Challenges and Solutions to Assisting Older Adults in Completing the GED:
A Study of What the Experts Say

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges and solutions encountered by Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs currently serving older adults seeking a GED credential in states where this is the only high school equivalency option available. The following questions guided this research: (1) what are the perceived characteristics and needs of older students seeking a high school equivalency diploma?; (2) how do GED programs promote the success of their older students?; and (3) what are the future service and planning needs of these GED programs with regard to this population? To address these questions, a series of 55 one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with experts across 32 GED-only states was carried out. Findings revealed a consistent, shared experience in terms of overall attitudes and challenges among these experts, as well as a variety of innovative practices and recommendations for assisting older learners.

KEYWORDS

Adult Learners, GED, High School Equivalency, Programs, Test Preparation

INTRODUCTION

The world’s most developed nations, including the United States, continue to experience an increase in the average age of their populations (Wagner, Hassanein, & Head, 2010). This has occurred alongside a greater need for individuals to learn new and increasingly advanced technologies, which have become a way of life for many individuals (Tacken et al., 2000). As the adult education landscape continues to evolve at a rapid pace, two changes that have been particularly notable during the last three years include the creation of a new computerized GED test and the introduction of educational competitors such as Educational Testing Service (ETS)’s High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) and McGraw Hill’s Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC).

As of 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that approximately 12% of adults ages 45 to 64, and nearly 24% over the age 65, had not earned a high school diploma (“Educational Attainment,” 2012). However, GED Testing Service reported that same year that adults over the age of 50 accounted for less than 4% of all test candidates (Annual Statistical Report, 2012). During 2013, prior to the new computerized version of the test, GED Testing Service also reported noticeably lower passing rates among older adults in the United States as well: ages 40-49 (65.2% pass rate), ages 50-59 (59.5% pass rate), and 60+ years of age (51.4% pass rate), in comparison to the youngest test candidate groups, ages 16-18 (85.7% pass rate), and ages 19-24 (77.1% pass rate) (Annual Statistical Report, 2013). Since the alternative assessments were only introduced in 2014, and the scores were still being normed and adjusted during that first year, sufficient data was still not readily available for meaningful reporting and comparisons at the time of this study.

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However, researchers have focused specifically on the new GED test that was released in 2014; these more recent studies have drawn attention not only to the extensive changes and related challenges, but also to perceptions and attitudes toward the new test, and even the professional development needs of educators to be able to teach for this test (Adams, 2015; Brinkley-Etzkorn & Ishitian, 2016; Brinkley-Etzkorn & Skolits, 2014; Hoffman, Wine, & McKinney, 2013). Based on the existing scholarly research, available test-related data, and what is currently known about the need for older adults to hold a high school equivalency (HSE) credential, this raises an important question for consideration in the current adult basic education (ABE) context: Given the high numbers of older adults in need of a HSE credential, their traditionally lower attempt and pass rates, and well-documented differences among younger and older learners, what are programs and teachers doing in the wake of the relatively recent changes in ABE to assist this unique student population?

Based on the need for information and understanding in this area, the purpose of this study was to investigate challenges and successes experienced in GED-only states with regard to how programs serve older adult learners and ensure their success. Specifically, the following three research questions guided this study:

1. What are the perceived characteristics and needs of older students who seek a high school equivalency diploma?
2. How do GED programs promote the success of their older students?
3. What are the future service and planning needs of these GED programs with regard to this population?

To address these research questions, this paper will begin with an overview of the relevant literature to establish a framework for the present study. Next, the methods and procedures will be reviewed, followed by the findings and related discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to contextualize the present study, there are three areas of research that provide an important foundation. First, it is necessary to review what is known about older adult learners in terms of their educational experiences and participation in continuing education programs such as the GED. Second, given that the move from a paper-based to a computer-based test was one of the most defining features of the new GED, it is also important to review what the research shows about older adult learners and their use of, comfort with, and attitudes toward technology. Third, it is helpful to review what the literature reveals about previously identified challenges and successes in the field of ABE.

Understanding Older Adult Learners

For decades, researchers have studied differences in the ways older learners participate in various aspects of education by investigating their learning experiences, motivating forces, barriers, and practices that promote their success. It is important to note that most older adult learners today experienced their formal education in a teacher-centered educational setting (Cercone, 2008; Tweedell, 2000), which Halperin (1994) described as a more traditional style of instruction in which students passively and quietly receive information from an instructor in the front of the room. Researchers have also found some commonalities in the barriers that exist to adult learning, which typically fall into one of two areas: (1) external/situational barriers or (2) internal/dispositional barriers. First, as the name suggests, external barriers are those that fall outside of the individual’s control, and may
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