and their failures; (d) the process then feeds back into knowing and valuing oneself, contributing to the development of a positive self-identity; and (e) although the development of self-determination is an internal process, the work, home, community, and school environments in which people function can be structured to either promote or hinder self-determination.

In the following subsections, we suggest some ideas for integrating aspects of these five steps (components) of self-determination into adult literacy programs, and we discuss these ideas in comparison to the literature.

Step 1: Know Self and Value Self

Self-knowledge for individuals with learning disabilities includes knowledge about their learning disabilities. This involves acknowledging more than one's global deficits (e.g., spelling, reading, calculation). For individuals who have been formally diagnosed, self-knowledge includes an understanding of their specific information processing deficits (i.e., auditory processing, visual processing, attention, and memory) and ways in which these deficits affect performance in daily life. For individuals who have not been diagnosed, self-knowledge includes an understanding of the types of situations that lead to success and those that put them in jeopardy of failure. Individuals with learning disabilities are particularly challenged in trying to understand and accept their disabilities; the hidden nature of learning disabilities makes them much more difficult to understand than physical disabilities that are obvious to the person with the disability and to others interacting with that person.

The process of accepting one's disability involves the ability to define the disability as something that is limited or contained rather than all-encompassing. Thomas (1991) points out that acceptance of one's disability means that a person accepts self and the disability in a positive light. This internalization of information into a realistic self-appraisal helps the individual make both the internal and external changes necessary to accommodate one's specific learning disabilities, ultimately resulting in a healthy sense of self (Thomas, 1991). Some highly successful adults with learning disabilities are even able to move beyond acceptance to valuing their disability as something they can use to give themselves a competitive edge (see Shessel & Reiff, 1999; Reiff et al., 1997).

Formal diagnosis of a learning disability is the starting point for acceptance. Even those individuals who enter adult literacy programs with a

diagnosis may have little understanding of their unique, specific strengths and needs. Other learners may enter literacy programs without a formal diagnosis but with histories of school difficulties and with learning profiles that point to the possibility that learning disabilities is a factor. If these individuals are to meet with success, it is critical for them to gain insight into their strengths and challenges.

The topic of learning disabilities can be discussed with learners by discussing famous individuals who have found success despite having learning disabilities (e.g., Cher, Whoopi Goldberg, Tom Cruise, Bruce Jenner, Winston Churchill). The need to understand one's strengths and needs is universal. A discussion of ways in which famous individuals may have compensated for difficulties with reading, writing, memory, or computation can help learners understand that success comes from an understanding of one's own strengths and needs. One way to encourage adult learners to acknowledge and to understand their own strengths and limitations is to have them respond to needs assessments and to talent and interest inventories.

When possible, the literacy teacher or tutor can engage the learner in specific activities such as identifying the practical implications of specific processing deficits, describing significant others' understanding of learning disabilities, and identifying positive self-talk the individual can use when frustrations arise. The teacher or tutor might begin by asking the learner to identify two of his or her strengths or talents as well as one weakness or challenge in areas such as physical, mental, emotional, or social circumstances. The learner might then ask a significant other the same question, such as: What do you think are my two greatest strengths, and what do you think is a weakness of mine in these four areas? The learner who poses this question to two or three trusted individuals will find some consistencies in the collective wisdom of the people who know the learner best. This activity often is effective in encouraging learners to understand and believe in themselves. Next, learners might identify particular strengths that they have developed in response to a perceived weakness, and they might identify times that they felt self-determined as well as times they felt controlled by others. Finally, learners might be asked to identify how their relationships with significant individuals in their lives (e.g., spouse, parent, co-worker, boss, teacher) might change as the learner becomes more self-determined. They might also identify the kinds of support they will need from these significant individuals to help them become more self-determined as well as how they might seek the support they need.

Step 2: Plan

Productive planning begins with goal setting. Field and Hoffman (1994) found that an important part of the process was learning to differentiate between wants and needs, to make choices that match one's interests, preferences, and strengths, and to avoid one's areas of weakness. Goal setting and planning require organizational skills and the ability to follow a process. For adults with learning disabilities who struggle with impulsivity, cause-and-effect thinking, and following sequential steps, the planning process can be frustrating and difficult. In studies of young adults with learning disabilities, Spekman et al. (1992) and Raskind et al. (1999) found that the more successful individuals were able to use a step-by-step process to achieve goals, whereas unsuccessful individuals either did not identify goals or reported goals that were unrealistic and grandiose for their current situations. In their study of highly successful mature adults with learning disabilities, Reiff et al. (1997) identified conscious goal orientation as an internal strategy both to combat fear of failure and to impart a sense of control. The process of focusing, setting goals, persistently working toward one's goals, and meeting with success feeds on itself. Successfully achieving goals, even small ones, sets the stage for additional goal setting and goal-directed behaviour.

In a program for adult beginning readers, Ogle (1990) studied the use of learning contracts to collaboratively set expectations, determine goals, and select instructional materials. Students with learning contracts attended significantly more tutoring sessions and persisted in the program longer than learners without contracts. Learners and tutors alike believed that adult learners experienced increased motivation because they were actively involved in the planning process. Planning was facilitated by a simple form that helped learners identify their reading goals (e.g., get a better job, be a wiser consumer, be a better parent, etc.). Adults who were interviewed liked being able to choose the types of reading materials (such as cookbooks, newspapers, driver's manuals) that were used in the sessions. Encouraging learners to keep track of their progress in chart or graph form provided both a tangible method for identifying progress and a stimulus for trouble-shooting problem areas. In addition, Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (1998) find that encouraging adults to engage in self-directed learning activities can help them develop and practice valuable skills that support independence.

Some curricular materials that explicitly teach planning skills in real-life contexts are appropriate for use with adults. For example, de Bono's (1989) *CoRT* curriculum teaches thinking structures that can be used for planning.

Activities such as considering all the factors (looking ahead to see the consequences of a plan of action), defining objectives, and focusing on values and priorities help adults learn the thinking involved in making a plan. These activities were designed as group lessons. For example, one thinking structure is called PMI (P stands for plus, the good things about an idea; M for minus, the bad things about an idea; I for interest, what one finds interesting about an idea). Some PMI exercises contained in the curriculum's activity cards involve asking the class to orally do a PMI on one of more of the following ideas: (a) all seats should be taken out of buses; (b) by law, all cards should be painted bright yellow; and (c) every adult should spend one week a year in the police force. Following practice with the specific planning process, students consider discussion questions included on the activity cards. This encourages extending students' thinking about the process and its possibilities for real-life application. The CoRT curriculum is an example of a flexible curriculum appropriate for adults of all ages and skill levels. It teaches basic thinking skills that are important in the planning process.

An important success variable for persons with learning disabilities is the existence of a support system. For example, Gerber et al., (1996) and Reiff et al. (1997) clearly indicate the importance of having adults with learning disabilities identify at least one key individual in their lives who can help them compensate for their specific learning disabilities. Instructional activities that encourage learners to set goals and to plan often include opportunities for literacy teachers or tutors to help the learners to identify and reach out to potential support persons in their lives.

Step 3: Act

Successful adults with learning disabilities are proactive, often engaging in actions to fit situations to their strengths and to minimize their needs. They learn to be creative as they search for ways to match their working and learning profiles to tasks at hand, and they learn to persist and be successful, despite challenges. Reiff et al. (1997) identify this matching of strengths and talents to situations and tasks as "goodness of fit" (p. 111). The actions of successful adults with learning disabilities are supported by self-knowledge and planning. In contrast, unsuccessful adults with learning disabilities may not recognize that they have the power to change situations or that there are alternatives to achieving a goal (Raskind et al., 1999).

Huntington and Bender (1993) found that many individuals with learning disabilities do not informally learn social skills that are so important in navigating adult life. These skills must be explicitly taught. Adult

educators might consider integrating communication and social skills into their programs, thus affording learners the opportunity to practice negotiation and feedback skills within the adult education context as well as transferring these skills to important work and family situations. One guide for integrating the teaching of these skills is Aune and Ness's (1991) *Tools for Transition*. Their curriculum includes video clips of several difficult social situations; for each situation, there are contrasting scenarios that show the actor using a specific social skill unsuccessfully and then successfully. Learners then have an opportunity to role-play situations relevant to their own lives. Some of the topics and skills included in this curriculum include adjusting one's behaviour to situations by self-monitoring, self-control, negotiating difficult situations, and choosing alternatives to conflict; and participating in groups by joining in, offering help to others, and being supportive of others.

Step 4: Experience Outcomes and Learn

The struggles and failures faced by individuals with learning disabilities make them susceptible to developing an external locus of control—they attribute both successes and failures to conditions beyond their control. For example, they may interpret failure as the result of being asked to perform a task that is too difficult, or as simply bad luck, and they may attribute success to being given an easy task or as "a fluke." An external locus of control can decrease the individual's motivation to problem-solve and to persevere through challenging situations.

Persons who understand their areas of strengths and challenges are able to evaluate their successes and failures in terms of acknowledged areas of ability and disability. They recognize when failure at specific tasks is caused by their learning disabilities, and they do not berate themselves as stupid, inept, and global failures. They learn to constructively use support from others to compensate for their areas of need, thereby allowing them to focus on areas in which they excel. Reiff et al. (1997) found that a key to success was learning to take control of work and learning situations. *Less successful* adults with learning disabilities did not exhibit the same ability to learn from difficult and uncomfortable situations, thus foregoing the opportunity to use the experience to better shape future situations. Gerber et al. (1996) describe this difference as coping rather than excelling.

This aspect of learning from experience can be developed when an adult education program encourages students to conduct self-assessments, based on mutually developed and realistic goals, and keep regular records of

progress. The manner in which feedback is given can also affect a learner's ability to realize success. Feedback must be immediate and ongoing. It must pinpoint specific successes in an activity as well as provide information on areas that can be improved; it must also include explicit instruction in areas that need improvement.

Step 5: Find Supportive Environments

Three environmental conditions support self-determination (Wehmeyer, Kelchner, & Richards, 1995). The first condition is that individuals must be in situations in which they can continue to grow and to enhance their abilities. Individuals with learning disabilities are particularly vulnerable in environments that clash with the ways they learn or function. The second condition is that individuals must learn to use accommodations and supports to transform environmental challenges into learning and working conditions that set the stage for success. These supports can be in the form of individuals or of technology (Reiff et al., 1997). The final condition is that individuals must have opportunities to learn, to demonstrate competence, and to be part of the decision-making process that guides how the environment functions. Field (1996) has identified several key supportive environmental variables within educational settings: role models, curricula that teach self-determination skills, opportunities and support for choice and risk, open communication patterns, and the availability of a range of student supports.

The development of self-determination has been supported for the past 12 years by U.S. federal funding for the development of programs and intervention. However, the concept has received little attention heretofore in adult literacy programs. Slowly, a research base is emerging that can guide practice for those serving individuals with learning disabilities. In an analysis of 20 demonstration projects on self-determination focused on young adults who were in transition to post-secondary education and employment, Ward and Kohler (1996) identified the best practices for fostering self-determination. These included direct teaching with opportunities for generalization, mentoring and modeling, and learner involvement in planning. Their ideas contribute to the following implications we draw from the literature for adult literacy programs.

Implications for Adult Literacy Programs

The foremost implications we extract from the literature are the need for improved professional development of literacy providers on processes for uncovering undiagnosed learning and on practices that can contribute to development of self-determination among learners with a learning disability.

Other implications include teaching methods, curriculum, types of support for the learners, and further research.

Professional Development

If adult literacy providers are to foster the development of self-determination in adult learners, they need to understand the construct of self-determination and its particular importance to adults with learning disabilities. Professional development activities should go beyond raising awareness about the steps to attaining self-determination; teachers and tutors—as well as administrators, counselors, and support personnel—need to engage in activities that portray the process of interacting with learners in ways that encourage the development of self-determination. Professional development activities should encourage literacy practitioners to integrate self-determination activities into every class or tutoring session, and they should provide literacy practitioners with examples of hands-on activities to use in valuing self, in goal setting, and in planning that can be used to foster self-determination among learners.

For literacy teachers to become proficient in direct teaching strategies, professional development should consist of more than the typical one-shot workshop; rather, professional development should be an ongoing and daily focus of teachers and tutors. Changing teaching behaviours to incorporate explicit and direct teaching strategies, as well as integrating self-determination activities into each class, requires thoughtful planning and multiple opportunities for practice by the teacher or tutor. Peer coaching and action-research/practitioner-inquiry are two professional development strategies that can help teachers and tutors gain insight into successful practices for the direct teaching of self-determination attitudes and skills.

Direct Teaching of Self-Determination Skills

Problem solving and self-advocacy can be broken down into discrete skills that are teachable. Communication skills such as active listening, negotiating, asking for help, and making a complaint can be taught using a simple step-by-step method. Individuals with learning disabilities benefit from direct instruction on ways to communicate with employers, co-workers, and significant others. Learning these skills in class or with a tutor, and then practicing them in the real world, allows for a feedback loop with the literacy instructor. The opportunity to debrief and refine skills based on the outcome of real interactions can be a valuable and empowering learning experience. Teachers and tutors need both an understanding of, and practice in, appropriate strategies for teaching these skills.

For some individuals with learning disabilities, areas of weakness can be significant, necessitating the need for instructional and job accommodations. Some adults already have diagnostic test results that can help identify areas of weaknesses and compensatory strategies. Other adults who exhibit manifestations of learning disabilities may not have undergone formal diagnostic testing. In either situation, literacy instructors and tutors can engage learners in conversations that help them become more aware of areas of relative strength and areas in which compensatory strategies will improve performance. This awareness can then help the individuals to positively present their assets and to discuss with employers compensatory strategies that can help them meet with success in work settings. Teachers and tutors will benefit from professional development opportunities that teach them to provide practice for learners in disclosing this information in ways that are positive and productive.

Curriculum Development

Commercially available literacy instructional materials for adults do not typically address self-determination skills. Until such materials are available, adult literacy providers will have to adapt the growing array of curricular materials developed for secondary and post-secondary educational programs (see, e.g., Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998). Teachers and tutors should be encouraged to share activities that they have developed to teach self-determination. This can be done through conferences, newsletters and other publications, listservs, and peer coaching.

Types of Support for the Learners

There is something powerful and awe-inspiring in meeting persons who are leading highly successful lives, despite serious challenges. When literacy providers arrange activities that put learners in touch with role models who exhibit self-determination, learners may come to appreciate that there are multiple routes to a successful life. University disabled student services offices, school systems special education programs, and community organizations that focus on learning disabilities often have contacts with successful adults with learning disabilities who are willing to speak to groups. The growing base of simple and clearly written accounts by and about individuals with learning disabilities (see, e.g., Rodis, Garrod, & Boscardin, 2001) can provide numerous examples of persons who are coping and excelling with learning disabilities. Some community organizations offer support groups for individuals with learning disabilities; these groups can

foster a sense of connectedness and a practical means of learning from one's peers.

Most adult literacy providers already understand the concept of learner-centered instruction. Many programs seek to actively engage learners in the process of collaborative planning for instruction and collaborative teaching/tutoring. Therefore, it should be an easy jump to involve learners in the goal setting and planning steps of the self-determination model.

Need for Further Research Putting Current Concepts into Practice

The self-determination research to date has centred on populations other than adult literacy. This research base cannot be applied with confidence to adult literacy learners. There is need for reliable, field-tested practices on the development of self-determination among adults with learning disabilities in literacy programs, as well as on curriculum development, instructional strategies, and professional staff development. From research flows the development of policy initiatives and improved practice.

Current research on adults with learning disabilities clearly indicates that the challenges of this hidden disability continue into adulthood. The research on the success attributes of persons with learning disabilities points to the development of self-determination skills as key to successful adult adjustment. Modifications in professional staff development, curriculum development, and mentoring and modeling, as well as learner involvement in planning may help literacy providers to embrace and integrate the construct of self-determination into their practice. They may discover that they are assisting their adult learners not only in their quest for literacy but also in their successful transition to true self-sufficiency.

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