



# NCAL

NATIONAL CENTER ON ADULT LITERACY

# BRIEF

## Teacher Perspectives on the Adult Education Profession: National Survey Findings About an Emerging Profession

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### KEY FINDINGS:

- Considerable educational and field experience characterize the core of adult educators.
- The preparation and experience of full-time and part-time adult educators is virtually the same.
- Current teaching assignments in ABE, ASE/GED, or ESL cannot be predicted by pre-service credentials or prior educational experience.
- Techniques that can help in the classroom are a priority for professional development, according to adult educators.
- Three in five teacher respondents have more than five years experience in teaching in adult education, which suggests the presence of a relatively stable core group of professionals.
- This stable core of adult educators might better be characterized as professional educators rather than as adult education professionals because their training is rarely specific to adult education.

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- More immediate and better results may be obtained by strengthening and focusing in-service and post-graduate adult education rather than by establishing an academic preservice preparation program. A solid argument in favor of this type of professional development can be made given the experience and education reported by most adult education teachers.
- Collaborative work with colleagues should be more widely utilized as a form of professional development. Teachers report that they profit not only from peer learning in workshops, but also from engaging with their peers in other productive instructional activities.
- To help the emerging profession of adult education grow to its full potential, increased investment in training and credentialing is needed.
- States considering credentialing procedures should further explore the reasons for the consistently high overall satisfaction with the decision to teach adults as reported by teachers.

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### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many factors have converged to steadily increase the momentum toward the professionalization of adult literacy educators. Improving the quality of instructional practice in the field of adult education through the professionalization of practitioners is seen to be at the core of improving the quality of instruction in adult programs (Perin, 1999; Shanahan, Meehan, & Mogge, 1994). As a result of increased demand on adult education programs, which are being held to higher standards as measured both by student outcomes and program quality indicators, many states are investing in statewide professional development efforts and some are beginning to experiment with various types of competency and credentialing mechanisms (Parke, 2000).

Fundamental to the success of this effort is an understanding of the demographics, experience, and educational preparation of the professional adult educators now working in the field. In spite of past efforts to profile teachers in the field (e.g., Kutner et al., 1997), our knowledge of the community of adult literacy educators is

incomplete. As part of the Professional Development Kit Project (funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education), a national needs assessment was conducted to profile the current cadre of "professional" adult educators, and to assess their experiences, needs, and preferences for professional development.

The primary purpose of this paper is to discuss the findings of the survey in two areas: (a) the professional preparation and experience of adult educators currently active and (b) the needs for professional development as they are perceived by the teacher respondents to the survey. The findings of the survey are presented within the framework of preparation issues in the professionalization of the field of adult education. These issues are (a) preservice training and credentialing, and (b) in-service learning and professional development.

### METHODOLOGY

In order to recruit participants for the survey of professional development needs, NCAL contacted the Adult Education Directors of each state and asked them to

recommend five to ten well-regarded adult education programs with a large number of full-time teachers in their states. After receiving recommendations from the state directors, five survey packets were mailed to at least five agencies in each state, to be distributed to professional staff. Responses were received from 526 individual adult educators. Volunteers and tutors ( $n=32$ ) who responded were excluded from the analyses for the purposes of this report. After various other data quality and review procedures, the total number was reduced to a sample of reasonably complete, usable responses from 423 individuals.

**Instrument.** The ten-page needs assessment was divided into five sections: (a) teacher preparation and experience, (b) program profile and teaching environment, (c) teaching methods and practices, (d) professional development, and (e) an optional teacher profile section.

**Limitations.** The sampling procedures used were not intended to provide a nationally representative sample of all adult educators. The sampling design intentionally targeted individuals who devoted a large percentage of their time to adult education as filtered through the judgment of state directors. Subsamples (e.g., teachers who classified their assignments as ABE, ASE/GED, or ESL) are uneven in size and may influence stability and generalization of results. In spite of these limitations, however, the sample reported on here would appear to be an important population to understand and address regardless of the scope of generalizations to the larger community of adult educators.

**Analysis.** Data was analyzed based on the following variables:

- Full sample,
- Status (full-time vs. part-time),
- Main teaching assignment (ABE, ASE/GED, ESL), and
- Years of experience in adult education (1-5 years, 6-10 years, more than 10 years).

## IMPLICATIONS

This report speaks of an emerging profession, and defines the characteristics of "professionalization" as

- the use of education or training to improve the quality of practice,
- standardized professional responses,
- better defined collection of persons as representing a field of endeavor, and
- enhanced communication within that field.

The group of adult educators who responded to the survey are well-educated, experienced, and active participants in professional development activities. Despite arriving at adult education through a pathway of other educational experiences, 88% of respondents chose to say, "I know I made the right decision to become an adult education teacher/volunteer/tutor." We examined the distributions of responses based on subgroups that we believed might represent different general profiles including full versus part-timers, ABE/GED/ESL, and years of experience teaching adults. The similarities far outweighed the differences.

Given the diverse populations served and the special needs of adults, a solid argument could be made for

providing more substantive in-service or post-graduate training that is specifically targeted to professionally prepare teachers who choose this field as a specialty. The profiles suggest more common experiences, attitudes, and priorities for professional development than differences. It seems clear that adult literacy education is an emerging professional teaching specialization that is related to yet distinct from the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary teaching specialties from which this group of teachers gained their initial expertise. The professional needs of this group are different, as are their priorities.

Building on what we have learned about this group so far, it appears to be an apt time to follow through on the goal of creating a comprehensive system of professional development. This system should be designed to do "a variety of things in a uniquely systematic way" (Elmore, 1996). It should recognize the skills and competencies that teachers already possess, and provide a flexible, multi-tiered delivery system that can provide help in obtaining the skills and competencies they know they need. In addition, it should provide in-service professional development that reflects the special responsibilities of teachers of adults, and that supports the acquisition of expertise in a vital emerging profession.

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